

MEETING OF THE PARLIAMENT

Thursday 8 November 2001

Session 1

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Scottish Parliament

Thursday 8 November 2001

[THE DEPUTY PRESIDING OFFICER *opened the meeting at 09:30*]

Foot-and-mouth Disease (Public Inquiry)

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Mr George Reid): Good morning. The first item of business is a Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party debate on motion S1M-2409, in the name of Alex Fergusson, on a public inquiry into foot-and-mouth disease, and two amendments to that motion.

09:30

Alex Fergusson (South of Scotland) (Con): I begin by drawing members' attention to my entry in the register of interests—an entry that to some extent hides the fact that I am no longer involved in active or day-to-day farming. That is something for which I have been profoundly grateful over the past eight months, during which Scotland's farming industry in particular, and its rural economy in general, have been devastated by foot-and-mouth disease.

When it was announced on 20 February that the disease had been discovered in an abattoir in Essex, we all had a glimmer of hope that we in Scotland would be unaffected. However, as soon as the link to Longtown market was established, the introduction of the virus to Scotland became a sure-fire certainty. That was confirmed on 1 March, when the first cases were discovered in Lockerbie and Canonbie in Dumfriesshire. From there on, the statistics tell some of the story: 187 confirmed cases in Dumfries and Galloway and the Borders affected 1,493 separate farm premises, and 746,479 head of stock were destroyed, burned or buried, comprising 6 per cent of Scotland's beef herd, 12 per cent of its dairy herd, more than 7 per cent of the national sheep flock and 0.5 per cent of Scotland's pig herd. Many of those animals did not have foot-and-mouth disease and were sacrificed with great dignity for the greater good of pinning down and eradicating the virus. The sheer scale of those figures alone surely justifies today's debate.

It is the easiest thing in the world for Opposition politicians to jump up and down and call for a public inquiry into every disaster—major or minor—that occurs. However, I sincerely believe that there is an incontrovertible need for just such an inquiry in this instance, preferably on a UK basis, but failing that, as the motion suggests, in

Scotland alone. The Trading Standards Institute also believes in the need for an inquiry, as do the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons, the National Farmers Union, Advocates for Animals and virtually every organisation with any involvement in rural Britain.

There is no need—in Scotland at any rate—for such an inquiry to seek to lay blame or to make accusations. However, I believe strongly that, if we are ever to learn the lessons that must have been learned when the next epidemic of foot-and-mouth disease reaches our shores, there is a crucial need to identify where things could have been done better and whether assistance could have been delivered more effectively.

I am sure that the authors of the Northumberland report thought the same in 1968, when they drew up a list of recommendations based on the 1967 outbreak. We need to update that in the light of this year's epidemic and ensure that, unlike the Northumberland report, our report does not lie on a shelf, being studiously ignored until well over halfway into the disaster. We need a concise 10-point or 12-point action plan, to be reread and updated annually, so that we are ready for action next time and do not have to play catch-up.

One of the first questions that we have to answer is where the virus originated. Despite the accusatory finger of Government being pointed at Heddon-on-the-Wall, conclusive evidence has not yet been produced to nail that theory down and rumours persist of the disease having been present in sheep some weeks prior to 20 February, of Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food inquiries about the availability of timber and coal stocks, and of a phial of pan-Asian O virus missing from Porton Down. Until conclusive evidence is produced openly to indicate otherwise, those conspiracy theories will not go away. Surely the first action point to minimise the risk of a future outbreak is to pinpoint the source of this one.

I accept that hindsight is a great thing, but we need to ascertain whether preparations in Scotland were sufficient to minimise the spread of the disease. As I have said previously in the chamber, if the manpower resources that were involved at the end of the outbreak had been available from the start, I suspect that the disease could have been contained even more tightly than it was.

Was the eight-day warning period in Scotland, between the first discovery in Essex and our first case in Lockerbie, used to the fullest effect? Was too much left to and expected of Dumfries and Galloway Council in the early days of the epidemic, despite the justifiable praise that the council has received for its reactions at the time? After the 3km-firebreak cull was announced on 15

March, did it have to take almost a fortnight before the cull started? That meant that the 3km culls had to cover a vastly greater area than they would have had to if the policy was implemented straight away.

What happened following the postponement of the general election that suddenly led to most suspect cases being culled through slaughter on suspicion? That criterion did not trigger the 3km cull until a positive blood test was returned, when previously almost every suspect case was culled under the clinical confirmation criterion, which instantly triggered a 3km cull without the need for a positive blood test. Why did almost 80 per cent of the blood tests done in Dumfries and Galloway return negative? That fact left many farmers wondering whether their animals had foot-and-mouth disease at all.

Of course, it was not just farmers who were affected. The tourist industry, at a time when its income should have been beginning to flow, had its livelihood taken away just as surely as did any farmer whose stock had been culled. Everyone in the chamber would agree that we have learned that, in rural Scotland and the rural economy, farming, tourism and community economics—by which I mean the prosperity of the local shop, pub and post office, which are at the centre of village life—are inextricably bound together.

Those non-farming but nevertheless equally devastated businesses must have been encouraged by the First Minister's answer to a question from John Swinney on 22 March. The First Minister said:

"We are working on every front. Over the next few weeks, we hope to be able to develop consequential compensation."—[*Official Report*, 22 March 2001; Vol 8, c 877.]

That hope was well and truly dashed, because that was the last time that the First Minister or any other minister mentioned the words "consequential compensation". There have been too many businesses and self-employed individuals whose livelihoods have been dashed along with the First Minister's hope.

I do not doubt for a minute that £25-odd million has left the Executive's coffers in an effort to alleviate hardship. However, a long hard look must be taken at that money's effectiveness. As I have before, I assure the Executive that very little of that £25 million has reached the individuals and businesses that needed it. Serious questions need to be asked about the best method of delivery of such aid. What use is an information technology training grant to the self-employed molecatcher in Kirkcudbright who could not earn a penny for four months and was not able to receive any benefits because he had some modest savings? A £5,000 interest-free loan is of little use to small rural

businesses coming out of the winter months when their financial borrowing requirements are already at their maximum limit. A lack of flexibility has been displayed and I am sorry to say that a great deal of the Executive's money has been wasted.

We must consider the measures that have been put in place and those that are suggested for the future. The 21-day rule prevents for 21 days any movement from a farm on to which stock has been brought. That rule is strangling the recovery of the industry and could surely be applied only to purchased stock, which could be kept in isolation and carefully monitored.

I do not altogether agree with the arguments that are being made against the live auction market system. We should not forget that, although the markets provided the conduit for the spread of the disease, they did not cause it and so should not become the scapegoats for it. It is bad enough that they are still owed hundreds of thousands of pounds by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs for the exhaustive evaluations that they carried out, without which no cull could have proceeded. That is a disgrace.

I hope that the minister will take this opportunity to make it clear to members that he will have nothing to do with any Scottish version of the Animal Health Bill that has been introduced in England and Wales. That bill will effectively remove an individual's right to appeal against a Government decision to cull a farmer's stock, for example. Despite the fact that such an appeal might delay that one cull, the right of appeal is one of the most basic rights in any democracy and any erosion of that right is to be abhorred.

There are myriad other issues that time does not allow me to address, including research into vaccination and the size of the state veterinary service. My colleagues will expand on some of those points as the debate progresses.

As I have said, it is easy to ask for a public inquiry. In this instance, however, for all the reasons that I have outlined, and perhaps most of all so that those farmers, businessmen and individuals who have seen their life's work destroyed before their eyes can be satisfied that their sacrifice will lead to a better understanding of a future outbreak, I believe that a call for such an inquiry is totally justified.

I move,

That the Parliament calls on the Scottish Executive to instigate a full open public inquiry, either under its aegis or preferably as a distinct part of a full UK inquiry, into the impact of, preparations for and handling of the foot-and-mouth disease outbreak in Scotland, and the economic recovery measures put in place by the Executive and Her Majesty's Government, in order to ensure that lessons are learnt about the appropriate response to any future outbreak.

09:40

The Minister for Environment and Rural Development (Ross Finnie): I do not think that a great deal divides us this morning. The debate is essentially into whether the inquiries that have been established are adequate or whether a wider public inquiry is justified. As Alex Fergusson said, members are all too well aware of the huge impact that Scotland's farming industry and the wider rural economy have suffered. There is no question but that controlling and then eradicating the disease was a major task. I wholly concur with Alex Fergusson that it involved a great deal of sacrifice.

