

MEETING OF THE PARLIAMENT

Thursday 13 May 2004
(*Afternoon*)

Session 2

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Scottish Parliament

Thursday 13 May 2004

(Afternoon)

[THE PRESIDING OFFICER *opened the meeting at 12:05*]

Explosion at Grovepark Street, Glasgow

The Presiding Officer (Mr George Reid): Good afternoon. Our only item of business this afternoon is a statement by the First Minister on the explosion at Grovepark Street in Glasgow. There should be no interventions. I intend to call a small number of representatives, as well as the constituency member.

12:05

The First Minister (Mr Jack McConnell): Thank you, Presiding Officer, for the opportunity to present this statement to the Parliament.

It is with deep sadness that I have to report to the Parliament on the tragic events that have taken place over the past two days at the Stockline Plastics factory in Glasgow. Now, almost exactly 48 hours after the beginning of the incident, the full extent of the tragedy is becoming clear.

Our first thoughts are with the families, friends and work colleagues of those who have died and with those who were injured as a result of the explosion. I know that all members, including the Deputy First Minister and others who could not be here this afternoon, will wish to take the opportunity to send their deepest sympathies to all those people at this time.

Of course, there is an on-going rescue operation under way at the site in Maryhill. The firefighters and specialist rescuers carry the hopes of each and every one of us for every minute that they persevere in their search for life.

Like everyone throughout the country, I have been shocked by the scenes of devastation and despair as they have unfolded in Glasgow, but I have also felt immense pride in the effective response of our emergency services, volunteers and local agencies, and I will spend a few moments setting out to the Parliament the record of those events at Stockline Plastics factory and the nature of the response to date.

The first call to the fire brigade was received at 12.01 pm on Tuesday 11 May. Fire crews were in

attendance at 12.06 pm. At 12.08 pm, the assistance of the ambulance service was sought; by 12.10 pm a search was under way; and at 12.11 pm additional fire crews were on their way. Doctors and nurses from the nearby community health centre were on the scene and tended to the injured almost immediately. A major incident was declared, and over the initial period, a total of 32 fire appliances and specialist search and rescue vehicles were called to the scene. The police were quickly in attendance to secure the scene and to support the rescue, and representatives of the gas and electricity suppliers attended swiftly too.

It was apparent almost immediately that there were multiple casualties, including a number of fatalities, and the plans made by the emergency services and the national health service for just such a major incident were very quickly put into effect. At the height of the incident, more than 200 firefighters and scores of police officers were at the scene. Ambulance staff used their skills to treat casualties on the spot, and hospitals throughout the city dealt with those most seriously injured. Sniffer dogs and their handlers came to the scene from North Yorkshire, and the International Search and Rescue Team—an organisation of volunteers that specialises in major disaster work—the Mines Rescue Service and a number of mountain rescue teams responded to the call for assistance and arrived in Glasgow from throughout the United Kingdom.

In addition to the firefighters from Strathclyde fire brigade, specially trained search and rescue personnel from Lothian and Borders fire brigade, Grampian fire brigade and Central Scotland fire brigade were all deployed to assist at the scene. Many off-duty firefighters and officers reported for duty to meet the needs of the incident and to maintain fire cover for the rest of Glasgow.

The search and rescue work was and is of a highly specialised nature. The new arrangements and specialised equipment that were introduced following the horrific events in New York on 11 September 2001 have enhanced the capability of the fire service in Scotland to respond to a major incident and have proved their worth this week. Under those new arrangements, teams from fire and rescue services from London, Cheshire, Tyne and Wear, Leicestershire, Lancashire and Greater Manchester all attended in support of Strathclyde fire brigade. In all, nine other brigades have provided support, and we are very grateful for their assistance.

Away from the immediate scene, many other groups and organisations played their part too. A helpline was set up for concerned relatives and, at Maryhill Community Central Halls, an evacuation point was established and support services put in

place for factory employees, their families and local residents.

Many other agencies assisted there, including Glasgow City Council, the Red Cross, the Salvation Army, the charity Glasgow the Caring City and numerous Glasgow businesses and local residents, priests and ministers. The community centre became the focus of the real Glaswegian community spirit, which I know was so comforting for all relatives and residents. Still further from the site, the national health service in Glasgow put in place well-rehearsed emergency procedures. Glasgow royal infirmary, Stobhill hospital, the Southern general hospital and the Western infirmary all geared up to receive casualties. The Victoria infirmary, being the furthest away, dispatched nurses and doctors to the scene to assist paramedics in providing immediate care.

The most up-to-date information I have on the casualties arising from this incident is as follows. There have been eight fatalities—six people died at the scene and two died subsequently in hospital from their injuries. There have been 57 casualties. Nine casualties had to be treated at the scene and 39 went to hospital; 18 remain in hospital and of those, nine are in a serious condition and nine are in a stable condition. One person is still unaccounted for and the search continues.

