

# **MEETING OF THE PARLIAMENT**

Wednesday 23 May 2001  
(*Afternoon*)

Session 1

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## Scottish Parliament

*Wednesday 23 May 2001*

*(Afternoon)*

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

### Time for Reflection

**The Presiding Officer (Sir David Steel):** To lead time for reflection today, I welcome Rev Alan Paterson of the United Reformed Church in East Kilbride.

**Rev Alan G M Paterson (United Reformed Church, East Kilbride):** In the Christian calendar, tomorrow is Ascension day which, along with all other Christian feasts, is encrusted with 2000 years of theology and tradition. Fundamentally, however, the ascension paints a powerful word picture of the early believers' recognition that they had shared not only in the efforts and achievements of a man's life, but in the presence and action of God. The ascension draws a line under Christ's resurrection appearances and affirms a picture of Christ in glory.

The corollary of the ascension is that Christ's disciples now have their job to do. They and their successors are charged to be his witnesses—to speak for him—proclaiming a revolutionary kingdom where justice, peace and love rule. They have to teach and nurture, to respond to human need by loving service, to seek to transform unjust structures of society, to strive to safeguard the integrity of creation and to sustain and renew the life of the earth. Those are not desperately original aims, nor are they exclusively Christian. We make no claim that Christ's followers are better, wiser or abler at doing those things than anyone else: we just reckon that we have no excuse for not doing them.

When climbers are asked why they climb mountains, they almost inevitably fall back on the glorious answer that was offered by Mallory, the Himalayan pioneer, when he said, "Because they're there." By contrast, I recently read a poet's answer to the question of why poems are written. It was, "Because they need to be there." It seems that much of society's challenge in community, church, parliament or nation is encapsulated in these two questions: what do we do with what is there, and are we creating what needs to be there?

Let us pray.

Christ, who taught about justice, who demonstrated forgiveness and who offered a new kind of living,

Teach us to live.

Christ, who liberates minds, who changes attitudes, and who challenges motives,  
Teach us to love.

Christ, who elevated the humble, whose authority was in serving, and whose victory was a cross,  
Teach us to serve.

Amen.

## Parliamentary Bureau Motion

14:34

*Motion moved,*

That the Parliament agrees the following designations of Lead Committee—

the Justice 1 Committee to consider the European Communities (Service of Judicial and Extrajudicial Documents) (Scotland) Regulations 2001 (SSI 2001/172); and

the Justice 2 Committee to consider the Sex Offenders (Notification Requirements) (Prescribed Police Stations) (Scotland) Regulations 2001 (SSI 2001/173).—[*Euan Robson.*]

## Standards Commissioner

**The Presiding Officer (Sir David Steel):** The main item of business this afternoon is the Standards Committee debate on motion S1M-1901, in the name of Mike Rumbles, on a proposal for a committee bill to establish a standards commissioner.

14:35

**Mr Mike Rumbles (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (LD):** I am pleased to be able to present the Standards Committee's proposal for a committee bill to establish a standards commissioner in the Scottish Parliament.

Colleagues will be aware that this is largely a procedural motion in accordance with the standing orders. At its meeting of 23 November 2000, the Parliament agreed the Standards Committee's recommendation to appoint a standards commissioner under an act of the Scottish Parliament. Accordingly, the purpose of today's debate is to decide whether it is appropriate that the necessary legislation be introduced via a committee bill and to discuss the committee's recommendations for the provisions to be contained in the bill. It is the unanimous view of the Standards Committee that a committee bill is the most appropriate vehicle through which to legislate for the appointment of a standards commissioner.

I will briefly remind colleagues of the primary reasons underpinning the committee's initial decision to recommend the appointment of a standards commissioner. The committee's full proposals are contained in our fourth report of last year. In recommending the appointment of a commissioner, the committee was primarily concerned with ensuring that there was a sufficient degree of independence within the procedure for investigating complaints against members. We felt that that was required to ensure public confidence in the system. The committee considered whether to recommend the appointment of a standards officer, which would not have required legislation. The primary argument against such a recommendation was the need for a standards officer without statutory powers to rely on the powers of the committee to summon witnesses and compel evidence. We believe that that could impact adversely on the adviser's perceived independence and might undermine public confidence in the robustness of the complaints procedure.

We are convinced that the appointment, under an act of the Scottish Parliament, of a standards commissioner with specific statutory power to

summon witnesses and compel the production of evidence would be the principle bulwark of the independence of the post. The committee also agreed that the level of independence that a statutory standards commissioner would have could enhance the credibility of the post.

The complaints procedure that we propose will not only maintain public confidence in the Parliament, it will ensure that the rights of members are adequately protected. Members will be relieved to know that we are not proposing the introduction of a Star Chamber or the appointment of a witch-finder general. The commissioner will be responsible for the initial consideration and, if appropriate, investigation of all complaints against members, with the exception of those that are required by the "Code of Conduct for Members of the Scottish Parliament" to be referred to the Presiding Officer, the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body or the personnel office.

The commissioner's investigation will be carried out in private and independently of the committee. The committee will have the power to give guidance to the commissioner on certain investigative fundamentals that should apply to all investigations that he or she undertakes. The commissioner will also be required to notify the committee if his or her initial consideration of a complaint is likely to take longer than two months. In such circumstances, the Standards Committee may call for an interim report.

On completion of the investigation, the commissioner will be required to submit a report to the Standards Committee setting out his or her findings. A copy of the report will also be passed to the member who was the subject of the complaint. The commissioner will not be able to make recommendations on sanctions. That will remain the responsibility of the Standards Committee in the form of a report and a motion to the Parliament. The final decision on whether to impose sanctions on a member will continue to rest with the Parliament.

**Michael Russell (South of Scotland) (SNP):** I want to make a small but important point. Will that report to the Parliament contain the evidence that the commissioner has considered? In other places, such evidence is published. The Parliament might want to know about such evidence.

**Mr Rumbles:** Absolutely. All the information on the evidence obtained by the commissioner will be published and brought before the Parliament. Otherwise, it would be incredibly difficult, if not impossible, for the Parliament to make a decision. All the evidence will be made available to members.

The Standards Committee will also have the

power to refer reports back to the commissioner for further investigation and to conduct its own review of the complaint, or indeed to reject the commissioner's report.

The bill will set out the procedures for appointing and removing the commissioner. We propose that it should be a parliamentary appointment, by which I mean that the commissioner should be appointed by the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body, following a resolution of the Parliament on a Standards Committee motion.

The commissioner will be appointed for a fixed term of office of not more than five years, and, although he or she will be eligible for reappointment, that will be dealt with in a manner consistent with the principles laid down by the Committee on Standards in Public Life—the Nolan committee—and with the guidance issued by the Commissioner for Public Appointments.

The bill will provide that the commissioner can be removed from office, following a resolution of the Parliament on a Standards Committee motion. The grounds for removal will be specified in the terms of appointment, rather than in the bill. Although we can see that there would be some advantage in including those grounds in the bill, the committee judged that that would be outweighed by the lack of flexibility that would ensue if changes made to the grounds for removal in the light of experience were prevented.

The bill will set out procedures for the submission of complaints. They should be submitted in writing and should not only include the name and address of the complainer, but should identify the member against whom the complaint is being made. The commissioner will be required to refer to the committee complaints not submitted in accordance with those rules, in order to decide whether they should nevertheless be investigated.

The committee has decided to include in the bill a provision that will require complaints to be submitted not more than 12 months from the time when the complainer should reasonably have become aware of the matter alleged in the complaint. Notwithstanding that, the committee will have a discretionary function in considering whether complaints that have been submitted outside that time limit should be investigated.

The commissioner will not be required to inform the committee of complaints that he or she judges not to warrant a full investigation. However, in order to enable the committee and the Parliament to retain an oversight of the number of complaints that are resolved in that way, and to maintain an overview of the complaints process, the commissioner will be required to submit an annual report to the Standards Committee and to the

Parliament. The bill will also provide the committee with a power to call for interim reports on specific investigations.

It is only right and proper that the Parliament is seen to be promoting the very highest standards of probity for its members. In short, it is for the Parliament to ensure that its own house is in order. We think that a committee bill is the most appropriate legislative vehicle for making our proposal for a standards commissioner a reality.

I move,

That the Parliament agrees to the proposal for a Committee Bill under Rule 9.15 contained in the Standards Committee's 2nd Report 2001, *Proposals for a Standards Commissioner Committee Bill* (SP Paper 312).

14:43

**The Deputy Minister for Parliament (Euan Robson):** The Executive welcomes today's short debate and is always ready to support measures that will ensure the highest standards of probity in public life. I believe that the standards commissioner bill will be such a measure.

The Standards Committee is correct in its view that it is essential to introduce an independent element into the process of ensuring public confidence in arrangements for investigating complaints against members. A statutory commissioner, appointed by the Parliament, with his or her own powers to summon witnesses and to require production of evidence, will, I believe, provide that independence.

I am pleased to see that, in its proposed appointment arrangements, the committee has sought to follow the principles recommended by the Nolan committee and the guidance issued by the Commissioner for Public Appointments.