Our efforts and those of many other bodies, and the unanimity in the Parliament throughout the peak of the crisis, helped enormously. Tuesday's hard-won agreement in Brussels to allow lamb exports from most of Scotland, but regrettably not Dumfries and Galloway, as well as venison exports, was a major step forward. No one should be in any doubt that getting agreement on the terms that we did was no mean achievement. However, the task is not finished. In a fortnight's time, we must return to ensure that exports from Dumfries and Galloway are included.

Laying the foundations of recovery for the industries affected is a task for the Executive. It is our responsibility to do that, supported by the many bodies, interests and individuals who have a stake in the future of those industries. I do not disagree that there is a need to assess independently an outbreak of the magnitude described by Alex Fergusson. The outbreak had far-reaching consequences and raised a huge number of questions about how it was handled and about the underpinning science. The assessment process must have access, where necessary, to those with expertise. The work must be carried out expeditiously and not be allowed to drag on for too long. That is why I think that the two key inquiries—there are three inquiries altogether—that have been set up at national level meet the requirement.

The first inquiry, headed by Dr Iain Anderson, the chairman of BT Scotland, will look at the lessons to be learned from the outbreak and establish what is necessary. It will address many of the issues that Alex Fergusson raised. It will deal with the source of the disease. The UK general election played no part in the decisions that the Scottish Executive or I, as a minister, made on how we formed our policy. However, the inquiry will ask what should be done in a situation such as we found ourselves in this year and whether, in an attempt to curb a disease, it is sufficient to cull animals simply because we believe that they may have been in contact with the disease. That is a difficult question, but it is at

the heart of the issues that Alex Fergusson raised.

That inquiry will address all those issues. It has already begun to gather material. The Scottish Executive will be contributing to the inquiry; I shall say more about public participation in a moment. The inquiry will get whatever assistance it needs from the Scottish Executive and me.

Alasdair Morgan (Galloway and Upper Nithsdale) (SNP): Will the co-operation that the Government and the Executive give to the inquiries include access to all relevant Government documents?

Ross Finnie: I certainly hope that we will be as open and frank as possible, unless there is some conflict over confidential information, particularly in relation to individual farmers. I shall look into the matter, but I cannot see any reason for holding back Government documents.

The second national inquiry, which has also begun, is being carried out by the Royal Society. That inquiry will look into the science of transmission, prevention and control, and will examine further the question of vaccination.

Those inquiries, when combined, will cover the essential ground and will produce recommendations for what is required in future. In addition, the Royal Society of Edinburgh is undertaking an independent review. It is looking not only at the science, but at the impact on Scotland's economic and social well-being.

Mr Murray Tosh (South of Scotland) (Con): I accept what Ross Finnie says, but does he acknowledge that, when we look at facets of the situation, there is a risk of losing the strategic overview that a public inquiry would give us? Have not many Liberal Democrat MPs at Westminster been pressing for a public inquiry in that light and on that understanding?

Ross Finnie: I am not sure that I can answer for their light or their understanding, but I have no doubt that one of the essential matters is the science. There is no question but that we need to understand the transmission of diseases, and I think that the Royal Society is best placed to inquire into that. However, I do not believe that that means we will get into a bit of a silo. The overarching remit of the Anderson inquiry is clear; the aspects that it is examining must be carefully considered. I believe that that will be best done by that inquiry.

The two national inquiries will play a huge role in helping us. Members will know that concerns have been identified in respect of controlling and inspecting imports. There are also concerns about animal feed. We have already banned pig swill, but we may have to go further. There is a clear need to establish minimum standards of on-farm

biosecurity, about which we need to know more. I agree that we will not necessarily go down the road that was originally intended for livestock movements, but there is a clear need, on veterinary grounds, for some kind of livestock restriction. We will consult on that. We need to be informed by the scientists about what is required. Veterinary surveillance clearly needs to be revised, as that service has not been looked at recently. I hope that the Royal Society inquiry will give us direction on how we might achieve an improved vaccination that could be used without the latent risks that exist at present.

I assure the Parliament that I have considered carefully the provisions of the Animal Health Bill, which has been introduced at Westminster. We need to revise and improve our animal health legislation, but I shall do so in a considered fashion in the light of the inquiries and of all the information. I do not believe that we currently face an emergency. However, we have an absolute requirement to revise that aspect of the law.

Alex Johnstone (North-East Scotland) (Con): Will Ross Finnie give way?

Ross Finnie: No, I must move on.

The impact and timing of the outbreak in Scotland were different from what happened in the rest of Great Britain. However, the problem affects the whole of Great Britain, and how we handle it must also take account of what happens in Europe. We must also understand that much of the outbreak in Dumfries and Galloway was essentially an extension of the outbreak in the north of England. We cannot overlook that. There is an even greater danger of putting what happened in Dumfries and Galloway into a silo. We need to get a better and wider understanding of how the disease spread.

The inquiries are hugely important, and we are committed to supporting them. I stress that the two major inquiries are open to the public. They will want to consider a wide range of views; they are not confined to Government services, Government bodies and Government ministers. The chairmen of both inquiries have made it absolutely clear that they want to have wide access to public opinion and that they want public contributions to their inquiries.

Alex Fergusson: The minister was right to say that there is little that divides us on most of the issues. Does he accept that, unless the inquiries to which he refers are held with open doors and are completely accountable to the press and other agencies, there will always be a question mark among the people who have been most affected by the disaster?

Ross Finnie: I very much hope that there will not be any doubt among the public. The two

people who will lead the inquiries, the chairman of the Royal Society and Iain Anderson, are persons of considerable probity and integrity. I hope that conducting the inquiries in a way that encourages the widest possible public contribution will ensure that those inquiries are demonstrably thorough. It is particularly important that the scientific inquiry should have access to serious experts in the field, so that it can deliver the kind of result that we all want.

I agree that there is a real need for speedy, independent scrutiny of the outbreak. However, for the reasons that I have given, I do not accept that it is necessary to stop the work that has already begun.

I move amendment S1M-2409.2, to leave out from "calls on" to end and insert:

" , recognising the need for independent scrutiny of the handling of the foot-and-mouth disease outbreak, supports the participation of the Scottish Executive in the Royal Society inquiry, the Anderson 'Lessons Learnt' inquiry and the Royal Society of Edinburgh inquiry and believes that these inquiries provide ample opportunities for all interested parties to contribute to the process."

09:49

Fergus Ewing (Inverness East, Nairn and Lochaber) (SNP): It is possible that less attention will be focused on this debate than on the following debate. That does not mean that the foot-and-mouth outbreak is not the most serious of topics and I welcome the fact that we have an opportunity to debate it. I associate myself with Alex Fergusson's tone and contribution. He made many points eloquently.

As the minister said, there are not huge differences between the parties. For Parliament's sake, it is sensible to remind ourselves that, when the farming community faced a crisis in spring, political parties came together and, out of genuine belief, supported the methods that have been proven to eradicate the outbreak of one of the most virulent animal diseases. The broad consensual approach was of assistance to those who faced huge sacrifices and great tragedy. Our duty is to make constructive criticism and I think that everyone accepts that lessons must be learned.

The public ask about the cause of the disease, which is still not known. There are many explanations, but the importation of infected meat seems a likely candidate. The infection came to England and we recognise that there must be an inquiry into the source of the infection in England. An inquiry convened in Scotland would not be the appropriate way in which to deal with that aspect of the problem.

There is grave concern about culls on such a

massive scale. Eighty-nine thousand cattle and 654,000 sheep were slaughtered in Scotland. Will the public and the farming community cope with the possibility of the slaughter of animals on such a scale again? I do not think so. However, will there be sufficient development in vaccinations to avoid such slaughter? The inquiries will consider those questions. I agree with the minister to the extent that there must be the fullest contribution from all those with scientific expertise in order to find a way ahead. Perhaps greater investment in research is more important than that, especially in the development of effective vaccinations against every strain and serotype of foot-and-mouth disease and other diseases that we should not forget.