I met some of those injured yesterday and they wanted me to make one point very clearly. This has been a terrible tragedy for everyone affected, but it could have been considerably worse had it not been for the extraordinary effort and professional dedication of all the emergency workers, NHS staff and volunteers. I visited the site yesterday and I was deeply moved by the bravery of the survivors and by the dignity of the bereaved, but I was also immensely proud of all the emergency workers and everyone involved in responding to the tragedy.

Emergency workers work in difficult and sometimes dangerous conditions, with no thought for themselves, intent only on saving lives, comforting the bereaved and supporting the injured. Their work at the site has gone on around the clock to ensure that every life that can be saved is saved and that any ounce of support that is needed is given. The response to this incident has been a tribute to the commitment, dedication and skill of our emergency services and we owe them a great debt of gratitude.

The search and rescue effort is being led by Brian Sweeney, the firemaster of Strathclyde fire brigade. He has been an inspiration to everyone involved in responding to this tragedy and I would like to mark my personal appreciation of his effective and encouraging leadership. However, scores of organisations and hundreds of individuals have played their part, too, and many

are still working today as we speak. There are too many to name, but every one is appreciated to the full.

The search work is on-going. Once it has been completed and the structure is made safe, an investigation into the causes of the tragedy will get under way. Members will understand that it would not be appropriate for us to speculate on the possible cause of the incident at this time. I have spoken to the Lord Advocate and to Andrew Smith, the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, who has responsibility for the Health and Safety Executive, and I can confirm that the Lord Advocate will announce in due course the exact format of the investigation.

The investigation will be led by the Procurator Fiscal Service and will involve the police and the Health and Safety Executive. The investigation will be thorough. Any lessons that should be learned, must be learned. Any improvements found to be necessary will be implemented. Because the investigation will be full and thorough, it will take time, but any early action found to be necessary will be taken forward by the Health and Safety Executive, with the consent of the procurator fiscal.

Tuesday, 11 May 2004 began as an ordinary working day at Stockline Plastics in Glasgow, but it ended in sadness. There are times in my service when I am deeply affected by how cruel life can be and by the impact of unexpected events on the lives of ordinary Scottish families. We all today express our deepest sympathy for all those most affected by the explosion in Maryhill, including those most seriously injured, whose lives will now involve fresh challenges. There are also times when I am proud of the spirit of Scotland, the professionalism of our public services, and how ordinary people stop everything in their own lives to help those most in need. I have been inspired by those many hundreds of people involved in this emergency whose daily job is to protect us and to save lives—jobs that far too often we take for granted. During the past few days, our emergency workers have shown the skill, courage, professionalism and dedication that make them among the very best in the world. Today, we speak for Scotland when we thank them and send our condolences to the families of those who have died.

12:16

Mr John Swinney (North Tayside) (SNP): I thank the First Minister for his statement and associate the Scottish National Party with all the remarks that he made. I have already written to the Lord Provost of the city of Glasgow to pass on the sympathies of the Scottish National Party, but I know that Patricia Ferguson, as the member for

Maryhill, and the other Glasgow members will convey to the people of the city the deep sympathy and sadness of every party in the Parliament.

I express our sympathy to the families who have lost relatives in this tragic incident. Their lives will be made more difficult and their grief will be personal and absolute in coming to terms with the tragedy. None of our words will be sufficient to eliminate the grief from those individuals' lives, but they can at least be reassured that the Parliament is united in its concern for their welfare. I express our good wishes to those victims of the tragedy who have survived and our hope that they make a full recovery, not just from their injuries, but from the trauma with which they will have to come to terms. I express our hope that even at this late stage in the investigation lives can be saved, and that those who have serious injuries will recover.

The First Minister has rightly expressed admiration for the fire, ambulance and police personnel and for the range of emergency personnel from throughout the United Kingdom and other parts of the world who have contributed to the outstanding effort of the past 48 hours. We can only look on in wonder at the fantastic achievements of those individuals in public service. They have operated swiftly, effectively and with a true heroism of which we should all be proud. We must always remember the commitment of those individuals to public service and the sacrifices that they make on our behalf. We must value them as first-class public servants who work on behalf of the public of Scotland.

It is understandable that the First Minister has given few details of the inquiries that will be undertaken as a result of the incident. I know that he will bring to the Parliament full information on the inquiries. I simply express the point that the inquiries into the issues that the incident raises must be truly comprehensive. The true unity of purpose among the emergency service organisations must be an example for the inquiry and investigation into the circumstances of this tragic incident. That unity of purpose in dealing with the accident must be replicated in the investigation in order to guarantee that we learn the lessons of the tragedy and that public safety in our country is put at the top of the agenda.