In addition to maintaining the independence of the commissioner, it is vital to ensure that he or she is accountable. I am reassured to see that the bill will make provision for that through the arrangements for reports on individual complaints to be made to the committee and for annual reports to be made to the committee and to the Parliament. It is also right that the committee should be able to guide the commissioner on certain fundamental aspects of investigation procedure.

The Executive endorses the committee's proposal to limit the commissioner's role to the investigation of complaints, leaving the Standards Committee's clerks with the primary responsibility for advising members on standards issues. If the commissioner were to be responsible both for investigating complaints and for providing advice, that would undoubtedly lead to conflicts of interest, which could undermine the credibility of the

complaints process.

Similarly, I am pleased to note that the bill does not seek to give the commissioner powers to recommend or impose sanctions against members. That is a matter that can properly be dealt with only by the Parliament.

Finally, the Executive considers it important that the introduction of a new measure such as this should not impose an excessive financial burden on the Parliament. As the committee's proposal refers only to the appointment of a standards commissioner, it would not seem to give rise to significant new costs. However, the Executive would be concerned if the commissioner were to be given powers to employ staff or to incur any costs other than reasonable day-to-day expenses.

Overall, the Executive believes that this is a worthwhile proposal, which will produce a robust and effective mechanism for investigating complaints against members. I commend the committee for its work. The Executive is pleased to support the committee's proposal for a bill.

14:45

**Lord James Douglas-Hamilton (Lothians) (Con):** I strongly support the initiative in this matter of Mr Mike Rumbles, the convener of the Standards Committee, and I agree with what the minister has just said.

As Mike Rumbles pointed out, the main purpose of the debate is to propose that the necessary legislation to introduce a standards commissioner should take the form of a committee bill. Essentially, we are dealing with good parliamentary housekeeping. Along with colleagues on the committee, I believe that it is appropriate that the legislation should be introduced through such a bill.

There were a number of factors that led us to recommend the appointment of a commissioner. From the *Official Report*, it is quite clear that the most influential of those was the need to include an independent element in our investigative procedures, as the minister has just recommended. Although independence is not a legal requirement, the committee heard that self-regulation tended to be viewed with suspicion and that the public would be sceptical of the claim that members would be impartial in investigating their colleagues. Therefore, an independent element is essential to ensure public confidence in the robustness of the Parliament's investigative procedures.

The committee is aware of the need for transparency and openness in its deliberations. Indeed, one of the key principles underpinning the Parliament is a commitment to openness and



transparency. However, we are also conscious of the rights of members to be protected from malicious or frivolous complaints, so we have proposed, and the Parliament has agreed, that the initial stages of any investigation will be conducted in private and independently of the committee. The aims of that are to ensure that there is confidence in the robustness of an investigation and that malicious complaints are not awarded unwarranted attention. However, once the initial investigation has been completed and considered by the committee, it is envisaged that any further investigation by the committee will normally be conducted in public. All decisions by the committee will be made publicly and reports on each complaint will be publicly available. In that way, we hope to achieve the right balance between the need for a robust, but fair investigation and our proper commitment to transparency and openness in the decision-making process.

The committee is also keen to avoid any sense of its simply rubber-stamping the commissioner's conclusions. It will be for the committee to carefully consider those conclusions on their merits. The committee will retain the right to investigate any matters within its remit. The *Official Report* shows that we felt that a number of options would be open to us after we considered the commissioner's report: we could accept the report; we could refer it back to the commissioner to conduct further inquiries; or we could conduct our own investigation or review of the commissioner's report. As colleagues have pointed out, the committee will continue to be responsible for recommending to the Parliament whether sanctions are appropriate.

The sanctions that a member could face will be exclusion from proceedings of the Parliament; withdrawal of the right of access as a member to the parliamentary complex; withdrawal of the right of access as a member to parliamentary facilities and services; and removal of representational and related privileges that a member might usually enjoy.

A member who is complained about will have rights. The commissioner is required to invite the member who is under investigation to respond to the complaint. The member will also have the right to receive a copy of the commissioner's final report. If the commissioner identifies a breach of the code, the member will have the right to appear before the committee at stage 3, when he or she may challenge the findings. At stage 4, the member will have the opportunity, during a debate in the Parliament, to appeal against the committee's report on an issue of law or procedure or to appeal against the recommended sanction. Members will recall that there is also the possibility of judicial review.

My final point is on fair play. Once a recommendation has been made to the Parliament, the members of the Standards Committee will not vote on the sanction that they have recommended, in order to ensure the fairness of the process.

The proposal for a committee bill is a wholly sensible way forward. I congratulate the convener of the committee for having brought us to this point.

14:50

**Patricia Ferguson (Glasgow Maryhill) (Lab):**

This is always a difficult time in a short debate, particularly when one is the closing speaker in the opening section of the debate. However, members should not sympathise with me too much—they should think of my colleague Tricia Marwick, who is to close the debate for the committee. To be frank, our colleagues have outlined eloquently and clearly all the proposals in the committee's report.

It is worth emphasising the fact that, as the committee went through its work, we were concerned about ensuring that the Parliament's founding principles were adhered to and that public confidence in the independence of the process that we are proposing was to be sacrosanct. We were also concerned to ensure that members could have confidence in not only the rigor, but the clarity of the process to which they might be subjected. We also wanted members to feel confident that the process was open and would allow them to submit appeals at the appropriate stages.

We took a lot of evidence before we reached our conclusions. I will highlight two of the issues that, for me, were crucial in reaching those conclusions. First, the commissioner will not be responsible for giving advice to members. The committee felt that that was crucial to the process, as we did not want the commissioner to find himself or herself investigating a member who had acted on advice given by the commissioner. That difficulty has been encountered in other Parliaments and we did not want to go down that road.

Secondly, we were clear that evidence-taking sessions held during an investigation by the commissioner should be held in private. At that stage, members are still innocent until a problem has been proven, and we believe that if those sessions are taken in private, members will have the confidence to speak freely to and to co-operate fully with the commissioner and to give him or her all the information that might be required from them.

I believe that the conclusions that we reached after that lengthy process are the right ones. Time will tell, but our experience so far of the temporary

adviser, who has worked in a similar way to that proposed for the commissioner, leads me to believe that that will be the case.

In conclusion, I thank Sam Jones and Jim Johnston, the committee clerks, for steering us along that path. I look forward to the introduction in the Parliament of the committee report's conclusions.

14:53

**Tricia Marwick (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP):**

I add the thanks of committee members to those of Patricia Ferguson for all the support that Sam Jones and Jim Johnston gave us when we were reaching our decisions. On behalf of my colleagues on the Standards Committee, I also thank members for their contributions to what has been an interesting, if short, debate.

It is clear that the committee's proposal for a standards commissioner has cross-party support and has been widely welcomed by members across the Parliament. That constructive approach reflects the consensual way in which the committee has sought to develop its policy in this area, and we welcome the Executive's support for our proposals.

The overwhelmingly positive response to our proposals reflects the extent of the commitment of members of all parties to ensuring that we maintain the highest standards of probity when we conduct our business. It is clear that the issue of standards in public life remains topical and we are all aware that we are constantly under the microscope of the press and other media as we carry out our parliamentary duties.

By recommending the appointment of a standards commissioner, we send the right message. That message is that we take the issue seriously and are wholly committed to ensuring the robust investigation of complaints against members. By so doing, we hope to reassure the people of Scotland that their new Parliament will not be afflicted by sleaze and corruption. Rather, members are bound by the key principles of the code of conduct, which set the tone for the relationship between members and those whom they represent.

We believe that the proposals strike a balance between ensuring that complaints are dealt with in a rigorous and transparent manner and making certain that members are not unjustifiably exposed to malicious or ill-founded complaints. In short, we aim to ensure that complainer and member alike can be confident that they are being treated fairly and justly.

I want to pick up on some of the key elements of the proposals. First, the bill will contain powers to

enable the commissioner to summon witnesses and to compel the production of documentary evidence. Those powers will underpin the independence of the post, and that independence will be a critical guarantor of the confidence of the Scottish people and of members of Parliament in the complaints process.

Secondly, I want to highlight the commissioner's relationship with the committee and with the Parliament. As Mike Rumbles explained earlier, the commissioner will be responsible for carrying out investigations in private and independently of the Standards Committee. However, the committee will continue to be responsible for recommending whether the sanctions that are set out in rule 6.5 of the standing orders are appropriate. The commissioner's role will be restricted to a consideration of and decision on the facts of each complaint. It will be for the committee to scrutinise the commissioner's findings and to make the appropriate recommendations to the Parliament.

Thirdly, a decision on whether to impose sanctions on a member who has been found to have breached the code of conduct will be taken at a meeting of the whole Parliament. We believe that that is fundamentally important. It will also give the member the right to come before the Parliament to put his point of view.

On behalf of the committee, I commend to members the proposal for a standards commissioner committee bill. We are convinced that the appointment of a commissioner will be an integral component and demonstrate the Parliament's commitment to ensure that there is the highest order of probity in our affairs. The introduction of legislation to appoint a commissioner will mark another important milestone in our commitment to maintaining and strengthening the public's trust and confidence in the integrity of the Parliament and its members in conducting public business.

