

MEETING OF THE PARLIAMENT

Wednesday 23 September 2009

Session 3

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Scottish Parliament

Wednesday 23 September 2009

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

Time for Reflection

The Presiding Officer (Alex Fergusson): Good afternoon. Our first item of business is, as always on a Wednesday, time for reflection. Our time for reflection leader today is Charandeep Singh, from the University of Strathclyde.

Charandeep Singh (University of Strathclyde): Good afternoon. I would like to thank the Presiding Officer for giving me the opportunity to speak at the Scottish Parliament. Today, I am representing the Scottish Sikh community in my capacity as a leader of the Scottish Sikhs youth project and a member of the youth committee of the Scottish Inter Faith Council.

Sikhism teaches that we, as human beings, should set a high moral and ethical standard to inspire and motivate all who come into contact with us. Working hard to earn an honest living, sharing with those in need and meditation are three fundamental rules of Sikhism that can be applied universally and are adopted in our lives so that we can move from an egocentric lifestyle to one that revolves around service to the community.

That attitude has led me to undertake many voluntary roles involving children, young people and adults. When I was a young child, compulsory attendance to learn about Sikhism and Punjabi culture was the norm. The knowledge and skills that I gained from those lessons have shaped my attitudes and views to the extent that they form a core part of my personality. Now, I am involved in teaching the very same classes that I once attended. I can now play a part in educating children about not only their own heritage but the culture and beliefs of others. In turn, that creates not a society that tolerates but one that accepts.

While growing up in the south side of Glasgow, our neighbours—a Scottish couple—encouraged my parents to send me to a Catholic primary and secondary school to instil in me good values and education. I received not only an improved education, but good values and a sense of personal responsibility. I see those neighbours as my Scottish grandparents, portraying the positive crossover between faiths and cultures.

I recently attended a seminar for senior pupils at Oban high school that was titled “Faith and Young

People”. On entering the school, I realised that a Sikh who dons a turban is not as common a sight in Oban as it may be in Glasgow. Being able to share my experiences as a young person of faith helped those pupils to realise that we shared many more common values than they first thought, even though our appearances may be worlds apart.

I believe that young people are the key to Scotland’s prosperous future. Interfaith dialogue between educational establishments and faith and community leaders is paramount in creating a stronger and prouder nation. To this day, I have not witnessed anywhere else in the United Kingdom the respect for diversity that is in Scotland. That is why I say that I am not a member of the Sikh community but a member of the Scottish Sikh community.

Points of Order

14:34

Margaret Smith (Edinburgh West) (LD): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. On 3 September, the First Minister unveiled the Government's programme to the chamber. Despite being asked by me about legislation on class sizes, none was announced. Last week, at First Minister's question time, I again raised the issue of the lack of legislation to secure the Scottish National Party's pledge of class sizes of 18 in primary 1 to primary 3. Again, there was no response on that important flagship policy.

Today, the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning announced that there will be legislation that will limit only P1 classes to a maximum of 25, not 18. That is clearly a U-turn on the policy of class sizes of 18, which is of interest to every member in the chamber and on which, I believe, a statement should have been made to the chamber. Will you reflect on whether it was reasonable for the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning to make what was a very important announcement in that way? Will the Parliamentary Bureau look at whether time can be found for a debate on the matter as soon as possible?

Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): On a point of order, Presiding Officer.

The Presiding Officer (Alex Fergusson): I will answer Margaret Smith's point of order first, if I may.

I am grateful to Margaret Smith for prior notice of her point of order, which I have already reflected on. As members will recall, this is not the first occasion on which such a point of order has been raised. I am disappointed that the announcement appeared in the media this morning prior to members being informed by an answer to an inspired parliamentary question. I remind the Government that major policy announcements should not enter the public domain before being communicated to Parliament.

I will now take Mr Gibson's point of order.