12:19

David McLetchie (Edinburgh Pentlands) (Con): I associate the Scottish Conservative party with the sentiments expressed by the First Minister in his statement to the Parliament and by Mr Swinney. I extend our thoughts and sympathies to the bereaved; our prayers and good wishes to the injured for their recovery; and our grateful thanks

to the emergency services for their magnificent response to the accident.

We do not live in a perfect world and we never will; sometimes, accidents and tragedies happen. Some are the result of human error; others are the result of a systemic failure that demands a response from Government agencies or even from the legislature. As always, we need thoroughly to investigate the causes of the explosion in the inquiry and to learn the lessons for the future. I am sure that the Parliament will agree that the last thing that we need is a knee-jerk reaction and that the people who have been affected by the tragedy deserve a considered response that comes up with clear answers and sensible, measured and proportionate recommendations. That is the best that we can do for those people in the longer term.

12:20

Robert Brown (Glasgow) (LD): I associate the Scottish Liberal Democrats and the Deputy First Minister, who is unable to be with us this afternoon, with the observations made, particularly by the First Minister, who spoke for the Parliament and the nation today.

The events at the Stockline Plastics factory this week are hugely tragic for the people and families involved and for the local community. On behalf of the Scottish Liberal Democrats, I offer heartfelt sympathy to the families of the dead and injured. Our immediate hopes are with those who are severely ill in hospital and with the one person who is still trapped and who we hope to see rescued alive today.

This morning, I was able to meet firemaster Brian Sweeney and the chief superintendent of police to be briefed on the current position. I was enormously impressed, as we have all been from the beginning, by the dedication and organised professionalism of all the emergency services—firefighters, police, ambulance and health workers in particular. I also pay tribute to the broadcast and written media, which have allowed the people of Scotland to share in the events that have taken place in Maryhill and give sympathy to those involved.

If there is one message of hope and inspiration to come out of the awful events, it is the supremely able way in which the key services have conducted themselves. Brian Sweeney has been their voice and public face, but the organisation, practice and dress rehearsals for an event that everyone hoped would not happen have paid off and undoubtedly saved lives. I hope that the First Minister will be able to assure the Parliament that their work and the numerous acts of personal heroism that have taken place during these events will be recognised when the time is right.

12:22

Robin Harper (Lothians) (Green): I associate the Green party with the sentiments expressed by the First Minister and I thank him for those. The Green MSPs offer our deepest sympathies to all those affected by Tuesday's events. Our thoughts are with the families and friends of those who died in the tragedy. Our hopes and thoughts are also very much with those who remain in hospital.

We praise the dedication, hard work and the excellent professionalism that have been displayed by the emergency services, both here and elsewhere. We also praise the voluntary agencies that have been working tirelessly throughout the rescue operation and which continue to work.

I welcome particularly the First Minister's commitment to a full inquiry into the explosion and his commitment that action will be taken on any lessons to be learned.

12:23

Rosie Kane (Glasgow) (SSP): I associate the Scottish Socialist Party with the remarks of the First Minister and others who have spoken this afternoon.

Two weeks ago we gathered in Princes Street gardens on workers memorial day to lay flowers and remember workers throughout the world who are no longer with us because of industrial injury and illness. Speakers on that day remembered all workers, from journalists in war, to firefighters, to cocklers in Morecambe bay.

We could never have imagined, even in our worst nightmares, that two weeks later the terrible disaster in Maryhill, Glasgow would bring eight new names to the tragic list. Our hearts go out to all those who have lost loved ones who, as the First Minister said, simply left home to go to work on Tuesday morning. We offer our condolences, our warmth and our love to all who have found themselves connected to the tragedy in any way and we put ourselves at their disposal.

Finally, as others have done, we pay tribute to the magnificent firefighters from all over, and in particular to Strathclyde fire brigade, which has as ever risen to the painful challenge, to Strathclyde police, the paramedics and all medical and support workers on and around the scene as well as to all those in receiving hospitals.

It is important that we assemble to send comfort and concern from this chamber to the entire community. I thank the Presiding Officer and the First Minister.

The Presiding Officer: And finally, the constituency member, Patricia Ferguson.

12:24

Patricia Ferguson (Glasgow Maryhill) (Lab): I thank those party leaders and representatives of parties who have spoken this afternoon and all those other members who have expressed their support and sympathy in recent days for those involved in the tragic event in my constituency.

I know that those who visited the site of the explosion in Maryhill and who met some of those most affected by it will agree with the First Minister that the efforts of the rescue services, the police and all those involved have been a model of professionalism and sensitivity. I also commend the efficient and caring way in which they have responded to the tragedy and I recognise the dedication shown by social work teams, Red Cross members and, in particular, the staff and volunteers of the Maryhill Community Central Halls, who provided much-needed and much-appreciated support to the families of the victims.

Meeting closed at 12:25.

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