There must be a full, open, public and independent inquiry. No matter how well-intentioned or distinguished those in charge of the inquiries may be, the SNP is not satisfied that inquiries should be held behind closed doors. There are many reasons for that. First, there is huge public concern. Secondly, there are many theories about aspects of the disease, not all of which are conspiracy theories. Thirdly, the public must have confidence that the process of an inquiry will bring about the correct results. Fourthly, we must ensure that ordinary people—ordinary farmers and their wives and farm workers—have a chance to put their stories to an inquiry about the handling of the outbreak and that it is not only experts who contribute. Those people were on the receiving end and I suspect that only they can tell the true story of the handling of the outbreak and whether it could have been dealt with more effectively in Scotland and south of the border.

The SNP is extremely concerned that the scope of the inquiry as outlined in the Executive amendment is limited to the handling of the outbreak. The Executive does not think that an inquiry should consider the outbreak's severe impact on the farming community, tourism, road haulage and virtually every business in the rural economy. It is wrong that its wider impact should be excluded.

Similarly, it is wrong that an inquiry should not consider Scotland's ability to develop its own policies in Europe. Jim Walker of the National Farmers Union of Scotland recognised that Scotland's position in that respect was severely defective under the devolution arrangement. Despite his reasoned and considered comments to Parliament a few weeks ago, that situation will not be considered.

My colleagues will develop many of those points. We join all parties in welcoming the fact that there are inquiries. However, we fear that those inquiries will not satisfy the need for a full,

open, public and independent inquiry into a serious crisis that rural communities in Scotland face.

I move amendment S1M-2409.1, to leave out from "calls on" to end and insert:

"welcomes the cross-party approach towards the policy adopted in Scotland to eradicate the foot-and-mouth disease epidemic, but believes that it is essential that all lessons are learned by means of a full, open and independently convened public inquiry in Scotland and that it is important to monitor closely the impact of the crisis upon the whole Scottish economy and, in particular, upon those regions of Scotland most affected by the outbreak."

09:55

Dr Elaine Murray (Dumfries) (Lab): It may not be unusual to find the Tories and the NFUS in bed together, but it is unusual for them to be joined by Advocates for Animals and other organisations.

It is clear that there are a number of issues of widespread concern. A similar debate has already been held in Westminster and Margaret Beckett, the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, has rejected the call for a full public inquiry, in particular because the definition of a full public inquiry is specific—such an inquiry would be extremely costly and time-consuming. She felt that matters should be progressed much more quickly than they could be if a full public inquiry were held.

Brian Adam (North-East Scotland) (SNP): Given that cost is the principal reason for which Margaret Beckett has chosen to reject a public inquiry, would Elaine Murray care to comment—

Dr Murray: Time is the principal reason for her rejection of an inquiry.

Brian Adam: In—

Dr Murray: I wish to proceed. [*Interruption.*]

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Order. The member wishes to continue.

Dr Murray: Given that that is the view of UK ministers in relation to England, would there be any real benefit in our having a full public inquiry in Scotland? Such an inquiry would be time-consuming and would report much later than the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and the other inquiries that are being carried out down south.

There are four independent inquiries. The minister referred to UK inquiries that will be chaired by Dr Iain Anderson and Dr Brian Follett FRS. There will also be a policy commission on the future of farming and food, to be chaired by Sir Don Curry.

The Royal Society of Edinburgh's inquiry will involve a wide-ranging assessment of the impact of the disease on animal health and will examine

its social and economic consequences on the countryside and the rural economy. Mr Ewing did not seem to appreciate that.

Alex Fergusson: I warmly welcome the RSE's inquiry and hope that it is successful. However, does the member accept that that inquiry is constrained by budget, as the RSE admitted?

Dr Murray: Any inquiry is constrained in some respect. The RSE is an extremely distinguished body of academics with huge expertise that is probably not available anywhere else. That expertise covers many disciplines. It is insulting to the society if the Conservatives and the SNP are implying that its inquiry will be anything other than well informed and totally independent. There would be absolutely no benefit to the RSE in attempting to cover up for the Executive. Indeed, to do so would jeopardise the high regard in which the society is held. Moreover, members of the society hold various political views. Why on earth would they want to act as apologists for the Scottish Executive?

I agree with Alex Fergusson that the matter is serious and that vital lessons must be learned in respect of future outbreaks. I was reluctantly of the opinion that the vaccination that is currently available could have been used only in association with a subsequent cull, which would have been even more distressing to the farmers involved. It is a matter of concern that research into improved vaccines does not seem to have taken place in the 30-odd years between the 1967 and 2001 outbreaks. The process of mass cull, incineration and burial was appalling, atrocious and medieval. I never want it to happen again in my constituency or any other part of Scotland.

Research is needed to produce a vaccine that is not live, does not mask the disease—and therefore transmission—and is distinguishable from the disease. That would allow routine protection of stock in the same way that many other animal diseases are controlled. Discussion would be needed in the European Union for its views on vaccination, but it is important that progress is made.

The outbreak has been extremely costly—£1 billion has been paid in compensation to farmers and probably more than three times that amount has been lost to the tourism industry. We must consider the possibility of insurance against such outbreaks, particularly if a vaccine is developed.

We also need to consider the way in which detection can be improved. There is certainly a need for a rapid and reliable on-farm system of testing for infection, which would negate the need for slaughter on suspicion of flocks and herds. Most of the flocks and herds in Dumfries and Galloway that were slaughtered on suspicion were

later proved to test negative. We need a system of testing that prevents that from happening.

It is generally recognised that the epidemic was better controlled in Scotland than south of the border. For example, there were 176 cases of foot-and-mouth disease in Dumfries and Galloway but 893 cases just across the border in Cumbria. There is a lesson to be learned about the way in which control was progressed here. Much of that relates to the strength of the public sector ethos and local government in Scotland.

The Conservatives might like to reflect on the fact that local government in Scotland survived 18 years of attack from a Conservative Government. They might also like to reflect on who ran down the state veterinary service. I would be interested to hear what they have to say about that.

I await with great interest the results of the four independent inquiries, which will progress our understanding of the disease far better than any opportunistic debates by Opposition parties.

10:01

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

Elaine Murray has just spoken with great feeling and considerable knowledge about the essentially medieval policy of slash and burn, the effects of which we saw this summer. We all embraced that policy at the beginning of the year and supported it throughout the crisis, but we have seen public opinion increasingly turn against it. I do not mean to cast discredit on the Minister for Environment and Rural Development's handling of the crisis, or on the role of Dumfries and Galloway Council and the Borders control centre, but, in essence, slash and burn was a crude policy that was framed for the circumstances of 1967. It is important that we revisit that policy in the light of this year's experience.

In 1967, agriculture dominated the countryside. The disease then was restricted to cattle in two counties. It was a disease that could be corralled and the policy response might have been appropriate when only agricultural interests were affected. In the 30-plus years that have passed since then, the countryside has changed enormously. We are in an era of great mobility, in which stock is moved considerable distances to market and to pastures. The disease has been hard to control. We have also seen an explosion of leisure uses in the countryside. It is ironic that so much of that has been farm-based—the response to policy injunctions to farmers to diversify. Of course, those other businesses have also borne the brunt of this year's epidemic.

Although I am not handing down any definitive judgment, because I do not know the answers, I know some of the questions. Many people from

the south of Scotland have expressed to me the opinion that tourism and leisure businesses in the countryside, including many farm-based businesses, were sacrificed this year in the interests of agriculture. I acknowledge that many farmers also challenged the policy.

The policy was to burn huge pyres of animals, images of which appeared on television screens throughout the world. That created an appalling image of Scotland and the United Kingdom, led to travel agents in foreign countries telling their clients not to come to Britain and portrayed a Britain that was in a state of utter devastation and crisis. We have to learn from that and respond better to such exigencies in future.

The Government and the Executive had no will, despite what the First Minister promised in Parliament in March, to compensate all those businesses for consequential losses. It is clear that measuring and compensating for such losses would not have been easy.

In the future, we have to understand the countryside as a whole. We have to understand how widely the implications will be felt and the ramifications of any future outbreak. We all defended the line on slaughter this year and were right to do so.

Tommy Sheridan (Glasgow) (SSP) rose—

Mr Tosh: Tommy Sheridan did not defend the line. However, the major political parties in the Parliament acknowledged that, having started on that line, it would have been foolish to change policies in mid-course.

In the light of experience, we must ask—as Elaine Murray and Fergus Ewing have asked—whether vaccination has a role in the future and whether the public will demand that vaccination have a role in future epidemics. We must examine the live export trade and consider how we sell and slaughter animals. We must thoroughly and carefully consider biosecurity measures and the role and level of the state veterinary service and research in epidemiology. The countryside needs a coherent strategy for, and a national reaction to, future disasters. Conservative members' concern is that, by segmenting the inquiry, we will fail to address the matter properly at a strategic level.