Kenneth Gibson: Presiding Officer, the matter does not involve primary legislation. Will you reflect on that when you consider the way in which the cabinet secretary made the announcement? The Scottish statutory instrument in question is no different from the hundreds of other SSIs that have been made each year over the past decade, not just in relation to education but in relation to local government, health, transport and every other devolved area. For example, in 2006—when Margaret Smith's party was part of the ruling

Labour-Liberal Administration—some 616 such SSIs were made, including: the Teachers' Superannuation (Scotland) Amendment Regulations 2006 (SSI 2006/308); the Education (Student Loans) Amendment (Scotland) Regulations 2006 (SSI 2006/316); the Education (Assisted Places) (Scotland) Amendment Regulations 2006 (SSI 2006/317); and so on. The SSI in today's announcement is no different from those.

The Presiding Officer: I am not entirely convinced that that was a point of order. It is for me to decide whether I believe the matter was a major policy announcement. I believe that it was and that the announcement should have been made to Parliament first.

Broadcasting

The Presiding Officer (Alex Fergusson): I remind members that we are short of time this afternoon. As a result of the two points of order, we have even less time.

The next item of business is a statement by Michael Russell on broadcasting. As always, the minister will take questions at the end of his statement, so there should be no interventions or interruptions during it. This will be a 10-minute statement.

14:37

The Minister for Culture, External Affairs and the Constitution (Michael Russell): When the First Minister spoke to the Scottish Parliament on 8 October last year, he identified three areas that he saw as being of particular importance: increasing network production by existing broadcasters; establishing a Scottish digital network; and improving accountability arrangements by giving Scottish institutions more power over Scottish broadcasting. All those issues arose from the report of the Scottish Broadcasting Commission, which published its final report on 8 September last year after sitting for 13 months, hearing 83 hours of oral evidence and considering more than 200 written submissions. Unsurprisingly, the commission's final report was widely acclaimed as being rigorous, detailed and compelling. It is important that the report continues to command such an impressive consensus, because its implementation still requires support from across the broadcasting industry and the public sector in Scotland and the United Kingdom as well as from this Parliament. My statement today is what might be called the first annual report on the progress of implementing the commission's findings—a commitment that the First Minister made when he spoke last year. I will report today under the three areas that the First Minister identified.

On increased network production, the figures that were produced by the Office of Communications in August this year provide a stark reminder of why the commission and this Parliament have previously emphasised the issue. Ofcom's figures show that, between 2007 and 2008, Scotland's overall share of the value of network production decreased from 2.6 per cent to 2.5 per cent, its share of Channel 4 programming fell from 1.7 per cent to 1.4 per cent and its share of ITV network programming declined from 1.9 per cent to 1.4 per cent. There was a slight increase in Scotland's share of BBC programming—from 3.3 per cent to 3.7 per cent—but that was counterbalanced by a decline in overall BBC production across the UK.

The BBC and Channel 4 have made strong public commitments to do more to increase network production in Scotland. Since the commission's report, the BBC has appointed commissioning executives in Scotland for factual, entertainment and daytime programming, and it has built its expertise here in comedy, drama, factual programming, entertainment and children's programming. The BBC says that it is confident that Scotland's share of network production will increase significantly in 2009. Many remain doubtful, and the jury is out.

Channel 4 needs to play its part. I welcome Channel 4's commitment that a set number of programmes from key programme strands will be made in Scotland in future. I also welcome Channel 4's decision to establish a nations pilot fund to invest in new programming from Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. However, the fact is that only 1.4 per cent of Channel 4's network programming is made in Scotland. That is completely unacceptable. Channel 4 needs to do much more.

My job—and, I believe, the job of this Parliament—is publicly to hold the BBC and Channel 4 to account on these matters. Their rhetoric must be matched by progress. We must ensure that network production share in Scotland is increased rapidly, sustainably and in a way that brings genuine benefits to the Scottish production industry. A start has been made, but we need to keep an eye on what is happening so that improvement is made on that start.

Getting network broadcasters to increase their share of broadcasting production will bring major benefits to Scottish producers, but any such increase in demand requires the broadcasting industry to have a concomitant ability to meet it. That is why the Scottish Broadcasting Commission included in its report recommendations for Scottish public bodies to help the development of the industry. Their response has been positive. Scottish Enterprise is now working far more closely with the television production sector than was the case before the commission's report was published. Postgraduate students in broadcasting now benefit from the investment that the Scottish Further and Higher Education Funding Council announced in March last year. Creative Scotland has agreed a clear way forward with local authorities and the enterprise agencies for supporting the creative industries. I firmly believe that creative Scotland will have an extremely positive impact on the television production industry, just as it will across all the other creative industries.