**The Presiding Officer:** That draws the debate to a close. However, before we leave the subject altogether, I wish to say a word. The convener of the Standards Committee mentioned the informal arrangement for complaints of members against members, which will still come to me before they go to the committee, if that is necessary. I would like to take this opportunity to say that I am, frankly, disappointed at the number of such complaints that I am having to deal with. I hope that members who are not present will read this in the *Official Report*.

Having to deal with such complaints is, I find, quite the most tedious and distasteful part of my many duties. I appeal to all members to read the code of conduct carefully to see how they are supposed to describe themselves and how they

are supposed to deal with each other so that we diminish these internal complaints. It is time that we took steps to do that—I see the convener of the Standards Committee nodding.

## Motion without Notice

14:58

**The Deputy Minister for Parliament (Euan Robson):** I ask the chamber's permission to move a motion without notice.

**The Presiding Officer (Sir David Steel):** I am minded to accept the motion to bring forward decision time. Is that agreed?

**Members indicated agreement.**

**Euan Robson:** To allow for the fact that business has concluded early, I move,

That, under Rule 11.2.4, Decision Time be taken at 14:59.

*Motion agreed to.*

## Decision Time

14:59

**The Presiding Officer (Sir David Steel):** There are two questions to be put as a result of today's business.

The first question is, that motion S1M-1955, 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 Committee—

the Justice 1 Committee to consider the European Communities (Service of Judicial and Extrajudicial Documents) (Scotland) Regulations 2001 (SSI 2001/172), and

the Justice 2 Committee to consider the Sex Offenders (Notification Requirements) (Prescribed Police Stations) (Scotland) Regulations 2001 (SSI 2001/173).

**The Presiding Officer:** The second question is, that motion S1M-1901, in the name of Mr Rumbles, on behalf of the Standards Committee, on the proposal for a committee bill to establish a standards commissioner, be agreed to.

*Motion agreed to.*

That the Parliament agrees to the proposal for a Committee Bill under Rule 9.15 contained in the Standards Committee's 2nd Report 2001, *Proposals for a Standards Commissioner Committee Bill* (SP Paper 312).

## Maternity Services (Gordon)

**The Presiding Officer (Sir David Steel):** The first members' business debate is on motion S1M-1935, in the name of Nora Radcliffe, on maternity services in Gordon. The debate will be concluded without a question being put and it will be helpful if those who would like to take part in the debate would indicate that now.

### *Motion debated,*

That the Parliament notes that under-use has been cited as the reason for a proposal to close the midwife-led maternity unit at Inch and District War Memorial Hospital and further notes that a recent local campaign making mothers-to-be aware of the option of local delivery increased the number of women choosing to be delivered there; recognises that there are legitimate local concerns that the midwife-led maternity unit which is to be retained at the Jubilee Hospital in Huntly, the next town, will also find itself under threat of closure in the future unless women are encouraged to use it, and therefore urges local GPs, Grampian Primary Care NHS Health Trust, and Grampian Health Board in consultation with the Scottish Executive to do much more to raise the status of midwives and make better use of their skills, to reverse the trend to "over-medicalise" childbirth and to promote the attitude that birth is a natural process and should be treated as such.

15:00

**Nora Radcliffe (Gordon) (LD):** The genesis of the concern that prompted my motion was probably the loss of maternity services at Inverurie hospital 20 years ago, in the teeth of local opposition. However, the trigger was a recent review of maternity services that was undertaken by central Aberdeenshire local health care co-operative in my constituency. That review came to the conclusion that one of the two maternity units at Inch and Huntly should close and that maternity services should be centralised on the Jubilee hospital site in Huntly.

For those who are not familiar with the area, Inch and Huntly are market towns that are 12 miles apart. Each has a fairly evenly populated farming hinterland. Aberdeen maternity hospital is the main maternity hospital in the region and it is 28 miles from Inch. Although the nearest major facility for Huntly is Dr Gray's hospital in Elgin—which is 27 miles away—for historical reasons, Huntly would normally look to Aberdeen rather than to Elgin. The review was prompted by the steady decline in recent years of the number of mothers who choose to give birth in the local units. Another relevant factor is the demographic projection of a decline in the number of women of child-bearing age in the area over the next 15 years.

Obviously, midwives need a certain number of deliveries to maintain their skill levels. Existing

local protocols for dealing with maternity emergencies rely heavily on the availability of GP support. It was suggested in the review report that in the area where Grampian doctors—G docs—provide out-of-hours cover, a GP who was responding to an emergency might not have obstetric experience. That might be looked at more closely as a justifiable reason for closing the unit because G docs is a co-operative out-of-hours service that is largely manned by local GPs.

Whatever the reason for proposing rationalisation of services on one site, my concern with the process is that it has started in the wrong place. Much more could and should have been done to investigate why the decline is happening. The decline should not merely have been accepted passively as a fact and reacted to.

The midwives in the units gathered some statistics that were published as part of the report. I find those statistics interesting. Over two six-month periods—one in 1999 and one in 2000—women were asked at the start of their prenatal care where they would prefer to be delivered. It was then noted where they had been delivered. In 1999, 26 out of 41 women in Huntly said initially that they would prefer to have their babies in Huntly and 15 said that they would prefer to have them in Aberdeen maternity hospital. In the event, the numbers were reversed. The place of delivery was Aberdeen maternity hospital for 26 of the women and only 12 were delivered in Huntly.

Initial preferences in Inch were more evenly split—18 for Inch and 19 for Aberdeen. However, again, there was a significant shift over the course of pregnancy and there were only eight actual deliveries in Inch, but 27 in Aberdeen. For those whose mental arithmetic is good, I should point out that the numbers do not tally exactly because some people moved house in the middle of the process.

In 2000, 26 women in Huntly said that their preferred place of delivery was Huntly and nine said that they would prefer to deliver in Aberdeen. In the event, 11 delivered in Huntly and 29 in Aberdeen. Twenty-four women in Inch said that their preferred place of delivery was Inch and 12 said that they would prefer to deliver in Aberdeen. The figures for the actual place of delivery were 13 in Inch and 20 in Aberdeen. Some of the women who would have preferred local deliveries were delivered in Aberdeen because of complications or possible complications. That is absolutely as it should be, but I would like to know more about why there is such a big shift away from local delivery during the course of a pregnancy. I find it hard to believe that it is all for genuine medical reasons.

Another interesting factor is that the National Childbirth Trust mounted an awareness-raising

campaign in Inch, to ensure that local women knew that they could choose to have their babies in the local hospital. That had a measurable impact. Whereas, over the period monitored, there were 12 Huntly deliveries in 1999 dropping to 11 in 2000, in Inch there were eight deliveries in 1999 rising to 13 in 2000. Those statistics cover a limited period, but raise questions that are wider than events in Inch and Huntly. They reflect national trends and those questions need to be answered.

According to an article in *The Times* earlier this month, pregnancy and childbirth were taken over by doctors in the 1970s, when the Peel report recommended hospital deliveries and took away the traditional autonomy of midwives. As a result, mothers lost the right to have one familiar midwife to see them through pregnancy, childbirth and antenatal care—ironically, that is something that every Victorian mother expected as a matter of course.

It is true that more women died in childbirth when babies were routinely delivered at home, but that was before antibiotics, improved housing and nutrition, contraception, and NHS expert care for the small percentage of problem pregnancies that really require a doctor's help. Today, in the Netherlands, 40 per cent of women have their babies at home with the help of midwives. The Netherlands has one of the lowest perinatal mortality rates in the world. America's maternity system is led by obstetricians, but its perinatal mortality rate is higher than Cuba's.

Medical intervention can be crucial for some mothers and babies. No one would deny that or try to obstruct such intervention in any way. However, some of the statistics suggest that we have got the emphasis wrong. The World Health Organisation says that the rate for Caesarean sections should be no higher than 10 per cent to 15 per cent of births. The British percentage is 19 per cent overall—which is bad enough—but, in some areas it is as high as 30 per cent.

According to the Royal College of Midwives, staff shortages in the NHS are a factor. If two thirds of women are left alone during labour because there are not enough staff for continuous care, the anxiety and stress that that can cause contribute to those ever-rising rates of Caesareans and the other avoidable interventions that are more dangerous than natural birth. A midwife who was quoted in the article in *The Times* stated:

"There are millions of women with scars from Caesareans or from forceps deliveries ... who have been taken in by one of the biggest lies in the past 100 years."

I do not know whether I would be quite as forceful as that, but I do think that we have the balance wrong and that it is time to hand back to midwives authority for the vast majority of births.

They are ready and waiting. There are 90,000 registered midwives, but only 32,000 are practising in the health service. Many have gone into private practice where they are able to offer the sort of care that they want to give.

We have been over-medicalised for so long that shifting the balance back will need a concerted effort by all those who are involved. Doctors must let go. We have to encourage the midwives to take over; they have the skills and they know where medical intervention is necessary. Women must be given the information and the confidence that they need to make informed choices. The Scottish Executive should be running the sort of awareness-raising campaigns that a voluntary organisation ran so successfully in Inch. The whole thrust of modern health service provision is to bring it as near to the patient's home as is medically and practically sensible. I look forward to pregnant women being seen as patients only in the few instances in which that is necessary, and to their being able to choose to have their babies safely and happily in their own local midwife-led facility.