I do not question the minister's good intentions or the integrity of what he said, but, in another place, many politicians from his party have made the case for a proper public inquiry, which might be supported by some Labour members, as it is by the Conservatives. That is the appropriate way for us to proceed and to begin to restore public confidence in our ability to handle future crises.

10:06

Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab): It is important to remember that no one predicted—no one could have predicted—the outbreak of the disease. With the benefit of hindsight, we can point to things that were not done properly or that could have been thought through better, but that does not alter the fact that the Governments in Westminster and Scotland were faced with a disease that spread more quickly than anyone could imagine it would.

The Conservative motion does not mention the fact that the UK Government has announced three inquiries into the impact of the outbreak. Anyone who considers the issue seriously must at least acknowledge the announcement by the UK Government, whether or not they agree with it. I do not believe that a public inquiry would be appropriate, particularly if it began before the inquiries that are in place have reported. However, there is no room for complacency; we must ensure that lessons are learned quickly. The inquiries that the Government has set up mean that we will have conclusions speedily and that we will be able to put in place alternative procedures if the disease should recur. A public inquiry would take much longer.

The impact of foot-and-mouth disease and the consequential ban on exports hit farmers and crofters in my constituency severely. A drawn-out public inquiry would not be in their interests—lessons need to be learned now, not only by Government, but by the agriculture industry. We have had reports of farmers breaking movement restrictions and possibly contributing to the spread of the disease. Farmers must ensure that in the future they work collectively for the good of the industry.

Although the Executive compensated farmers who were directly affected by foot-and-mouth, those who are suffering as a consequence of the disease require more assistance. The announcement that lamb exports are to resume is a welcome relief, but it is too late for this year for many farmers and crofters in my area. The lamb cull scheme helped and I urged the Executive to extend the scheme to cover cast ewes. The over-supply of lamb in the home market as a result of foot-and-mouth means that it is difficult to see a potential market for cast ewes. I believe that the lamb cull scheme has a surplus, and I ask the Executive to consider an extension and to pass that surplus on to farmers and crofters.

Although crofters and farmers on the periphery are suffering badly from the effects of foot-and-mouth, I am sure that they will welcome the Scottish Executive's intention to devise a completely new less favoured areas support scheme. I have urged the Executive to consider

such a scheme for a long time, so I welcome the move. I ask for the scheme to be devised in conjunction with those who are worst affected by the current scheme and for lessons to be learned from other countries. A new scheme that creates a level playing field for Scotland's farmers and crofters will benefit not only them, but the communities that depend on them.

The situation is an example of the Government learning from past experience. I am confident that the inquiries that are under way will help the Government to do that.

10:09

Stewart Stevenson (Banff and Buchan) (SNP): The SNP amendment calls, properly, for a focus on the regions that were most affected by the outbreak. However, as Rhoda Grant said, the financial impact spreads far beyond the areas where sheep and cattle had to be slaughtered as a result of infection or proximity to it.

I will make one or two points about Scotland north of the Forth-Clyde axis. In a sense, we were comparatively fortunate that the outbreak happened in spring when the flow of beasts and sheep was north to south. In the autumn, a move to the north would have been in full flood and the effects on the economy of the north could have been considerably worse.

We had some narrow squeaks. What turned out to be frostbitten feet on sheep at Fyvie had us on tenterhooks for several weeks. Travel by a farmer in the far north to infected farms in the south was punished, properly, by slaughter of his animals.

However, freedom from infection does not mean freedom from impact. Our marts were shut. Sheep that were over-wintering could not be moved or sold and the beasts could not move on to the parks that were occupied by those sheep. Winter feed became exhausted while the beasts remained isolated in the barns from the new grass, which was being eaten by the hoggets. The spring export market, which would usually take 70 per cent of the crop, was closed.

When movement became possible, the restrictions to lifts from a single location meant that the small number of over-wintering sheep on a typical farm represented a transport cost per head that was far in excess of the market value of those sheep. We moved from vets destroying stock on disease grounds to farmers destroying stock on economic grounds. All this was happening hundreds of miles from the nearest infection.

Ross Finnie: Will Stewart Stevenson be gracious enough to concede that, at all stages, the movement controls that were imposed and the extent to which they were unfolded was done

consistently on veterinary advice in relation to the risk associated with foot-and-mouth disease?

Stewart Stevenson: I am happy to accept that. I acknowledge that it was entirely proper that those restrictions were in place. I am not disagreeing with Ross Finnie; I am highlighting the fact that the impact in areas far from the disease was severe, just as it was in the areas that were directly affected. I thank the minister for that intervention.

Alex Fergusson referred to consequential compensation. Transport company vehicles, already suffering from exceptionally high fuel prices, lay idle in their yards. When relaxation came at last, the burden of disinfection was another problem for the hauliers; it was a double whammy for them.

Tourists, encouraged to do so, properly, by Government campaigns, stayed away from rural areas in droves. Some unscrupulous landowners in the Highlands even printed off official-looking signs from the Highlands Council website and used them to instruct people to keep off their land. Only the individual action of a council employee, in the past month, has seen many of those signs removed.

In my constituency, day visits to the area are a staple of our tourist industry. Already hard hit by the closure of toilets throughout Aberdeenshire, which nudged older visitors to other areas, tourist attractions such as the excellent lighthouse museum at Fraserburgh, which celebrates the work of the Stevenson family, have had to lay off staff.

The effects of the crisis will last for years. That is not to say that there are easy solutions—we do not pretend that there are—but that we must work together to win fairness and justice for those who are affected across a range of industries and throughout Scotland. Politicians, industry and the general public must work together to learn the lessons, minimise the chance of recurrence and improve our response to the disease. We can do that only by working in public.

Elaine Murray says that a public inquiry would take too long.

Dr Murray rose—

Stewart Stevenson: At least, Margaret Beckett says that it would take too long. If it takes too long, that is because there is a big problem and we must learn big lessons. We need a proper, rigorous interchange, in public, between investigators and those giving evidence. That is why we seek a public inquiry—convened in Scotland, for Scotland—to discover the facts in partnership, to develop solutions together and to rebuild public trust.

10:14

George Lyon (Argyll and Bute) (LD): I agree with some of Alex Fergusson's comments but—there has to be a but—I feel that his motion calling for a public inquiry smacks of hypocrisy. The Tories, during their time in office, presided over one of the most damaging food scares ever to hit UK agriculture, which inflicted permanent and lasting damage on Scottish farming.

John Scott (Ayr) (Con): Will Mr Lyon take an intervention?

George Lyon: No. I have a short amount of time.

The Tories' handling of that crisis was characterised by incompetence, bungling on a grand scale, self-interest and shambolic failure. Yet, time after time, they refused to hold a public inquiry. Only after the Tories had been booted out of office was the Phillips inquiry set up. What short memories the Tories have.

Alex Fergusson: For that very reason, and bearing in mind that the Labour Government set up the Phillips inquiry, can Mr Lyon think of any justifiable reason why the Labour Government should not set up an open public inquiry into foot-and-mouth disease?

George Lyon: BSE first appeared in 1988.

Alex Fergusson: I will take that as a no.

George Lyon: The Phillips inquiry took three years to report and did not report until last year. We cannot wait that long for the answers.

John Scott: Will George Lyon take an intervention?

George Lyon: I have just taken an intervention. Calm down and sit down, Mr Scott.

Most independent commentators would accept that the control and eradication of foot-and-mouth disease in Scotland was relatively well managed, well organised and well co-ordinated. Ultimately, the disease was successfully controlled and eradicated in a short period of time—four months. There is no denying that mistakes were made, but by and large most people would agree that the operation was effective. Had it not been for the intransigence of Europe, our meat exports would have been back in Europe weeks if not months ago.

This is in stark contrast to the situation south of the border, where DEFRA—or death-RA as it is now called—by all accounts failed to organise, manage and co-ordinate. DEFRA failed to bring foot-and-mouth under control as speedily as happened here in Scotland. Westminster's shambolic handling of the affair succeeded only in alienating the farming industry south of the border.

The Anderson inquiry must consider closely the different approaches that were taken north and south of the border. As Elaine Murray rightly said, the matter was handled better in Scotland and lessons must be learned for the future.