Some progress has been made on increasing network production, but more is needed. The First Minister's second point last October was about the

establishment of a Scottish digital network, on which we have seen far less progress. The Parliament unanimously endorsed the need for progress on the issue. The Scottish Broadcasting Commission argued that a Scottish digital network would secure a sustainable source of competition to the BBC for public service broadcasting. Nothing that we have seen during the last year suggests that the need for such competition—and, therefore, for the network—has reduced. In fact, if anything, it has increased. In January, Ofcom reduced the amount of Scottish programming, other than news, that STV is obliged to provide to just 90 minutes a week. STV, of course, has promised to provide more Scottish programming than that, and to provide more high-quality, home-grown programming, but we await the outcomes.

The need for us to move forward with the network has been accepted by a number of people outwith Scotland, most notably Stephen Carter, who, in February, when he was the minister in charge of broadcasting, said in a House of Lords debate on public service broadcasting:

"I ... recognise the importance, having been reared on it, of having news and content that reflects the nation's sense of itself ... one of the things that we are seeing as a catch-up after the devolution agreements is how critical that is".—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 25 February; Vol 708, c 283.]

As I said, the Parliament endorsed the idea of a Scottish digital network. I agree with what my colleague Ted Brocklebank said in March, when he described the creation of a new network as

"the settled will of the Scottish Parliament".—[*Official Report*, 18 March 2009; c 15864.]

His words were not original but are resonant.

In that context, it is astonishing that the United Kingdom Government's final "Digital Britain" report simply ignored the need for a choice of non-news public service broadcasting content in Scotland. Although its recognition of the importance of ensuring sustainable news provision in Scotland was welcome—provided that it extends to the south of Scotland as well as to the current STV regions—"Digital Britain" missed a golden opportunity to rectify a difficulty that its author had correctly identified. As Blair Jenkins, the chair of the Scottish Broadcasting Commission, pointed out after "Digital Britain" was published, it is simply not sustainable to say to Scottish audiences

"that they can have 500 channels, but none of them will be Scottish. That's not digital Britain, that's a digital deficit—and also a democratic, economic and cultural deficit."

I do not think that we as a Parliament can or should give up on the case for a digital network simply because the "Digital Britain" report ignored it.

The Scottish Government's power to establish a network is incredibly constrained, but we will continue to press the UK Government on the issue. I recently urged Ben Bradshaw to explain how the lack of competition in Scottish public service broadcasting can be addressed, and I hope that all MSPs will apply pressure on their Westminster counterparts to deliver the outcomes that Scotland needs.

Of course, I acknowledge that funding difficulties are an issue, but the Scottish Government has pledged to be as constructive as it can be in making suggestions to the UK Government and others on the issue. The argument is not just about money, although money is an element of it. We need to ensure that the unanimity on the issue in Parliament and in Scotland as a whole is maintained and increased, because that is how we will win the argument.

The final area that the First Minister highlighted last year was accountability. The Scottish Broadcasting Commission made some straightforward suggestions on how accountability could be improved. I welcome the fact that the Calman commission agreed with the SBC's recommendation that Scottish ministers should in future appoint members of the BBC Trust. That recommendation does not require legislation and is not dependent on any other recommendations in the Calman report. It can and should be implemented immediately.

I hope that recommendations in the Scottish Broadcasting Commission's report that relate to MG Alba and Ofcom can also be implemented. Those recommendations would require legislation, but the digital economy bill that will soon be introduced at Westminster represents an ideal opportunity to improve accountability.

It has been heartening to see the Scottish Parliament playing an increased role in scrutinising broadcasting. In particular, the director general of the BBC, Mark Thompson, gave evidence to the enterprise and lifelong learning committee for the first time in June this year. I hope that such evidence sessions with heads of the major broadcasting organisations will take place regularly in the future.

My belief, of course, is that the devolution of broadcasting powers should go much further than what the Scottish Broadcasting Commission has proposed. That will be no surprise to anybody in the chamber. Nothing that I have witnessed in the past year, during which a report that commanded cross-party consensus at Holyrood was ignored at Westminster, has dissuaded me from that view. However, I recognise and respect the fact that many members hold a different view.