The closure of maternity services at Inch is still just a proposal that technically, even at this late stage, need not and might not happen. At the very least, we must ensure that conditions are right—that could possibly be as simple as ensuring that attitudes are right—for Huntly to flourish and for Inch, if it does not close, and even Inverurie, eventually to be brought back to midwife-led use.

15:08

**Brian Adam (North-East Scotland) (SNP):** I pay tribute to Nora Radcliffe for bringing this matter to the Parliament. She has covered a wide range of the issues. This debate is to do not only with Inch; it is to do with rural maternity services in general. We still have a considerable number of community hospitals in the north-east of Scotland—some people might suggest that we have a disproportionately high number. I do not know what the minister, Malcolm Chisholm, will say in his winding-up speech, but I welcome the fact that we still have so many of those hospitals.

**Nora Radcliffe:** Will Brian Adam rephrase that, and say that other areas have a disproportionately low number of community hospitals?

**Brian Adam:** Since the north-east has seven of the 18 that are left in Scotland, we have a very high proportion.

The trend of maternity services in the north-east has been towards centralisation. Initially, it appeared that all services would be centralised at Aberdeen maternity hospital, but largely through the efforts of people in Moray—in particular, my colleague Margaret Ewing—an agreement was

reached to set up a significant maternity service in Elgin. That, of course, came at a price—the closure of maternity units at Spynie, Keith, Buckie and Forres. Welcome as it is to have proper full-scale maternity services in Elgin, those who lived in the other areas regretted the loss of services in places such as Keith and Buckie.

I am old enough to have been born at home, but my brother and sister, who are somewhat younger than me, were part of the over-medicalisation that Nora Radcliffe referred to, and had the privilege of being born in Keith maternity hospital, which no longer exists. Turner memorial hospital in Keith is now largely a geriatric hospital. That is a matter for significant regret.

A problem with the over-centralisation of maternity services in the north-east is the roads. In the winter, it is not always possible to get quick access—even for helicopters, if we are in the middle of a blizzard. The distances that are involved are considerable, so the only way that one can deal properly with the problem is to manage patients. Nora Radcliffe quoted statistics to show that patients are being managed. Despite an initial intention to have a baby locally, medical interventions mean that many babies end up being born in Aberdeen, often unnecessarily. It is not just a question of there being more Caesarean operations, because there is a greater number of induced births. There are dangers with the inducement of births, but it is convenient, when trying to manage a service, for births to happen where there are most staff. In the north-east there was a particularly bad period when we had a lot of managed births that happened to correlate with staffing levels. That is not the best way for babies to be born, and it certainly is not best for the mothers and families that want to be involved.

How do we redress the imbalance? It may be that the Executive will refuse to close the hospital in Inch, which is an option that is open to it, but we want to ensure that the required medical support is available locally. The LHCCs will have to address that, because they will have to provide support, so that when appointments are made, people with the appropriate obstetrics and gynaecology backgrounds are available. G docs provides out-of-hours services, and I am sure that it would be possible to provide cover through that scheme, but that would require some lateral thinking.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer (Patricia Ferguson):** Will you wind up please?

**Brian Adam:** Are you encouraging me to stop?

I welcome the motion. We should have another look at the issue. We should not encourage over-centralisation of what is a natural process. It strikes me that much of what is happening is

driven by medical desires and not by clinical needs.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** I remind members that the usual four-minute speaking rule applies.

15:13

**Mary Scanlon (Highlands and Islands) (Con):**

It is interesting that last week in the chamber we were espousing “breast is best”. It was interesting to hear Brian Adam putting forward the great benefits of natural childbirth.

My first point is on Arbutnott funding. We have a problem, because Grampian did not do well out of that funding. I say that because the Highlands did exceptionally well. I believe that Grampian had one of the lowest settlements from Arbutnott, which wanted increased access for all. I have serious concerns about many of the community hospitals and facilities in Grampian, because the area has undoubtedly had a poor settlement this year.

Nora Radcliffe mentioned the over-medicalisation of maternity services. My children—they are not children now—are 26 and 27 years old. When they were born, we were being told in this country, “You cannot possibly have a home birth. You have to go to the acute hospital. You would put your child’s life at risk otherwise.”

It is interesting that, at the same time, mothers in the Netherlands were being told the opposite and were being encouraged to have home births. Nora Radcliffe said that in the Netherlands, 40 per cent of women were having babies at home. I was told today that more than 60 per cent of children are born at home in the Netherlands. I lodged a written question to the Minister for Health and Community Care some time ago to ask whether NHS staff will be allocated to assist with home births, because that is the preferred option of parents. Like Nora Radcliffe, I think that we are considering parents’ choice. That point has come through in the debate. Many parents would like to have that choice, provided that the appropriate services and skills are available.

The Royal College of Midwives also mentioned a serious lack of consultation in the area that Nora Radcliffe referred to. It is not the first time that members of the Health and Community Care Committee have heard that. Such comments were made during our investigation into the Stobhill situation. Whenever local services are changed, reconfigured or restructured, there seem to be serious problems of lack of consultation. I understand that account was not taken of the wider catchment area or that questions were not asked to ensure that risk assessment took place so that people were reassured about that.

The distance between Inch and district hospital and Aberdeen maternity hospital is 28 miles and the distance between Huntly and Elgin is 27 miles. If Nora Radcliffe's colleague Jamie Stone were present, he might compare those distances with the 150 miles' travel that many parents will face in Caithness and Sutherland in the Highlands, given that the consultant-led service there might be reduced. Compared with that, 27 miles is almost next door.

Central Aberdeenshire local health care co-operative said:

"Both communities have expressed an opinion that would suggest that Inch residents would not use the Huntly facility nor would the Huntly residents use the Inch facility."

That seems to be the Gordon equivalent of the Falkirk bairns not wishing to be born in Stirling. The issue is emotive. It does not matter where a patient has a hip operation or has their appendix taken out, but where children are born matters to families—it is important. I hope that whatever great clinical health guidelines are produced take account of that basic point.

Women must have the information that will allow them to make informed decisions by balancing risks. I am not sure whether that information is available. I will not read out statistics, but there is something odd about the total number of bookings for Huntly and Inch. Comparison of the total bookings with the total deliveries illustrates stark figures. Why are only a quarter of children who are booked to be born in Huntly and Inch delivered in those places? Is that the parents' choice, or is the medical profession giving other advice?

15:18

**Mr Mike Rumbles (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (LD):** I am grateful for the opportunity to speak. The debate concerns the changes to maternity provision in Gordon, but my neighbouring constituency is similarly affected by the decisions of the health trust involved. Many of my constituents use the facilities at the Inch and District War Memorial hospital and will be adversely affected by its closure.

We must address why the changes to the maternity services in our rural Aberdeenshire hospitals are taking place. The changes are driven by funding difficulties caused by the Arbutnott formula, which allocates the lowest health spending to Grampian. Grampian will receive just £991 per person for health services. All the other health areas will receive funding of much more than £1,000 per person. For example, Tayside Health Board—a similar authority to Grampian—is to receive £1,166 per person. The situation cannot be right. The Minister for Health and Community Care, Susan Deacon, provided a table in answer

to a written question that I lodged on per capita funding for 2003-04 and long-term planning. The figures are stark. The only one of the 15 health boards to receive a three-figure sum rather than a four-figure sum is Grampian.

**Ben Wallace (North-East Scotland) (Con):** I am grateful to Mike Rumbles for making that point, which he has illustrated well. Will the Liberal Democrats join us and lodge a motion to reverse the Arbutnott formula? We need to send the formula back so that we can have it reassessed.

**Mr Rumbles:** I do not want to play party politics in a member's debate. I am speaking up for my constituents and for the north-east.

What is the reason behind the figures? I recently discovered that the formula used by Arbutnott to allocate funding to our health boards may have changed the definition of rurality. That in turn is causing great difficulties for Grampian Health Board. I wonder why, when the Minister for Health and Community Care has said consistently that the funding formula favours rural areas and when half the population of Grampian Health Board area lives in rural communities, they receive one of the lowest levels of funding from the Scottish Executive.

Apparently, the reason is simple: the further away people are from medical services, the more funding they get. In the north-east, we are fortunate to have a good network of community hospitals and GP services. However, our health service managers have worked out that if they centralise medical services in Aberdeen and close down rural medical services, because of the Arbutnott formula the population in Grampian Health Board's area will receive more money from the Scottish Executive. That is a perversion.

Closing down Aberdeenshire community medical services and using so-called economies of scale in the city of Aberdeen's hospitals is ridiculous and it should play no part in our health managers' thinking. When we consider such issues, are not we forgetting the patient? The closure of the maternity services at Inch typifies the trend in our NHS managers' thinking. I am afraid that I do not trust the trusts in such matters.

The Arbutnott funding formula is at the heart of the problem. The board has to manage on the funding that it has. What I want to avoid at all costs is a penny-pinching approach to our community medical services. Only by changing the flawed Arbutnott formula will we save community hospitals that are under threat from the centralisers. I say to the minister that it is in the chamber of the Scottish Parliament that we will secure the future of our much-needed community hospitals at Inch and throughout Aberdeenshire and the north-east.