There are several key questions, as far as my constituents and I are concerned. First, how did foot-and-mouth arrive in this country? Tight controls have been successful for many years in the United States, Australia and New Zealand, which have not had outbreaks, in some cases, for more than 60 years. That is in stark contrast to the UK, where we have had at least three outbreaks since the war. Lessons must be learned from other countries, so that we can establish robust controls and enforce them rigorously to ensure that foot-and-mouth never arrives on our shores again.

Secondly, why did the original infected farm at Heddon-on-the-Wall remain undetected for so long, thereby allowing the disease to spread widely throughout the country? That is why the outbreak was so large and why so many farms were involved. There was a two-to-three-week period between the original infection and the discovery that the disease was in the UK.

Thirdly, what role does vaccination play in controlling and eradicating foot-and-mouth? Other members have mentioned that, and Elaine Murray's point about vaccination was well made. The European Union and the rest of the world still have in place an eradication policy. That question cannot be adequately sorted out without policy changes at EU and world level. More research must certainly be done to try to find a better vaccination system.

Finally, 17 of the first 20 cases of foot-and-mouth were related to cattle and sheep dealers, not to farmers. How do we modernise the livestock trading system in this country to eliminate the need for dealers to haul animals around the country to market? We must bring the livestock marketing system from the 20th century into the 21st century.

The inquiries must provide answers to such questions and the answers must be acted upon to ensure that farmers and their families never again endure the agony and horror of seeing a lifetime's work literally go up in smoke.

10:20

Mr Jamie McGrigor (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I draw members' attention to my entry in the register of members' interests regarding my ownership of a sheep and cattle farm in Argyll. As a farmer and a representative of the Highlands and Islands area, I was uncomfortably close to the effects of foot-and-mouth. Although the region did not suffer the horrors that were experienced by our

friends in Dumfries and Galloway and the Borders, it has nonetheless been affected detrimentally in almost every aspect. We need a full public inquiry to discover the cause of the outbreak and to plan ahead for any future outbreak to ensure that Scotland is not once again held to ransom in the way that it has been for the past nine months.

The European Parliament has recognised that need, which is why it has voted for such an inquiry. It is vital that the rumours that abound in the farming world about the cause of the outbreak and any accusation of incompetence in its handling should be fully investigated without prejudice or bias. All options and practices must be considered to improve both our defences against the disease and our response to any fresh outbreak.

The UK Government owes that much to our people; if it is frightened by the prospect of such an inquiry, the Scottish Executive certainly should not be. I hope that all MSPs are trying to work towards a fireproof scheme to ensure that our people never again experience the biblical hell of plague and pestilence. The issue is not just financial loss. What will not go away are the traumatic mental scars and misery experienced by those who, as George Lyon said, watched hundreds of years of breeding stock literally go up in smoke. Not just current farmers' efforts, but all the expertise and knowledge that over generations had given this country the world's best reputation for livestock have gone and will be difficult to replace.

The question is whether the general public would ever again accept the cull policy that has horrified so many. I respect the decision not to vaccinate and the steadfastness of the National Farmers Union of Scotland on the issue. However, if one considers European stocks of vaccine—especially the stock that is held for the UK—one must wonder whether vaccination was a possibility at all. European Union stocks of vaccine are grossly inadequate, because an outbreak on the scale of the recent one in the UK was never expected. The stocks are supposed to contain mainly small outbreaks in individual countries by means of ring vaccination within a 3km radius of an infected herd. Furthermore, vaccine stocks are held at minus 120 deg C in liquid nitrogen at half-product stage. Four further processes are required to make the vaccine ready for use, which would take a week, and to make more vaccine would take at least three weeks. However, to do so in such a short time would require us to bypass the usual safety checks.

The vaccine is stored at Pirbright on behalf of a consortium of countries, of which the UK is simply a member. The consortium committee must meet before any country can access the doses of

vaccine, which means that the potential for political in-fighting is enormous. To cut a long story short, the UK has direct access to only 200,000 doses in its own country.

Although I do not want to take a stance on the pros and cons of vaccination, any inquiry should consider the issue in relation not just to this country, but to the whole of Europe, in an unprejudiced and unbiased light. As members know, vaccination was carried out in parts of Europe including Holland up to 1991. The practice was stopped after the publication of results of modules that were carried out in the 1980s into the financial implications and effectiveness of the system. However, as times have changed, especially with regard to animal movements across Europe, those modules would need to be updated. I would like an EU-wide policy on reaction to foot-and-mouth that all members subscribe to and sympathise with; the EU should help us with the problem instead of hindering us.

I welcome Ross Finnie's announcement on the opening of exports of lamb and beef and look forward to the date of commencement. Unfortunately, that will not help most farmers of store lambs in the Highlands and Islands, who have already sold their lambs for very little. The selling-and-buying window for those farmers and crofters is only 10 weeks between mid-August and October, and the 21-day rule is making their lives impossible. I ask the Executive to help those farmers in every possible way. The irony is that, because French and Irish farmers have made £70 a lamb as a result of the crisis, there has been a huge drop in the sheep annual premium, which is meant to act as a safety valve for farmers in bad times.

I therefore ask for a full public inquiry that will also examine the effects on farmers and tourist operators in the wake of the outbreak and the measures that can be taken to save their businesses and restore their faith in the future.

10:25

Brian Adam (North-East Scotland) (SNP): I am thankful that the outbreak of foot-and-mouth in Scotland appears to have ended and I pay tribute to all those people in the public and private sectors who have worked so hard to bring it to that end. It is all very well for MSPs to stand here pontificating about what has happened or what might happen in the future, but many people strove for a long time to bring the disease under control and I pay tribute to their work.

Although we are not absolutely certain about the source of the outbreak, we know that the disease was probably fairly widespread by the time that it was identified. The slaughter of 654,000 sheep and 89,000 cattle in Scotland is a matter of great

regret and many questions were asked about whether a cull on such a scale was absolutely necessary. I would like that question to be answered by the various on-going inquiries. As Elaine Murray rightly pointed out, we had neither the resources nor the facilities to conduct testing to determine whether the level of contiguous culls that took place was necessary.

We know a little more about those matters now. Indeed, one of the ironic features about the information that we possess is that we know that we do not have any foot-and-mouth among our sheep flocks in Dumfries and Galloway and the Borders, because we have tested them all. However, we cannot export the sheep from those areas that we know are okay, even though we can export sheep from other parts of Scotland where testing has not taken place. We must examine the resources and the testing facilities that were available at the time to ensure that, in the unfortunate event of another outbreak of the disease, we do not have the same level of cull that we had before.

I am concerned by the fact that there will be a variety of inquiries. In the past week or two, we have debated the conflicting conclusions of the various inquiries into the Chhokar case. I realise that each inquiry into the foot-and-mouth outbreak will consider slightly different aspects of the situation, but there is bound to be overlap. What will we do if one inquiry recommends one solution and another recommends something different? Having a public inquiry would allow us to take an overarching view of the issue. No one wants any recommendations—and, more important, any action—to be delayed by the length of time that a public inquiry would take, but the potential for conflicting recommendations might not exist with such an inquiry.

It has been 20 years since the previous outbreak of foot-and-mouth and 34 years since the last major outbreak of the disease; although we should not be too complacent, I do not think that there is another outbreak round the corner. We should have learned some lessons by now. As a result, I do not think that the time element is the only reason why the Government is not too keen on a public inquiry; the cost of such an inquiry also figures significantly in its thinking. Public inquiries are expensive, but in the context of Scotland's overall funding—which runs to many billions of pounds—the cost of such an inquiry would be minuscule and the inquiry would make a worthwhile contribution to moving matters along.

10:30

Euan Robson (Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (LD): The foul pestilence of foot-and-mouth disease struck my constituency first in

Newcastleton, in the far south, having seemingly crept across the border from Dumfries and Galloway and Cumbria. Suddenly, inexplicably, it jumped about 30 miles, to near Jedburgh. There were later outbreaks to the west of Hawick and near Duns, in Berwickshire—again, many miles apart.

Today, I pay tribute to those who faced the loss of their animals with such enormous courage. I shall mention just three people, although there were many more. Gordon Jackson lost his prize-winning sheep at Newcastleton and is now spending night and day trying to reft ewes on his hillside. I saw Colin Goodfellow gathering his flock for slaughter, although it was later proved that they did not have the disease. George Shiel not only lost his animals, but later found himself misrepresented in the media.