That is one reason why the Scottish Government is today publishing a national conversation paper on broadcasting, which sets out further options for how broadcasting in Scotland could evolve under four different constitutional arrangements. I hope that the document will inform genuinely open debate about broadcasting in Scotland. It goes without saying that Scotland should have additional powers over broadcasting. It should have different structures, and it should enhance those structures. How it should do that is a matter for debate. The fact that the Parliament has been able to express unanimity on a key issue is a strength.

The past year has been one of limited progress. The Scottish Broadcasting Commission's report has spurred some welcome moves, but they are far from complete. Scottish Enterprise and skills bodies have risen to the challenge, but the broadcasting companies have not yet fully done so. Much more needs to be done to meet the economic, democratic and cultural needs of the Scottish people.

I am happy to announce that, later this year, I will host a major national conference on broadcasting in conjunction with the Saltire Society to discuss the way forward for Scottish broadcasting. The conference will be informed by new research that has been commissioned on attitudes to broadcasting and broadcasting requirements in Scotland.

The current system is still short-changing viewers in Scotland one year on from the Scottish Broadcasting Commission's report. We can make the system better. I hope that members will unanimously agree the means by which to do so.

The Presiding Officer: The minister will now take questions on the issues raised in his statement. We have barely 20 minutes for questions; after that, we will simply have to move on to the next item of business. It would therefore be useful if members kept their questions as short as possible.

Pauline McNeill (Glasgow Kelvin) (Lab): I thank the minister for the advance copy of his statement.

This is a difficult time for the media industry, including the broadcasting industry. The battle for STV's survival is reaching a critical point. There is consensus that we need a strong commercial television company. That should be a priority for the Government, even if it comes before some of the Scottish Broadcasting Commission's good recommendations. There is a desire for a new Scottish digital network, but that should not come at the expense of STV or our existing network. What is the point of gaining a new digital network if we lose what we have now? The Scottish

Government must put aside any differences and use its consensual mode, rather than its conflict mode, when it discusses with the UK Government how we can find a genuine solution and how we can work with the regulatory bodies for a workable solution for our existing broadcasting companies.

The Scottish Government has confirmed today that it wants to break down the current broadcasting model as we know it. Its primary aim is to separate Scotland from the UK's network, infrastructure and investment. We support increased scrutiny powers for the Scottish Parliament and greater accountability for network production in Scotland, but we still believe that our broadcasting must be part of the UK network. We believe that Scotland benefits from economies of scale. That is where the consensus ends. We do not want to move in the direction that the Scottish Government wants to move in.

There is consensus in that we, too, believe that the BBC and other broadcasters have neglected Scotland. We confirm that we will work with the Government to demand improvements in the share of production that is based in Scotland.

The Presiding Officer: I press the member for a question.

Pauline McNeill: What meetings has the minister had with Channel 4? Notwithstanding what we have said about where we believe the Scottish digital network fits in the level of priorities, what funding will the Scottish Government put up for Scottish production and to ensure that there is a Scottish digital network? Surely, in delivering that, there is a role for the Scottish Government in funding it, rather than just demanding it from Westminster.

Michael Russell: Pauline McNeill asked a number of questions; I will try to run through them all.

At a time when the Labour Government at Westminster is cutting the Scottish budget by £500 million, asking us to find additional money for Scottish broadcasting is part of the fantasy wish-list approach that Labour spokespeople tend to enjoy. The reality is that, if the Westminster Government is prepared to enter into an agreement with the Scottish Government to devolve broadcasting power and the resources for broadcasting—with power must come resources—Pauline McNeill will not find us wanting in implementing a radical and important new policy for broadcasting in Scotland.

Pauline McNeill gave no indication in her questions or her commentary—and there was more commentary than there were questions—whether she continues to support the establishment of a digital network. Her analysis of the situation regarding ITV was extraordinary. To

accuse the Scottish Government of being in conflict mode with ITV when it is ITV that has taken out a writ against STV seems to show that she does not even read the newspapers. I strongly support the work that STV does. STV itself has welcomed the idea of a digital network; it did so again in a meeting with me on Thursday. Our job is to ensure that there is healthy plurality and diversity. I met STV on Thursday and I continue to meet all those who are interested in broadcasting. I want to ensure that they all succeed.