15:22

**Mr Duncan McNeil (Greenock and Inverclyde (Lab)):** I could not resist the opportunity to try to get into the debate. I thank Nora Radcliffe for lodging the motion that brought it about.

I have some supporters—I hope that I can call them that—from St Ninian's Primary School in Gourrock sitting in the public gallery.

I want to make a plea on behalf of the local Rankin maternity unit. The St Ninian's Primary School pupils' presence is timely, as many of them will have been born in the Rankin maternity unit. They will surely verify the concern that exists in my community about the future of the unit and how much the unit is valued by the community.

I welcome the establishment of Mothers for the Rankin. My colleague Trish Godman and I met some of its members on Friday. It is a powerful alliance of mothers who are not politically affiliated. We also met GPs, who outlined their demands, which are not the same as the consultants'.

The consultants in their ivory towers have deemed that a maternity unit needs to have 1,000 births a year. If we accept that principle, we accept the centralisation of maternity services throughout Scotland—not just in Argyll and Clyde, in Greenock or Port Glasgow or in Gordon. That will inevitably drive us down the road of competition.

I ask the minister also to consider the artificiality of health board boundaries. The fact that trusts and health boards are forced to consider maternity services within artificial boundaries has thrown up some massive contradictions.

When Trish Godman and I spoke to Mothers for the Rankin on Friday, what mattered to them was access to quality care, choice and continuity of care. They said that they do not want super-duper maternity units that do not meet those criteria and that force them to give up their choice. I hope that others will, like me, take every opportunity—in the Parliament and with the health boards and trusts—to make that point forcefully on the mothers' behalf.

15:25

**The Deputy Minister for Health and Community Care (Malcolm Chisholm):** I congratulate Nora Radcliffe on securing the debate and on giving members the opportunity to discuss the important matter of maternity services.

The motion was well timed, since we are starting to implement and address the action points in "A Framework for maternity services in Scotland", which Susan Deacon launched in February. At the beginning of that document, various broad themes are emphasised that are consistent with several

points made by Nora Radcliffe.

First, the framework reminds us that pregnancy and childbirth are normal physiological processes in women's lives. Nora Radcliffe's motion points that out. Secondly, the framework states that maternity services must deliver a woman and family-centred approach to care and support, planned in partnership with the woman. Finally, it reminds us that maternity services should be essentially community-based and midwife-managed wherever possible, with an emphasis on continuity of care.

Stand-alone midwifery and GP units such as those in Gordon have developed in rural areas to meet the needs of people who make the choice not to travel to a distant, consultant-led centre. As Mary Scanlon said, their use involves careful balancing of risk and choice, but they meet the very real needs of a number of women. Provided that the risks are fully explained, appropriate criteria for early transfer in emergencies are strictly adhered to and appropriate consultant advice and regular updating and training of staff in key skills such as resuscitation and stabilisation continue, such units will continue to provide a valuable service.

However, from time to time health boards and trusts must consider all their services to ensure that they are still consistent with need. Such assessment is rightly for NHS bodies to undertake locally, on the basis of their detailed knowledge of local circumstances, so members will not expect me to become closely involved in the details of the situation in Gordon.

**Mr Rumbles:** I have listened carefully to the minister. Does he agree that the Arbutnott formula is forcing Grampian trusts and Grampian Health Board to centralise their services to save money, in the mistaken belief that that will lead to economies of scale? Does he further agree that the excellent community services that we have in the north-east are under threat because of the flawed Arbutnott formula?

**Malcolm Chisholm:** I will not comment on the particular issue of Inch hospital, but I am assured that the proposed changes, which have not yet been before the health board, do not entail any cost savings. Mike Rumbles was wrong to pursue that route in relation to the motion. I remind members that the Arbutnott settlement gives Grampian a 5.5 per cent revenue increase this year. Although we do not have detailed allocations for the next three years, we have announced that Grampian will receive minimum increases of 6.5 per cent in 2002-03 and 7.4 per cent in 2003-04. By any reckoning, those are large increases, which are unprecedented in recent times.

Duncan McNeil moved us on to a different area.



I cannot get too involved in that, but I remind members that there are no specific proposals yet for the Rankin. When proposals are drawn up, they will be subject to full and proper public consultation and will have to be consistent with the principles of the framework. Duncan McNeil referred to health board boundaries. The framework makes it clear that cross-boundary issues must be considered.

Decisions must be taken following detailed consultation. Mary Scanlon reminded us how important that is in relation to many reviews and that is made clear in the Scottish health plan, "Our National Health: A plan for action, a plan for change". The maternity framework builds on that and emphasises that public and professional consultation is fundamental to the planning, development and provision of local maternity services.

It is vital that women's care provides continuity, from pregnancy to childbirth and beyond. Midwives have a central role to play. They are by far the best placed to deliver the one-to-one support that women have a right to expect during such a major event in their lives.

Inevitably, most expectant and new mothers' contact with the NHS takes place during pregnancy and after birth, but it is crucial to get all the interactions, including childbirth itself, right. Midwives have always been instrumental in ensuring that that happens and the framework reinforces and supports their role.

Individual choice is an issue that often comes up when matters affecting maternity services and childbirth are under discussion. That is right and proper, as Nora Radcliffe emphasised. Women's experience of childbirth—and that of their partners and families—can be hugely affected by whether the birth takes place at home, in a small, homely, local maternity unit or in a specialist unit in a large hospital.

**Mrs Margaret Ewing (Moray) (SNP):** Is the minister satisfied with the recruitment and retention of midwives in rural areas, as that is a significant factor?

**Malcolm Chisholm:** That follows on from the importance that we attach to midwives in our strategy. I hope that I have reassured members about that.

Many members have emphasised the importance of informed choice, with women as equal partners in decision making. However, we must remember that pregnancy and childbirth are not risk-free. Obstetricians, GPs and midwives all have important roles to play. They should not promote one model of maternity care over another, but it is for them to explain to individual women the risks associated with any given model

of care. It is for them to provide all the information that women need to help them to make the appropriate choice and it is for them to involve women as equal partners in the decision-making process.

Community-based, midwife-managed services will in many cases be the first option, not only for antenatal and postnatal care, but for childbirth. They might well offer a model for service provision in the more remote and rural parts of Scotland where the only alternative is a long journey to the nearest specialist unit, but they cannot be divorced entirely from specialist care. It is extremely important in every case to maintain links with a designated consultant obstetrician. The framework makes that clear.

It is obvious that the role of the specialist maternity unit and of consultant-led care must not be sidelined or undervalued. In many ways, it is because of the advances that have been made at the high-tech end of obstetric care that pregnancy and childbirth entail so much less risk than in times gone by.

**Michael Russell (South of Scotland) (SNP):** Will Mr Chisholm give way?

**Malcolm Chisholm:** I am almost out of time.

As I have said on more than one occasion, we are in the process of implementing the framework across Scotland. We are doing so in close partnership with health boards, trusts and professionals who provide services on the ground. The framework does not pretend to be a blueprint for the ideal maternity service, but it offers a set of key principles that we expect the NHS in Scotland to apply when developing its strategies for services in the areas that it serves.

I commend the framework as essential reading to everyone who has participated in the debate and to anyone who is interested in how we want to take forward this vital aspect of the many services that our NHS provides.

## Local Newspaper Week

**The Deputy Presiding Officer (Patricia Ferguson):** The next item of business is a members' business debate on motion S1M-1926, in the name of Mr Duncan McNeil, on local newspaper week, 14 to 20 May 2001.

*Motion debated,*

That the Parliament welcomes Local Newspaper Week; recognises that local newspapers play a crucial role in their communities and can act as a focal point of community life; acknowledges that they provide valuable services such as scrutiny of local elected representatives and the championing of local causes; further acknowledges that they are a window on our communities and give us a unique opportunity to present all that is positive within our areas to a wider audience, and notes that the *Greenock Telegraph* is a fine example of these roles.

15:33

**Mr Duncan McNeil (Greenock and Inverclyde) (Lab):** I thank those members who have stayed for the debate and those who signed the motion. I am sure that we will hear a lot in the next half hour or so about the role that many different local newspapers play in communities throughout Scotland and about the contribution that they make to civic life.

My local newspaper, the *Greenock Telegraph*, is as much a fixture of local life as the town hall or the River Clyde. I should perhaps declare an interest before going any further. I am a former employee of the *Greenock Telegraph*, and delivered the paper between '62 and '64.

**Michael Russell (South of Scotland) (SNP):** When he was between 62 and 64?

**Mr McNeil:** No, no. I just look 63 now.

Little did I know that the skills that I learned doing battle with furious dogs and lethal garden gates just to reach a rusty letterbox would stand me in good stead, particularly in the past couple of weeks, for delivering leaflets.

One of the features that sets local newspapers apart from their national counterparts is that their stories have a direct impact on the lives of their readers. The "Greenock Tele", as it is called, acts as a focal point for community life. It chronicles the hatches, dispatches and matches in the church and on the football field, academic achievements, court reports and other public events.

Local newspapers provide a level of scrutiny of local elected representatives, such as ourselves, that broadcast and other national media cannot provide. However much we rant and rave about how local newspapers cover a specific story, we know in our heart of hearts that what they do is

good for democracy and the political process. Local papers also help people who have left the area, and even the country, to keep in touch.