There were many others. I was moved by the courage that many of my constituents showed in facing the disaster that befell them. I also record my thanks for the efforts of the many who did so much to contain the disease in the Scottish Borders: Scottish Borders Council's emergency teams; the Army, led by someone whom I was at school with, Brigadier Hugh Munro; vets who faced huge stress and very long hours; and the Minister for Environment and Rural Development, who was always available with help and advice.

There remain a number of specific, sometimes individual, problems that need to be addressed in clearing up this miserable, horrible disease. I appeal to DEFRA to take a more sympathetic and urgent approach to some of the specific cases. As Alex Fergusson rightly said, many non-agricultural businesses were affected, some of them marginally, but others very seriously. Tourism businesses deserve specific mention, as do businesses involved in equestrian activities, as the decision was made—wisely and bravely—by many of the common riding and festival committees to cancel their events. That was a great sacrifice, especially for those who run the equestrian businesses that contribute so much to our common ridings and festivals.

I welcome the Borders recovery plan, which has been drawn up by the partners in the Borders economic forum. It is a three-year programme to revive sectors of the local economy. I listened carefully to what Alex Fergusson said. Perhaps in contrast to the experience in Dumfries and Galloway, Scottish Enterprise Borders has been able to direct specific assistance to many local businesses through its small business gateway. That could be a model for similar emergencies or difficulties in future.

Mr Tosh: I agree strongly with everything that Mr Robson has said so far, especially concerning the individuals to whom he paid tribute. Is he

aware that Mr Archy Kirkwood MP has called for a full public inquiry, and does he support that call?

Euan Robson: I am just coming to that.

I look forward to contributing to the development of the recovery plan in the coming months. Many partners are involved in the plan. There are important, specific and innovative pilot projects in the agricultural section of the plan, which I hope will proceed soon.

This foul disease knows no physical or geographical boundaries. I welcome the Scottish Executive's participation in the various inquiries, but any decision on a public inquiry is a matter for another place.

10:35

John Scott (Ayr) (Con): I declare an interest, as I am a farmer. I suspect that I am the only MSP to have had animals slaughtered under the Government's suspect contiguous cull policy.

The reason for this debate and the need for our call for a public inquiry are obvious, following the previous disaster to hit farming—BSE. After that debacle, the Labour Government rightly launched a public inquiry, and this is a disaster of similar proportions. I am sure that George Lyon will concede, in his inimitably gracious way, that the Tory Government of the day at all times followed the best scientific advice that was available to it. As the foot-and-mouth disaster affected not only farmers, but almost every business in Britain, it is vital that lessons that were wilfully ignored following the previous foot-and-mouth outbreak of 1967 are learned this time around. They should be set in tablets of stone, as a reference point for any future outbreak.

So far, the UK Government has offered three inquiries instead of an overarching one, and they have almost certainly been designed to let the Government and DEFRA off the hook. Many questions still need to be answered. Why did the disease spread so quickly? Why was there such a delay in slaughtering animals? Why was the contiguous cull introduced, rather than vaccinations? Why were vaccinations not available? Why was the Government not better informed about a vaccination policy and better able to inform the farming community—which was bitterly opposed to a vaccination policy, as was I—about it, even though it might not have been the right course to pursue? Why were people allowed to transport dead infected animals through uninfected areas, and why were the most basic animal welfare issues ignored in the slaughter policy? Above all, why were the lessons of the Northumberland report totally ignored?

We need assurances that the lessons that were

so expensively learned this year will be logged into the memory banks and acted on in future. However, without a full-scale public inquiry, there will be no definitive report, no minister or DEFRA official will be held to account, and any future outbreak will again be characterised by muddle and ignorance.

Another aspect of the outbreak has been its effect on other industries, especially tourism. In Ayrshire, the effect on tourism has been marked. The number of hotel bookings has fallen and tourist spend in the area is down, yet the compensation that has been made available to businesses elsewhere in the south-west has not been made available to my constituents, who have also been affected by the crisis. I appreciate that we have not faced problems on the scale of those faced in Dumfries and Galloway and the Borders; nonetheless, tourism has been significantly affected and nothing has been done to help the contiguous counties.

In conclusion, I call on Parliament to support Alex Fergusson's motion to hold a public inquiry. I also appeal to the Scottish Executive—even at this late stage—to offer financial aid to the adjoining areas that have suffered from the disease and its mishandling.

10:38

Mr John Home Robertson (East Lothian) (Lab): I refer to my entry in the register of members' interests. I am grateful to the Labour party for allowing me to speak on agricultural matters. Rules implemented by the civil service prevented me from having anything to do with agriculture policy when I was a deputy minister, because of my personal interest.

I and a number of my constituents were affected by stringent animal movement restrictions during the outbreak of foot-and-mouth disease, and we experienced the awful business of burning pyres of animals that had had to be slaughtered in precautionary culls in East Lothian, as well as in the Borders. Members have mentioned the fact that tens of thousands of people's livelihoods have been hit hard by the outbreak—not only in agriculture, but right across the board. Hauliers, people in the tourism industry and others throughout the rural economy have been affected. Farmers who had their stock culled received some compensation, but virtually everybody else has just had to cope with the disaster. It has been a catastrophe, as members from all parties have said.

The debate has shown us that it is a wonderful thing to be wise after the event. Opposition politicians are always well endowed with hindsight—I know that it goes with the job because

I was in opposition for a long time—and Alex Fergusson quite fairly acknowledged that point. However, does anyone think that any minister from any party would have done anything differently? If Alex Fergusson or, heaven forbid, Fergus Ewing had been the—

Tommy Sheridan: Will the member give way?

Mr Home Robertson: I am short of time.

Tommy Sheridan: We did not have the benefit of hindsight, but we opposed the cull policy.

Mr Home Robertson: Okay.

Alex Fergusson: I hope that the member will accept that no one has questioned the minister's actions. We want to know whether a minister could be better informed in the event of another outbreak, which is how we could successfully defeat it.

Mr Home Robertson: Ministers have to live in the real world. Would Alex Fergusson or Fergus Ewing have ordered a review of veterinary policy on foot-and-mouth disease before it happened? I do not think so. Any minister has to implement the policy that has been built up over many years on the basis of the scientific and veterinary advice of scientists, vets and civil servants under a series of Governments. That policy is still to take the only practical action that is known to us to eradicate the disease, because of the catastrophic implications of endemic foot-and-mouth disease for the future of all livestock in the UK and because reliable vaccines are not approved or available.

This outbreak was larger and more dispersed than had been anticipated. It is right that the Government and the Executive have set up independently chaired inquiries to learn the lessons of the outbreak and to review the science of foot-and-mouth disease. It cannot serve any useful purpose to try to play politics with the matter. I will resist the temptation to do that and, in fairness, most other members have done so too. There is nothing to be gained from stirring up friction between rural Scotland and the rest of the country. There is a national consensus that we must protect our livestock against this type of disease and that we must do everything possible to prevent further outbreaks and minimise the risk of spread.

I agreed with George Lyon when he said that we must seriously examine the way livestock are moved around the country and how the dealer system has evolved. I hope that the inquiries come up with recommendations on those matters. Everything possible must be done to help tourism and other rural industries recover. That is exactly what the Scottish Executive is doing.

I join Brian Adam in expressing the admiration, appreciation and heartfelt thanks of the Scottish

Parliament for the dedicated and heroic work of the vets, farm workers, soldiers, local authority staff and others who had to carry out the unpleasant duties that were required to ensure the eradication of foot-and-mouth disease. It has been a grim task and we all pray that it has reached its conclusion.

The two inquiries are proceeding and I am absolutely confident that the Scottish Executive and the Government in Westminster will take the action that must be taken on the recommendations that flow from those inquiries.

10:43

Alasdair Morgan (Galloway and Upper Nithsdale) (SNP): Alex Fergusson read out a long list of reputable organisations that have asked for a public inquiry. That should give us pause for thought. There is genuine concern that separate inquiries might result in some issues falling through the cracks.

Some members expressed concerns about the cost of public inquiries, which are held under the Tribunals of Inquiry Act 1921, and the time that they take. It is true that that type of public inquiry tends to become yet another gravy train for lawyers. Perhaps we have to examine whether there is a better way of having open public inquiries that would satisfy everyone.