Pauline McNeill should join all the other people in the chamber who want to see progress made on Scottish broadcasting as we continue to press her friends in London to deliver the Scottish broadcasting network. I do not judge her on the fact that she has so far failed to do so; I just ask her to do better in the future.

Ted Brocklebank (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I, too, thank the minister for early sight of his statement. Although it was perhaps not quite as early as I might have liked, I understand why, in the current circumstances relating to STV, any statement on Scottish broadcasting had to be fairly carefully crafted.

The minister seeks to refresh the Government's support for the proposed digital channel for Scotland—a proposal that was first made by the Scottish Conservatives to Blair Jenkins's commission on broadcasting. I am happy to reiterate our continuing support for a Scottish digital channel that is funded largely by advertising or sponsorship, or a combination of both. Would the minister's support for such a channel be so enthusiastic if it were to become a UK digital channel? Clearly, Scotland would have its own place in such a structure. Does he not accept that a UK digital channel might prove a natural successor channel to ITV, particularly given the fact that, as he has noted, it appears that that organisation will walk away from its public service broadcasting responsibilities as early as 2012? Will he welcome the proposal that has been made by Jeremy Hunt, the shadow secretary of state for culture, that a future Conservative Government would set up a range of local or city television companies that would become opt-outs from possible UK and Scottish digital channels, which could effectively bypass the dated "Scottish Six" arguments and bring local TV news directly to communities all over Scotland?

Michael Russell: There are some interesting points in what Mr Brocklebank says. However, I do not regard the "Scottish Six" project as dated; it is long overdue, but that is not the same thing. We need news that is reported in Scotland and which reports on Scotland, on these islands, on Europe and on the world from a Scottish viewpoint. That

will be an important step forward, whoever delivers it.

We are trying to achieve increased plurality in broadcasting, which Mr Brocklebank supports. In that context, I am not looking for a successor to the ITV network; I am looking for more variety within Scotland. I foresee circumstances in which a federated UK digital channel—I know that the F-word comes as a shock to Liberal Democrats, who have more or less given it up—might be a possibility. There are all sorts of models. As Mr Brocklebank knows, I have deliberately not got locked into how the channel should be finally structured; I am interested in getting agreement in principle from Westminster that such a channel should be established. There is potential for discussion on those matters.

Margaret Smith (Edinburgh West) (LD): I offer the minister a point of clarification: Mark Thompson had the great misfortune to give evidence to the education committee.

I thank the minister for the advance copy of his statement. I note with concern the lack of progress on a new digital network in Scotland, particularly in relation to the "Digital Britain" report.

I want to put on record our concerns about some of the developments at STV, as we received mixed messages yesterday on the "Scottish Six" on the one hand and the legal challenge from ITV on the other. I welcome the discussions that the minister has had with STV and ask him to give us further information about that.

It is essential that Scotland receives an increased share of production. To do that, we have to ensure that we have the skills in place. Will the minister comment on what progress has been made by the TV production working group of the Scottish digital media industry advisory group on setting industry priorities that respond to the challenges and opportunities facing the broadcasting sector to ensure that there is a clear approach from broadcasters, independent companies, support agencies and the Government to addressing the skills shortages that could be a barrier to growth in the sector? What role does the minister envisage that creative Scotland will play in that?

Much of the focus in relation to broadcasting has been on television production, but does the minister share our concerns about the viability of some local commercial radio stations, which serve fundamental local and community interests across Scotland?

Michael Russell: The situation concerning ITV and STV is a legal dispute, which I cannot, therefore, get involved in. However, it illustrates, in general terms, the basic instability of the ITV settlement in the modern age and the fact that

broadcasting has changed so enormously that the old-fashioned structures and licences are, by and large, irrelevant. There are real issues in there for the ITV companies and for STV in particular. I will keep a close eye on what takes place, but I repeat that the matter is a legal dispute within ITV that STV and ITV will have to settle themselves.