I write a short column in the *Greenock Telegraph* every week about the goings-on in this place. The column has my e-mail address at the bottom and I am amazed by the number of e-mails that I receive from Greenockians working, for example, for IBM in America, for an engineering company in Canada or in the construction industry in Italy. They read the paper, seek my opinions and want to keep in touch with what is happening locally and in the Scottish Parliament. We have had relatives making inquiries and representations from Canada about the care of an elderly uncle. That was brought about by new technology and the local newspaper.

It would be remiss of me—given that we have just discussed the Rankin maternity unit and given my involvement in the shipbuilding industry through its decline—not to mention local newspapers' campaigning role. They have the resources and local knowledge to run campaigns that bring matters of local concern to the attention of the public.

Local papers have another crucial role: they are a window on their community. They give us a unique opportunity to present all that is positive within our area to a wider audience. That is assisted by Scottish Television's lunch time "Scotland Today" and BBC Scotland's "Newsdrive", both of which review local papers daily. I welcome that. It would be in everybody's interest if more of that was done, including a review of the many weekly titles in Scotland.

The *Greenock Telegraph* was launched on 18 March 1857, at a price of 2d. It was originally published every Wednesday and Saturday. Two years later, the paper started to be published three times a week and the price was halved to a penny—newspaper wars indeed.

In 1863, the paper became Britain's first halfpenny daily newspaper. That caused others, such as the *North and South Shields Gazette*, *The Evening Citizen* in Glasgow, *The Echo* in London, the *Belfast Telegraph* and the *Paisley Express* to follow suit, which did a great deal to bring cheap, reliable newspapers to the British people.

For 144 years, the *Greenock Telegraph*, with its unique local angle, has reported many historic events: emigration from Scotland to the new world; both world wars; Greenock's blitz; the dark days when the yards closed; and countless general and local elections.

When I looked through some back copies of the *Greenock Telegraph*, I found a public notice from the 1946 general election that may be of interest, given that there is much discussion about apathy

in elections. The advertisement invited members of the public to book their tickets, at 1s 6d a time, to hear Ernest Bevin at Cappielow park. Such was the demand that an overflow meeting was organised next door to be addressed by the local candidate, Hector McNeil. These are changed days indeed.

When we read the more everyday stories, we get a real insight into how life in our community was all those years ago. For example, reading the court pages from those days, I was surprised at how many people were imprisoned for their beliefs: they believed that a night watchman was sleeping or they believed that the woman's husband was on night shift. There are some entertaining stories.

Keeping pace with changes in technology, the paper is now printed daily and in colour. The figures show that—despite the challenges imposed by television, radio and the internet—Inverclyde people still turn to the “Tele” for their night's news.

On the display board in the lobby of our office block, there is a quotation to the effect that an effective Parliament relies on informed people. Local newspapers are a primary source of news about how constituency or list MSPs are representing local people. If this Parliament is to be truly inclusive and accessible, we must ensure that local newspapers are fully involved.

15:40

**Michael Russell (South of Scotland) (SNP):** I congratulate Duncan McNeil on securing this debate. It is very clever of a member to secure a debate in which he manages to mention the name of the local newspaper, thus ensuring coverage; by bringing his own travelling support with him today, Duncan McNeil shows that he is even cleverer. Obviously he does not go out much alone.

Duncan McNeil is quite right to talk about the history of local newspapers. Local newspapers are extremely important, because they very much form the foundation of the democracy that we enjoy today. It is exciting, and sometimes depressing, to read the archives of local newspapers—as I often do in my other careers—and to see that they reflected a wholly different society, which was keenly engaged with the issues of the day.

Today, of course, as Duncan McNeil is very much on message in new Labour, he knows that targeting the local press is one of the key things—

**Mr McNeil indicated disagreement.**

**Michael Russell:** Mr McNeil shakes his head at my suggestion, but he is one of the most on-message people I know. He knows that it is

important to target local newspapers. It is interesting to see that Mr McCabe will reply to the debate; he has no doubt already targeted the *Hamilton Advertiser* with his comments. If the Presiding Officer, Mr Reid, could speak, he would want to target the *Alloa and Hillfoots Advertiser* and *Wee County News*, two newspapers that vie for the honour of reporting his activities with a keenness that recalls the circulation wars between the *Daily Express* and the *Daily Record*.

We can find plenty of examples of local newspapers providing strong, campaigning voices for vibrant communities. For example, one of the local newspapers in Irvine has been campaigning strongly on issues related to old people in the community. The fact that those people's concerns are covered week after week in the newspapers reassures them and reminds the community of their views. Furthermore, the *Dunoon Observer and Argyllshire Standard* near the area where I live has been campaigning vigorously about the pier, which is as important an issue to Mr McNeil as it is to me.

We must also remember that local newspapers face difficulties. This is a time of declining circulation and a falling number of newspapers. The challenge of the internet is real and those newspapers that have met it best are providing good local news services on-line for the whole world. The first, and best, of those newspapers was *The Shetland Times*, and there are now a whole range of them. Mr McNeil is right to say that there is enormous interest throughout the world in each part of Scotland, which is primarily a result of the diaspora. Those people want to find out what is happening in the communities.

Bringing matters closer to home, I noticed that Duncan McNeil mentioned his column in the *Greenock Telegraph*. Some of us argue strongly for columns in the local newspapers; we offer a high quality of writing. I make that advertisement again now. I am sure that I cannot emulate my colleague Irene Oldfather, whose recent columns have mentioned the illness of her hamster and the loss of her glasses; however, were the *Irvine Herald and Kilwinning Chronicle* to give me a column, I would try hard to ensure that the quality of my writing was as strong as that.

Local press is at its best when it reflects a broad spectrum of views. In that respect, I commend Christine Grahame's *Southern Reporter* column, which might annoy Ian Jenkins but is effective in putting across her point of view. I believe that Mr Jenkins also puts across his point of view in that paper.

There are exceptions. Some local journalism in Scotland is afraid of authority or is deliberately partisan. It might surprise most members to know that I wrote for the *West Highland Free Press* in

the late 1970s. [MEMBERS: "Tut."] Indeed—I am ashamed of it as well. I was not ashamed of the paper at the time, but I am ashamed of it now, because it has gone from being the voice of campaigning journalism in the Highlands and Islands that had no fear of what was happening to being a paper of the Labour establishment. That is very sad, because the paper has become worse as a result.

Local journalism needs constant vigilance, constant innovation, constant ideas, constant excitement—and more columns. I am available.

15:45

**Trish Godman (West Renfrewshire) (Lab):** I compliment Duncan McNeil on securing this debate. I advise Mike Russell that I am so far off message that I do not even have a mobile phone, let alone write a column in a newspaper. I did not know that this was local newspaper week until I read the motion. Like many members, I have a love-hate relationship with newspapers. I give them good stories, but they have never held the front page. They usually print stories that I do not think are very good. That confuses me, so I am definitely off message.

Nevertheless, I have always had a high regard for local and, as some would call them, provincial newspapers. My respect for and interest in such newspapers are based on their importance in communities large and small and on the fact that they play an important role in the development of journalistic talent. It is a safe bet that most of the journalists who write about the Parliament—for the broadsheets and for the tabloids—in their remarkably fair-minded and brilliant way, started their careers in local newspapers. Some of us who have been singled out by them for criticism might wish that those top-notch journalists—as they have become—had remained in local newspapers in Renfrewshire, Perthshire or elsewhere.

As Duncan McNeil said, local newspapers are a vital element in our communities. Readers are interested in international and national events, but they also have a keen interest in the goings-on in their communities. Sophisticated big-city types may sneer at local papers for their coverage of local flower shows, dog shows and community councils, but local papers often play an important role in reflecting and advocating local concerns about significant environmental and political issues. In addition, elected representatives cannot hide from the scrutiny of the local papers as they can in a big city. If a local newspaper is so inclined, it will report on the activities of MSPs, local councillors and MPs alike.

Local newspapers are also, in the main, blessedly free from smut. I do not know of a single

local paper that has a page 3 model on daily display. In fact, some local newspapers are so prim and proper that they could be described as dull. Nonetheless, that is better than printing salacious pictures and gossip.

An important role of local newspapers is the training of young journalists. Many of our well-known journalists, who now work for national broadsheets and tabloids, began their successful careers with local newspapers. Michael Parkinson and John Lloyd are just two such examples. Joan McAlpine, Simon Houston and Jason Allardyce all served part of their apprenticeship with the *Greenock Telegraph* and now work for national newspapers. All those journalists appear to be genuinely grateful for the opportunity that they were given to report on flower shows, dog shows and other local events. They may have had good cause to complain about the less-than-generous salaries that they received as local newspaper reporters, but they received a good grounding in the profession of journalism—and I believe that it is a profession.

Local newspapers are an important element in our local and national democracy. I hope that they continue to report on local and national events and on the decisions that are made by the Parliament, which have a direct bearing on the lives of their readers and communities. I say to local newspapers that they should keep up the good work and see to it that they pay their reporters and staff a decent salary.

15:48

**Mary Scanlon (Highlands and Islands) (Con):** I welcome this debate, which has been opened by a big mac and will be closed by a big mac. I usually address Susan Deacon or Malcolm Chisholm in debates.