Whatever mechanism is used, the evidence has to be out in the open and the conclusions need to be clear. This was a hard and stressful time for many people and it was not made any easier by the conflicting claims that were made—at one stage, people on every side of the argument were trotting out their scientists to back up their solution. Towards the end of the crisis, public sympathy was beginning to run out. Next time, if there is a next time, we need to know that we are following the best strategy available.

As Alex Fergusson and others said, there have been many conspiracy theories. Any suspicion, however unjustified, that all the evidence has not been examined, that a civil servant is hiding something or that a document has not been produced will only fuel those theories. That is another reason why we need a public inquiry.

We need to consider the compensatory measures, because it is not clear what will happen with those the next time. It is clear that the economic effects of the crisis were great and were much worse than they would have been if the same crisis had occurred in the 1960s, because of the changed nature of industry and tourism. If there is a next time, farmers whose livestock have not been culled, agriculture-related businesses and the tourist industry must be certain about what they will get and what they will not get. It is not

good enough for the possibility of compensation, which was opened up by the minister halfway through the crisis, to be shut down at the end. If we do not ensure greater certainty, the large amount of public co-operation that we received during this crisis might not be available next time.

We were right to proceed with a cull policy, if for no other reason than that it would have been nonsensical to change policy in mid-crisis when there was no certainty that any other method would work any better or would work at all. However, there is great disquiet, even in the agriculture community, about the policy that we pursued. We need to know that, next time, whatever policy is pursued is the best available in the light of the scientific evidence.

We need to know more about how the disease is transmitted and about whether all the restrictions that were imposed were necessary or helpful. Did disinfectant mats on the A9 do anything to stop the spread of the disease or did they simply damage the tourism industry unnecessarily? Were all the footpath closures necessary? We need to ensure that measures that damage other industries are necessary before we take them. We need to know what was an over-reaction and what was vital.

It is clear that the Scottish Executive and the Government in Westminster are against holding a public inquiry. We have to hope that a future generation does not pay a heavy price for that decision.

10:47

Ross Finnie: As we agreed earlier, there is not a great deal that divides the chamber on this issue. Elaine Murray and Rhoda Grant referred to a total of four inquiries, including the one by the Royal Society of Edinburgh. I make it clear that, while the Executive reads with great interest all inquiries into agriculture, whatever their source, the remit of Sir Don Curry's inquiry stops at Hadrian's wall—I thought that might cause some pleasure on the SNP benches.

Murray Tosh, Elaine Murray and Brian Adam made much of the serious question of our knowledge about vaccination. There is a lot that we cannot know about vaccination, but we should remember that, when the outbreak started, we knew that vaccinated animals could become carriers of the disease, that serological testing cannot distinguish between an animal that has the disease and an animal that has been vaccinated and that vaccinations have a limited life and are a little bit indeterminate. We were also aware that, while we think that the vaccines have no implications for the food chain, that has not been tested.

Since long before today's debate, I have been

on record as saying that I share the view of almost everyone in the chamber that, in future, any minister must have at his disposal different armoury from that which we had this time, to ensure that we are able, if humanly possible, to avoid the cull policy and its consequences. I hope that the Royal Society of Edinburgh will point us in the right direction, but I am sure that what will be required is a change in the vaccination and in serological testing. I am not going to speculate about that, because I am not a scientist, but I stress that we knew that that would be required if a vaccination policy were to be successful. That is why we did not take that option.

I agree with Rhoda Grant that there is no room for complacency on this matter. I also share the view that Stewart Stevenson, Brian Adam, Euan Robson and John Scott expressed that the foot-and-mouth outbreak has affected the whole of Scotland; the effect is not confined to those who suffered desperately from being at the centre of the disease. That is agreed.

I return to the essential issue of the broad—not exclusive—areas in which I, as minister, seek quick advice. Zoonotic diseases are in our country. Veterinary professionals are extremely concerned about the risks and threats, which grow by the day. We are back to looking for guidance on imports legislation, animal feed, biosecurity on our farms, which has been found hopelessly wanting, and livestock movements in our more intensive industries, such as the poultry and pig industries.

I want quick results on veterinary science and improved vaccination. I need guidance from the scientists, but that does not exclude investigating the source of the disease; examining whether the outbreak was handled properly; and putting under scrutiny my department's and my personal handling of the outbreak. The inquiries that have been put in place are designed to do just that. Those put in charge of the inquiries are people of integrity and probity. I submit that they will act independently. They have no interest in letting the Government, the Scottish Executive or anyone else off the hook.

We need answers quickly. I make the point to Alex Fergusson again that, although I am not about to rush into an animal health act, we need to amend the Animal Health Act 1981 reasonably urgently. I need the inquiries on all aspects of the outbreak to inform that process because, at the moment, we are slightly vulnerable.

For all those reasons, I ask members to reject the motion and the SNP amendment, to take part fully in all the inquiries, to make their views and positions known and to contribute to a process that will, I hope, produce a satisfactory result for Scottish agriculture.

10:52

David Mundell (South of Scotland) (Con): The debate has been useful not least because it has stressed that the impact and consequences of the foot-and-mouth outbreak are not over. Indeed, for some who have suffered great trauma and stress this year, they will never be over. The outbreak will be like wartime events or other events of great magnitude, which have an impact on an individual's whole life. Many of the contributions to the debate have recognised that.

As Alex Fergusson made clear in his opening speech, the purpose of seeking a full public inquiry into the outbreak is to try, through a single, definitive inquiry, to bring closure to the many issues that have been raised about the periods before, during and after the outbreak—if, as we all hope, it is finally over. The Conservatives did not believe before today that the inquiries that have been announced would do that—although one of them is to be carried out by my former boss, whose integrity I do not in any way question. Despite the minister's arguments today, that remains our position. We cannot accept the SNP amendment because it seeks to limit the discussion to Scotland, which is unhelpful, as the disease knows no boundaries. I believe that the rest of the United Kingdom could learn a great deal from Scotland.

During the debate, members have mentioned many important issues. We have heard many useful speeches, although I am surprised that there has not been more discussion of the role of MAFF and of DEFRA. I hope that the minister will encourage DEFRA to come forward with the many outstanding payments to auctioneers, farmers and others who were involved in the outbreak. DEFRA has not covered itself in glory in that regard.

John Home Robertson made an important point, although he did not develop it, on the impact of the crisis on people whose animals were not culled but who were in the infected area. People who have lived with the prospect of the disease and under restriction—and whose animals, although they did not develop the disease, had to undergo blood testing—have endured equal stress and are often in difficult market conditions. That point is not often or well enough made.

I am hopeful that the Enterprise and Lifelong Learning Committee will consider some aspects of the effectiveness of the compensation package that was put together for Dumfries and Galloway. There are many issues to do with compensation, but we need to examine how effectively the money has reached where it was supposed to go. The financial issues and the impact on the economy are as important as many of the agricultural aspects of the disease.

As we said at the start, the purpose of the debate was not to highlight or seek to allocate blame, and that did not happen. No one—not even the minister—disputes that mistakes were made in Scotland and elsewhere in the UK. We must seek to determine which of those mistakes were avoidable, which actions were effective and which were not, what could have been done better, what should have been done, what we can learn from the episode and what we would do differently if there were another outbreak.

People in Dumfries and Galloway and in the Borders do not need to be told that the outbreak was handled much better in Scotland than across the border in Cumbria. They saw that every night on their television screens—the Border Television network crosses the divide, even if foot-and-mouth disease does not recognise it. They saw thousands of cattle lying in fields for days and MAFF's shambolic arrangements to try to dispose of them. They saw how the crisis was handled by junior MAFF officials before senior officials were deployed from London.

I recognise—and have always recognised—that we did things differently in Scotland, but we must consider the process closely to understand whether we were just fortunate that the disease arose in an area in which the convener of the council was a farmer and understood the real significance that the outbreak could have for Dumfries and Galloway or that because the area had endured one of the greatest peacetime disasters in the UK, it already had strong emergency planning procedures in place and had built a command centre. We cannot be clear that foot-and-mouth disease would have been handled in the same way if it had struck first elsewhere in Scotland. Those questions must be dealt with in the public domain.

As other members, such as Alasdair Morgan, said, we regularly meet people who raise all sorts of questions about how the foot-and-mouth disease began. They are not as confident as George Lyon is of the facts. George Lyon stated not facts, but opinions about how the outbreak began. We have not yet had a definitive description of how it began. The minister is aware that there are many conspiracy theories. The only way to counter those arguments is to have a full and frank discussion of each allegation in the public arena.