On the question of skills, it is always important to keep in one's mind the fact that there is potential for skills shortages, on which a great deal of work is being done. However, the real issue for most people who work in the sector is not the shortage of skills but the fact that skills are not being utilised. Many people who have such skills simply find that the telephone no longer rings. The other day, I happened to meet a cameraman with whom I used to work—I know that others in the chamber have worked with him, too—and he told me that he had not had a phone call about a job in six months.

Freelance and independent contractors in the industry face a problem, but the issue is not lack of skills but lack of work. That is why one of my concerns around the issue of production in Scotland is that there needs to be a real increase in production in Scotland, not a cosmetic increase.

Margaret Smith's reminder about radio was timely, as radio faces a number of issues. The independent radio structure in Scotland is interesting and has successes. We need to examine two aspects of it in particular: community radio and the changes that are needed in the regulatory framework so that community radio can grow; and the issues around Radio Scotland. The Broadcasting Commission's strictures on Radio Scotland were clear, but they have not been responded to. There is general disappointment at the performance of Radio Scotland, which will need to improve.

The Presiding Officer: We come to open questions. One each please; we do not have long.

Alasdair Allan (Western Isles) (SNP): In light of the recent comments by STV about the editorial need—in its view—for an evening news bulletin combining Scottish with international stories, does the minister believe that the argument for such a bulletin on the BBC and STV has been strengthened rather than weakened?

Michael Russell: Yes, but I ask the member to be cautious. The STV plan is interesting, but it is not fully worked through—all that I have seen is a clip of what it might look like. There are three hurdles to be overcome. The first is that, at the moment, there is a consultation, not a policy, on the independent news consortiums and the top-slicing of money for them. The second is that, even if the proposal becomes UK Government policy, there is no firmness yet about which areas

will be covered. I am firmly of the view that the whole of Scotland, not just the Grampian and STV areas, should be covered. However, that is still to be decided. The third is the fact that there will be competition in terms of who would like to take part in the new system, as we know from an announcement last week. Therefore, the proposal is not a done deal.

I would like all broadcasters in Scotland to recognise the reality of news coverage, which is that news starts from where one is. In Scottish terms, that means looking at the world from Scotland. Scottish news coverage would be considerably better if that principle lay behind a "Scottish Six" on ITV and a "Scottish Six" on the BBC.

David Whitton (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (Lab): I declare an interest, as I am a very minor shareholder in STV.

Paragraph 1.28 of the national conversation document, "Opportunities for Broadcasting", says that the Government cannot comment in detail on the dispute between ITV and STV. However, Mr Russell will have seen the headlines in today's *Daily Record* about the latest twist in that dispute.

As the minister met them last Thursday, he knows that STV employs real people who do real jobs and produce real programmes for and about Scotland right now. What meetings has the minister held with ITV to assist in reaching a solution to that dispute that will protect those jobs?

Michael Russell: I am happy to meet ITV, but the present issue concerns STV's decisions about its programming. It is, as Mr Whitton knows, a long-running dispute, and the issues are many and varied. I cannot solve or negotiate the dispute—I can only indicate my policy for broadcasting in Scotland; show generally, as I have done, strong support for the ITV network and what exists within it; and ensure that the staff understand that we wish to have a flourishing production industry in Scotland. I am pleased to do all those things.

If there would be any benefit in myself or others meeting ITV, we will do so. It is important to recognise that STV has a right to set its own agenda, its programming and its means of operating. However, it also has a responsibility not only to its staff—although that is important—but to its viewers, many of whom are somewhat puzzled by the way in which the company has proceeded.

Brian Adam (Aberdeen North) (SNP): I, like the minister, welcome STV's moves towards a "Scottish Six". Does he share my concern, however, about STV's proposal to reduce the north of Scotland broadcast by the former Grampian Television from 25 minutes to 10 minutes? Does he consider that that is not in the

spirit of activities that are supported through public service broadcasting finance?

Michael Russell: It is important that there is more diversity and plurality, and everyone—including those who work in broadcasting in the former Grampian Television area—will be better served by having a Scottish digital channel in addition to the existing service. It is not a good idea to reduce the service to any viewer in Scotland, but any new programme that might emerge is some distance away. As I said, it is at least three hurdles away from happening, and all that currently exists is a five-minute mock-up of what the programme might look like. I do not think that anyone's interests in any part of Scotland would be served by reducing the good local news service that exists. That is particularly true in the north-east, where there is a fondness for the type of local service that was provided by the former Grampian Television.