I say to Duncan McNeil that, although the *Greenock Telegraph* may reign supreme in Greenock, the Scottish weekly newspaper of the year is, deservedly, the *Highland News*. This is the second time in four years that that accolade and recognition of excellence has been conferred on the *Highland News*, which was chosen as the best weekly newspaper in Scotland because of its campaigning stance. One of its victories was on membership for women of the Inverness British Legion, which was described as "a notable victory".

The *Highland News* measures, expresses and influences opinion on a range of subjects, such as fluoridation of the water supply, genetically modified crops, road deaths and Raigmore hospital accident and emergency services. Last week's issue contained a personal story from a woman who had been raped some years ago and

felt that she had to tell her story. The honesty and openness of that report was appreciated by many people who find their emotions difficult to speak about. The judges also commented on what they described as the paper's "street-fighter mentality", which persuaded it to carry the full text of a lengthy speech by the new chairman of Highlands and Islands Enterprise. The centre-page spread broke all the rules of tabloid design and outdid the broadsheets.

Mike Russell mentioned Irene Oldfather's column, but I say to him that it is the ordinary things in life that are reported in local newspapers. I have lost pets as a child and as an adult and remember the grief that that brings to a family. I ask Mike Russell how he would last for a week without his glasses.

**Michael Russell:** I hope that what I said was not interpreted as anything other than an expression of great sympathy for Irene Oldfather about her hamster. I just felt that I would like the opportunity to talk about my hamster if I had one.

**Mary Scanlon:** Now that Mr Russell has made his marketing pitch, I am sure that the local newspaper will weigh up whether he or Irene Oldfather is best placed to write about such matters.

Further success for the *Highland News* came when its journalist, Catherine MacGillivray, was highly commended in the weekly news journalist of the year category of the BT Scotland media awards. Nick Hunter, the editor of *Highland News*, which incorporates *Highland News*, *North Star* and the *Lochaber News*, stated:

"Apart from a great team of journalists who produce the *Highland News*, a lot of the credit must go to the readers. They phone with their stories, they phone with their worries, they phone when they want a wrong put right and they blow the whistle on injustice, knowing that we will investigate."

So, Donald Wilson and Helen MacRae—

**Mrs Margaret Ewing (Moray) (SNP):** I point out that the *Northern Scot*, based in Elgin, won the Highland newspaper of the year award for similar reasons.

**Mary Scanlon:** It did not get in touch with me to inform me of the fact, but I thank Margaret Ewing for telling me.

Local newspapers in the Highlands, as many members have said, are the lifeblood of information about what is on, gossip, problems, history, arts and culture, local achievements and so on—the list is endless. I have concentrated on the *Highland News* because of its national success—I hope that it goes on to success in the UK finals—but journalists in other local Highland newspapers should also be recognised. For instance, no one disputes what is written in the

*Inverness Courier*, because it has the long-established confidence of people in Scotland.

As members have said, local newspapers are not frightened to express their opinions of prospective parliamentary candidates, MPs and MSPs. The comments of the newspapers on the performance of politicians are probably worth a fair few votes. Local newspapers hold us to account and are a crucial part of the democratic process. All credit to them.

15:53

**Margaret Jamieson (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (Lab):** I congratulate Duncan McNeil on securing this debate on an issue that celebrates a vital link between elected members and our communities. Local newspapers provide a key window on our communities.

I make no apology for suggesting that the local paper in my constituency, the *Kilmarnock Standard*, is exactly the kind of newspaper that is referred to in the motion. I will take members through some of the stories in last week's edition. The front page had a story about a pensioner who had been burgled. Inside were stories about burst water pipes in Stewarton—an issue that has been taking up some of my time—compensation for redecoration from East Ayrshire Council and Sarah Boyack's visit to the bus station, whose refit had been funded by the public transport fund.

The newspaper has chronicled the ups and downs of our local sportsmen and women—although, where Kilmarnock Football Club is concerned, most of the stories have concerned ups—and especially our sporting children. The *Kilmarnock Standard's* sports staff are certainly fans with typewriters.

Local organisations are given their voice by an excellent group of local correspondents who keep the folks in the various towns, villages and districts of Kilmarnock and Loudoun in touch with what is happening at a local level. The strength of local newspapers is their ability to home in on local issues that have a resonance with local people.

One such issue in Kilmarnock and Loudoun has been the habit of some local politicians—and, indeed, hopeful politicians—to talk the area down when Kilmarnock has been turned around and is beginning to blossom once again. The editor of the *Kilmarnock Standard*, Alan Woodison, has come up with a major campaign, launched in last week's paper, called "K – Rise and Shine". He said:

"This old town is shaking off that shabby image which characterised years of decay and decline. Instead our 'rise and shine' campaign will sing the praises of Kilmarnock. We'll fly the flag from our corner of the country with the help of business leaders, decision makers, councillors and most important of all, our readers."

It is that kind of campaigning that local papers excel in. By harnessing the strength and interest of local people, they can make a real difference to their communities and become community leaders in their own right while giving a platform for ordinary people to make their voices heard. They can focus on really local issues and reflect the needs and wishes of all our constituents because they are rooted in their community.

I congratulate and support the *Kilmarnock Standard* and all local papers in Scotland. I thank Duncan McNeil for providing this opportunity to highlight the good work of our local newspapers.

15:56

**Ian Jenkins (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD):** I thank Duncan McNeil for securing this debate and am happy to accept his comments about the *Greenock Telegraph* and local papers in general. I strongly endorse the idea that the value of a local newspaper to the whole community it serves is substantial. I am not saying that just because of today's debate. Often, when I speak at local events, I highlight the importance of the local paper, usually starting with some scurrilous stories in which there are misprints, for example "The Sottish Parliament" and "Dear fiends". We make a joke about it, but then come to something of substantial importance and value to the local paper.

In my constituency, I am blessed with a clutch of excellent local papers, including *The Border Telegraph*, the *Peeblesshire News*, the *Selkirk Weekend Advertiser* and the *Southern Reporter*, which is more of an area paper, with the production values and printing standards that that implies.

Local newspapers perform all sorts of different functions. They give the news and the talk of the steamie. They also give a sense of place and tradition. They bring a sense of local identity: tiny wee villages get their bit in the local newspaper, with the time the village flower show is on or what the local rural institute has been doing, for example. They also provide advertising for local events in their "What's On" sections.

Local newspapers provide promotion for local personalities. I picked up the paper this morning and came across a photograph of a former pupil of mine who is now in America doing great stuff on the basketball scene. It is good for him and for his community. People feel good about that. This week's *Peeblesshire News* covers the appointment of Samantha Williamson, the Beltane queen—the queen of the local festival. I happened to speak to her grandmother and mother on Friday; they were so pleased and proud. The newspaper coverage gives recognition to the

youngster who got that award and accolade. That is good for the community. The paper also covers the St Ronan's principals in the Border games at Innerleithen.

The letters page gives people a voice when councils, developers, the authorities or the Parliament itself do not seem to be listening. It gives people somewhere to let off steam, to get their views heard and to create a discussion around an issue.

The Borders papers also have a very high standard of sports reporting. There are a tremendous number of people involved in the Borders, with teams all over the place. All the games get reported to a high standard, reflecting the real interest in these local events.

The papers also carry weekly features, for example essays about farming, or pawkie local commentaries. As for cookery, the Presiding Officer's lady wife has an excellent column in the *Selkirk Weekend Advertiser*. Local papers also typically carry such features as a country diary or a nature watch. The *Southern Reporter* features a beautiful series of evocative photographs by Gordon Lockie of the Scottish Borders.

A vibrant local paper is an integral part of a vibrant local community. We should celebrate it both here and abroad—my sister in Canada reads *The Buteman*, from our birthplace, and the *Southern Reporter* on its website. Scottish life is in Scottish newspapers.

16:00

**Paul Martin (Glasgow Springburn) (Lab):** I, too, congratulate Duncan McNeil on securing this debate, which recognises the role and importance of local newspapers.

I will focus on a specific issue in my constituency, on which the *Springburn Herald* and the *Glasgow Evening Times* have been active: the proposed secure unit at Stobhill hospital. Members will be aware that I have brought that matter to the Parliament on a number of occasions. If it were not for the reporting of the local newspapers and the action of the Parliament, that secure unit would have been built at Stobhill by now. That gives a clear focus on how local newspapers can inform public debate.

The *Springburn Herald* has also been active through its postcard campaign and a public petition to the Parliament on the acute services review in the Greater Glasgow Health Board area. The *Evening Times* has informed the debate on the acute services review and has ensured that people in Glasgow are aware of many of the issues that face them as a result of it. Those are two examples of the activity of local newspapers.

Unfortunately—but quite rightly—the children from St Ninian's Primary School have left us to catch their train. The tabloids do not report some of the very positive parts of the Parliament, such as the visit by that school today. Many other primary schools, including one in my constituency, have visited their MSPs. That would not happen to the same extent at Westminster. Such visits are not reported in any of the tabloids, but they are reported in our local newspapers. That is an example of the positive role that local newspapers can play, for which they should be given great credit.