There are many issues about what preparation could and should have been made for such an outbreak and, as members have mentioned, whether the Northumberland report was appropriately actioned. Elaine Murray and others have spoken at length about vaccination. There is clearly a need for a much greater review. I well remember attending the Rural Development

Committee meeting at which six scientists appeared and gave six different views on vaccination and the management of the outbreak. I agree with the minister that we are in need of definitive advice.

On many occasions when the crisis was at its peak, members here and at Westminster, farmers and the wider community gave the Scottish Executive and MAFF the benefit of the doubt on many issues that they questioned. We realised that decisions had to be made and that actions had to be taken that, in other circumstances, would have been wholly unacceptable. Many judgments were made and accepted on the basis that there would be a full drains-up review afterwards and that we could look back later to find out whether the actions were right and effective and whether the behaviour of organisations and individuals was appropriate in all the circumstances.

One of the clearest and most contentious examples of such an action during the outbreak in Scotland was the contiguous cattle cull. Many farmers still question whether that cull was necessary, whether it had a meaningful effect and whether decisions on what was contiguous were appropriate. There were many other decisions about whether individual flocks of sheep should be culled. It is important that those decisions are fully investigated in the public domain.

The issues will not go away, but will linger and fester and cause resentment, rumour and suspicion for years to come if we do not confront them head-on. I see no reason for the minister or the Executive to fear a public inquiry. Indeed, the Executive might come out of it well, compared with others in the rest of the United Kingdom. The Executive owes a public inquiry to those people who made sacrifices and who, as Fergus Ewing described, saw the outbreak at first hand, lived with the daily trauma of seeing prize stock killed before their eyes, breathed the smoke, and have had to live for months with restrictions on their movements and activities.

When the chips were down the farmers and the rural communities of the south of Scotland rallied round and worked with the Executive and the UK Government to ensure that the epidemic was beaten. Their efforts played a major part in that success. I believe that the minister owes it to them to lobby the UK Government to announce a full inquiry. If the UK Government will not do that, there should be a full public inquiry in Scotland.

I support motion S1M-2409, in the name of Alex Fergusson.

Point of Order

11:01

The Presiding Officer (Sir David Steel): We have a point of order from Mr McCabe.

The Minister for Parliament (Mr Tom McCabe): Presiding Officer, I seek your permission to make a point of order in relation to the business that we are about to discuss. I inform the chamber that the First Minister has this morning written to Her Majesty the Queen and to the Presiding Officer indicating that he intends to tender his resignation. The First Minister intends to come to Parliament later today to make a personal statement. I ask that the business of Parliament be suspended until later this afternoon.

The Presiding Officer: I accept the point of order. I take it that Mr McLetchie will not now move motion S1M-2412 on the conduct of the First Minister.

David McLetchie (Lothians) (Con): I withdraw the motion.

Business Motion

11:02

The Presiding Officer (Sir David Steel): Before I suspend the meeting, I ask Mr McCabe to move business motion S1M-2417.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees—

(a) the following programme of business

Wednesday 14 November 2001

2.30 pm Time for Reflection

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

followed by Executive Debate on the Scottish Youth Parliament

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5.00 pm Decision Time

followed by Members' Business – debate on the subject of S1M-2243 Johann Lamont: Hypertrophic Cardiomyopathy

Thursday 15 November 2001

9.30 am Executive Debate on Renewing Mental Health Law

followed by Business Motion

2.30 pm Question Time

3.10 pm First Minister's Question Time

3.30 pm Executive Debate on its Vision for the Protection and Promotion of Scotland's Natural Heritage

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5.00 pm Decision Time

followed by Members' Business – debate on the subject of S1M-2260 Miss Annabel Goldie: Rural Economy

Wednesday 21 November 2001

2.30 pm Time for Reflection

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

followed by Stage 1 Debate on the Sexual Offences (Procedure and Evidence) (Scotland) Bill

followed by Financial Resolution in respect of the Sexual Offences (Procedure and Evidence) (Scotland) Bill

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5.00 pm Decision Time

followed by Members' Business

Thursday 22 November 2001

9.30 am Equal Opportunities Committee Debate on its Report on its Inquiry into Gypsy Travellers and Public Sector Policies

followed by

2.30 pm

3.10 pm

3.30 pm

followed by

followed by

5.00 pm

followed by

(b) that the Justice 1 Committee reports to the Justice 2 Committee by 13 November 2001 on the draft Sheriff Courts (Scotland) Act 1971 (Private Jurisdiction and Summary Cause) Order 2001 and the draft Small Claims (Scotland) (Amendment) Order 2001 and that the Justice 2 Committee reports to the Justice 1 Committee by 12 November 2001 on the Legal Aid (Employment of Solicitors) (Scotland) Regulations 2001 (SSI 2001/392) and

(c) that Stage 1 of the Freedom of Information (Scotland) Bill be completed by 18 January 2002 and Stage 1 of the Fur Farming (Prohibition) (Scotland) Bill be completed by 31 January 2002.—[Mr Tom McCabe.]

Motion agreed to.

The Presiding Officer: I inform the chamber that I have received written confirmation of what Mr McCabe said in his point of order.

11:03

Meeting suspended until 14:30.

Business Motion

Question Time

First Minister's Question Time

Stage 1 Debate on the Scottish Local Government (Elections) Bill

Financial Resolution in respect of the Scottish Local Government (Elections) Bill

Parliamentary Bureau Motions

Decision Time

Members' Business

14:33

On resuming—

Personal Statement

The Presiding Officer (Sir David Steel): Under standing order 5.5.4, this afternoon's business will be a personal statement by the First Minister. There can be no debate or questions after the statement. I call the First Minister to speak.

14:33

The First Minister (Henry McLeish): Sir David, thank you. Colleagues, I would like to make a personal statement to the Parliament.

I acknowledge again today my mistakes in the matter of constituency office sublets and in the way in which I handled that matter. There is no need to go over the details again. What is important is that I take full personal responsibility. Others who worked with and for me have been criticised, but the ultimate responsibility is mine and mine alone. I recognise the mistakes that I made.

I have been surprised and dismayed over the past few weeks at how my family, friends, staff and colleagues have been brought into matters that are my responsibility alone and at how they have been made to suffer. That focus and attention has astonished them and me.

I value this Parliament. At Westminster, I was the lead minister for devolution and chaired the consultative steering group, which established the very principles by which this Parliament operates. I am proud of my role in that, but I take even greater pride in the role of my party and in what it has done for Scotland. We led on devolution, we delivered devolution and, with our colleagues in a historic coalition, we are and remain determined to make devolution work.

Scottish devolution, a Scottish Parliament, a Scottish Executive. I would be the last person to willingly or knowingly put the principles behind those new and great institutions at risk and in doing so put at risk everything that I have cherished in more than 25 years in politics, from becoming a councillor in Kirkcaldy district in 1974 to holding the highest office in Scotland over the past year. Even my harshest critics over the past few weeks have had to acknowledge that I made no personal gain from any of that.

I did not come to Parliament simply as some kind of career choice. I did not enter Parliament because it was some kind of family tradition. I came to Parliament to work for the people I know and grew up with and to serve them. That has been my purpose since the day and the hour that I

was elected. I came to Parliament, and eventually to the office of First Minister, to serve my constituents and, eventually, all the people of Scotland. If I have let them down in this matter, I hope that I have served them well in many others.

It has been a privilege to do that through the work of government here in Scotland. I believe that that work over the past year has strengthened the roots of our devolved Government and secured it irreversibly in the life of our nation. It is now time for others to lead us as we take that work forward. The future of Scotland is the responsibility of every one of us here today. That is why this Parliament must now turn its energies once more to its real and pressing business: the concerns of the people of Scotland. I want us to be allowed to do that with a minimum of distraction. That is why I am resigning. I call on Scotland to give all of us, and my successor, the fair and reasonable circumstances that we need to allow that to happen.

I am proud of what I achieved in Parliament, in the Executive and as First Minister. I will continue with my duties as MSP for Central Fife, serving the people I know and grew up with. That in itself is and remains an enormous privilege for me.

Thank you, Sir David and colleagues, for the courtesy. [*Applause.*]

The Presiding Officer: On behalf of all of us, I would like to thank you for your year's service to Scotland as our First Minister and for making that statement in the best interests of the Parliament.

Meeting closed at 14:38.

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