Lewis Macdonald (Aberdeen Central) (Lab): Does the minister accept that the news service that is produced in Aberdeen is regional rather than local, and that it has the highest audience penetration of any regional news programme anywhere in Scotland, England or Wales? Does he recognise that STV's current proposals would cut the level of production by nearly two thirds? How many jobs does he think will be put in jeopardy? Will he tell STV the next time he meets the company that he shares those concerns—if indeed he does—about the impact on the creative and media hub in Aberdeen?

Michael Russell: STV is in no doubt that I share members' concerns about programme production and news production in the former Grampian Television region and throughout Scotland. I want to see more, not less. There is no question that I would in any way support the reduction of programming.

I return to my point that any such situation is rather a long way away, if it ever happens. There will be competition for the independent news consortiums if the network is established, but no one currently knows whether that will happen. The consultation ended yesterday, so there is considerable time for views to change at Westminster. Because it involves BBC top-slicing, there will be a vigorous argument about it.

Of course, we need more production, news and local and regional coverage rather than less. The concept of a "Scottish Six" is attractive. If it is done properly it will look at the world from where we are. With respect to Lewis Macdonald, that can be done from Aberdeen, Edinburgh, Glasgow, Galashiels or anywhere. Perhaps it should be done from Aberdeen.

Christine Grahame (South of Scotland) (SNP): The minister mentioned in his statement the extension of sustainable news provision to the south of Scotland as well as to the current STV regions. Does he agree that my constituents in the south of Scotland, and the Scottish Borders in particular, have paid a very heavy price for ITV's change to basing its news coverage in Tyneside? Does he support my call for STV to extend its coverage to the Scottish Borders?

Michael Russell: Yes. I could go on at great length about that, but the Presiding Officer would not want me to. I have argued strongly with regard to the areas that Christine Grahame mentions—particularly Dumfriesshire and the south of Scotland, slightly further west than the area that the member is talking about—that the present dispensation that Ofcom has imposed is completely and utterly daft, and does not serve viewers in the area in any way.

I have said publicly—I am happy to say it again here—that the independent news consortium should, if it comes about, apply to the whole of Scotland, including the Scottish part of the border region. It would be unreasonable for it to cover every area but that one.

Ken Macintosh (Eastwood) (Lab): I thank the minister for his helpful list of what everyone else should be doing to support the new digital network. He talked about the roles of Scottish Enterprise and creative Scotland. Given the devolved powers over which the minister has control, what sort of support does he think his Administration is giving the new digital network? Mr Swinney's budget proposes a cut in the funds that are available to Scottish Enterprise, no more money but new powers for creative Scotland and, most important, no direct funds at all from the Government for the proposed new Scottish channel.

Michael Russell: Mr Macintosh questioned me closely—I suppose that is what he was trying to do—on those matters at this morning's meeting of the Education, Lifelong Learning and Culture Committee. The reality of the situation is that creative Scotland has the opportunity to draw in more resources from the enterprise network.

If Mr Macintosh will persuade his friend Gordon Brown—assuming that Gordon Brown is his friend—to rescind the £500 million cut and increase the resources to the Scottish Parliament, and if he will persuade his party to vote for independence for Scotland and the use of Scottish resources, I will fund the channel.

Bill Kidd (Glasgow) (SNP): Can the minister provide Parliament with any further information on the Scottish Government's efforts to secure a

wider audience for BBC Alba through its provision on Freeview?

Michael Russell: I have said publicly that I and the Government favour the Freeview option for MG Alba. The option could be taken tomorrow. It is because of the incredibly bureaucratic structure of the BBC that the review is taking almost a year. Let us just do it. MG Alba needs a wider distribution mechanism and it is clear that there will be take-up on Freeview. There is no barrier to use of that option. The Government supports it. If was put to a vote in the chamber, Parliament would support it—I think that every party has supported it. If the BBC would stop counting the number of angels on the head of a pin and just do it, everybody would be pleased.