Duncan McNeil touched on the sports coverage of local newspapers. My local junior football teams, Petershill and St Rochs, have had a very successful season. Local newspapers are effective at reporting on such teams, but the tabloids are not very good at reporting on junior football.

I conclude by again congratulating Duncan McNeil on bringing his motion to the chamber. I am sure that all of us look forward to continuing to support our local newspapers.

16:03

**Donald Gorrie (Central Scotland) (LD):** I am happy to follow Paul Martin. As well as issuing strictures on the tabloids, which sometimes do not cover us well, he could have spoken about a certain newspaper that I think has twice printed the wrong photograph of him. That shows that it is not just local newspapers that occasionally get things wrong.

Local newspapers play a large part in the community. Other members have spoken well about their coverage of local events, sports, flower shows, individual stories and so on: I will be dull and deal with political aspects, as one or two others have done. It is important that we have the greatest possible variety of outlets for political news and views. Local newspapers play a very important part in that, on which they are to be congratulated. I strongly support Duncan McNeil's motion, which will not have done his own local standing any harm.

I will discuss an area to which I think Mike Russell referred. I will not list names of newspapers. As I cover 10 constituencies as a list member, there is a terrible danger that I will miss one newspaper out and get in the dog-house, so I will not mention any.

I want to talk about a serious issue. Historically, the Labour party has been dominant in my area—good luck to it; it won the council elections. If one party is dominant in an area, it is quite difficult for some papers to be as critical of the local council as might otherwise be the case. For example, they

might not run with certain issues. We must support them and try to encourage them to be critical. The people who form the establishment—whether they are MPs, MSPs or councillors—must be grown up enough to accept some criticism and comment and columns that support their opponents.

The main question that I will deal with is whether we could help weekly and other local papers to report the Parliament better. There was some discussion of that a couple of years ago, but that debate went away. We could take technical steps that are quite beyond my skills to assist local papers' coverage of the local aspects of parliamentary politics. That would create a counterbalance: many papers concentrate on councils, but the Parliament does quite a lot that is relevant to their local communities.

I would also like to mention the importance of local radio stations and fledgling local television stations. In a sense, they are rivals of the print media, but they are also their successors and are part of the rich fabric of local newsgathering. We should encourage all the people involved in those media and give them as much access to the Parliament as possible. We should also support them when they report the Parliament. We must grin and bear it, even when they put our best press releases in the bucket—that often happens to mine—and agree that, collectively, local papers are a good thing.

16:07

**Mr Andy Kerr (East Kilbride) (Lab):** I will pick up where Donald Gorrie left off. I strongly believe that local papers provide a good balance in the political debate that goes on in our local areas. Not only do they not pander to ruling council administrations, they take a definite position by trying to suggest alternatives. Whether we like that or not, it adds to a sense of local democracy.

Members may be aware that I was born and brought up in East Kilbride. I believe that our local paper, the *East Kilbride News*, did something different by forming an identity for a new and developing town—arguably Scotland's most successful new town. It created a local sense of identity, not just through the births, deaths and marriages column but through the campaigning issues that it and other local papers pick up. Local papers are undoubtedly good for a community as they reflect that community's values and allow people to keep in touch with the community.

My local paper has picked up environmental campaigns, such as the green watch campaign. The Transport and the Environment Committee developed the debate about telecommunication masts and members discussed the committee's report in the chamber—we await the Executive's

response. Local papers such as the *East Kilbride News* also campaigned on that issue, bringing it to the attention of all members. When the committee reported its findings to the chamber, many members were aware of those local issues, which added to the Parliament's strength. Without doubt, that is a two-way process.

Local papers also provide a training ground for journalists. The *East Kilbride News* has its fair share of well-known names who started out as local journalists. Lorraine Kelly is one of the most notable—she is now fairly famous because of her involvement in the media.

Local papers also introduce young people—school children—to the media. We are all familiar with the photographs of primary 1 classes that are carried in newspaper columns, which is a positive introduction to the media for young people. I would argue that that positive introduction is somewhat soured later, by some of the coverage by our more aggressive colleagues in the national media.

Local papers assist people to build a sense of community. Strathaven, which is also in my constituency, is a small and prosperous market town. The *Strathaven Echoes* provides core information about tourism and entertainment and sells the town and the surrounding area. In the present climate, people have to compete for local spend and I believe that a local paper helps people to spend money in its community. To be frank, even when people are not even thinking of spending money in a particular locality, the local paper can usefully draw attention to events.

Members have mentioned hamsters and so on—there have been some fairly surreal images. Mike Russell told us about "Animal Hospital" rather than hamster wars. His was a fairly interesting speech—I must get hold of Irene Oldfather to see how her hamster is. I hope that she has found her glasses and will be able to read her own column.

At the end of the day, local papers give us an alternative point of view. The letters pages are always interesting for politicians because we get a chance to see what our communities are thinking. Local papers can keep local and national politicians aware of the issues that local people think important. They also form that sense of identity that members have commented on.

16:10

**The Minister for Parliament (Mr Tom McCabe):** I am delighted to have the opportunity to reply to today's important debate, which has been enlightening in more than one sense. Perhaps it has also been slightly worrying, in the sense that, unless Mr Russell is psychic, he predicted—correctly—that I may just make mention of my local newspaper, the *Hamilton*

*Advertiser*. That makes me worried that Mr Russell might have some kind of access to my ministerial computer and I sense that a story about that may appear in the *Hamilton Advertiser*, demanding a Standards Committee inquiry. I say to Mr Russell here and now that if, laced throughout that story, there should be a demand that he be thrown in the darkest dungeon while that long inquiry takes place, it has absolutely nothing to do with me.

The debate has been enlightening because, although I was aware that Mrs Godman did not always wear her pager, I am now aware that she does not have a mobile phone. Perhaps we will discuss that subject later this evening.

Like other members, I congratulate Duncan McNeil on securing today's debate. I also congratulate him on using members' business, in his particularly adept fashion, to highlight genuinely local issues, which is what it was intended for.

I am sure that Duncan McNeil, like me, was struck to hear Mr Russell talk about people being on message, but perhaps we will pass that one by.

As the motion says, local papers are an important part of the fabric of communities across Scotland, and it is right and proper that the chamber should recognise the contribution that they make. Our new Parliament has pursued the principles of openness and transparency and provides a level of scrutiny that would, I hope, stand comparison with any legislature anywhere in the world. We all believe in building confidence in our democratic processes, so it is important that we recognise that local newspapers, through a long and proud history, were pursuing those ideals long before the Parliament was established.

I am happy to acknowledge the part that has been played by the *Greenock Telegraph* in that long and fine tradition. I am reliably informed—admittedly by the man himself—that since Duncan McNeil became a regular contributor to that paper, its relevance and popularity in the local area have grown even further. I am sure that that is true.

**Michael Russell:** Has the circulation risen or fallen because of that?

**Mr McCabe:** I am reliably informed that circulation has, literally, gone through the roof.

As politicians are sometimes obsessed by the written national media, it is important to note that local newspapers are more closely read than their national counterparts. Studies show that they are more trusted by their readers, are held longer and have extremely high penetration rates. Famously, *The Courier and Advertiser*—admittedly more regional than local—used to have more sales than the number of households in its area, due to the Dundonian exile market.



Members may know that some 165 local newspapers operate in Scotland, with circulations that vary from just over 1,000 to well over 100,000. Local newspapers are often the focus for a healthy and intense exchange of views within a local community. People love to see mention of their street, their group, the new intakes at primary schools, bowling club openings, who marries and who, sadly, passes away. As Paul Martin pointed out, rightly, people like to read news of the local groups and schools that visit the new Parliament in Edinburgh.

The Executive has recognised the crucial role that local newspapers will play in providing information about the new democratic arrangements in Scotland. Local newspapers are vital conduits for information. They have always fired what they regard as justifiable criticism and no doubt they will continue to do so. In doing so, they make a special contribution to democracy and debate at the local level. Through a greater involvement in Parliament, I hope that they will do so at the national level. The Executive is committed to working with local newspapers. We want to enhance the quality of the information that they provide for their readers and we continue to recognise their vital role.

Donald Gorrie was right to say that we should examine the mechanisms for assisting local newspapers to cover the activities in Parliament. I am pleased to report that the press office has held a seminar, not only—as has been pointed out—with local newspapers, but with local radio and local television media, to explain the service that it can provide and to examine ways in which it can choose specific information that will be relevant to local readers. That project is continuing. I assure the chamber that we will continue to work on the project over the months and years to come.

Mr Russell must have psychic abilities. I am particularly proud that my local newspaper, the *Hamilton Advertiser*, has as long and distinguished a history as some other publications in Scotland. It was founded in 1856 and is one of the biggest-selling local newspapers in Scotland, with a circulation of more than 27,000. The paper is widely regarded in Lanarkshire as the county newspaper and was awarded the campaigning newspaper of the year award in 2000 for its hammer the dealers campaign, which targeted local drug pushers. Every member will agree that that topic touches every constituency and town in Scotland. The campaign is a fine example of how local newspapers can pick up extremely important agendas and make a real difference to the quality of life in the areas in which they operate.

I sincerely hope that we all look forward to the ideals and work of Parliament enhancing the fine traditions of local newspapers.

*Meeting closed at 16:16.*



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