The Presiding Officer: I ask Margo MacDonald to be very brief.

Margo MacDonald (Lothians) (Ind): I think that I am the only person here who has worked on a local television station with news bunnies, weather in Swedish and topless darts.

The Presiding Officer: Very briefly, please.

Margo MacDonald: I advise against going down that route until a lot more money is available. I ask the minister to ensure that the language that is used in any further presentation of the idea, whether in the national conversation paper or elsewhere, is simplified. People on the streets do not understand the technicalities.

The Presiding Officer: Please answer within 10 seconds, minister.

Michael Russell: I disagree with Margo MacDonald. We are debating the policy and we need to be able to do so. As for news bunnies and topless darts, that is not my plan for Scottish broadcasting, although it might be hers.

The Presiding Officer: On that note, we will move rapidly to the next item of business. I apologise to members whom I was unable to call.

Petitions Process Inquiry

The Presiding Officer (Alex Fergusson): The next item of business is a debate on motion S3M-4770, in the name of Frank McAveety, on the Public Petitions Committee's inquiry into the public petitions process.

15:08

John Farquhar Munro (Ross, Skye and Inverness West) (LD): It is with enormous pleasure that I open this afternoon's debate, on behalf of the Public Petitions Committee, on the report on our year-long inquiry into the public petitions process.

The inquiry was prompted by three events—petition PE1065, from Young Scot, on enhancing young people's engagement in the democratic process through new technologies; the research that the Public Petitions Committee in the previous session of Parliament commissioned in 2006, "The Assessment of the Scottish Parliament's Public Petitions System 1999-2006"; and the 10th anniversary of the Parliament's re-establishment and adoption of our founding principles, which are embedded in the petitions process.

It was a particularly enjoyable inquiry. We launched it after our meeting in Dumbarton on 24 June 2008. We took evidence here in Parliament and, importantly, furth of Edinburgh from folk in Duns, Easterhouse and Fraserburgh. We adopted a new format for taking evidence. As a public-facing committee, the views of the public and petitioners are important so, at those three meetings, we held public sessions in advance of our normal committee business. We asked the public about how we could increase awareness of the petitions process, about how we as a committee could improve it, about how we could better navigate and signpost people towards its very existence, and we asked about the role that information technology could play. The format worked well and gave people the opportunity to contribute and to work with us. Indeed, its benefit is demonstrated by the number of our conclusions that stem from people's suggestions and ideas.

There was also a lot of interest in what we were doing and how we were doing it. We received encouraging feedback from the people whom we met and through research that we commissioned. Despite the on-going challenge of broadening people's awareness of the petitions process, there was immense support for the notion that petitioning is a good example of how people can easily and positively engage with their Parliament. Over the past 18 months, we have considered many important and high-profile petitions covering, for example, access to cancer treatment drugs,

mandatory custodial sentencing for knife carrying, school bus safety, the right of healthy gay and bisexual men to donate blood, and new guidelines on vitamin D supplementation for children and pregnant women. Without individuals having lodged petitions that were based on their own experiences, would policymakers have considered such issues? Yes—at some point they would; however, petitioning provides a direct route into Parliament for people who want such issues to be considered sooner rather than later.

I think that the most positive outcomes of our inquiry are that our public petitioning system works well, is highly regarded by users and others and has proved that it can lead to change and that people can influence policy. That, of course, is the most important feature of a public petitioning process: we must be able to demonstrate that it can, and does, lead to change. I am sure that other members will touch on that in the debate.

As far as the report's main conclusions are concerned, the inquiry had essentially three elements. The first was improvement of awareness of the existence of the public petitions process, particularly among hard-to-reach groups. The second was the subsequent participation of petitioners in the process. The third and most important was the committee's scrutiny role—in other words, what we do with a petition and how we move it forward.

In the report, we comment on the success and our enjoyment of our external meetings and we commit ourselves to a further programme of such meetings. I am particularly pleased that Monday's meeting was held at Alness academy in my constituency. We had a good turnout from local primary and secondary schools, with more than 100 folk turning up to watch and to take part in our meeting. We also enjoyed being piped into the school when we arrived—a true Highland welcome.

Our report also highlights the need to maximise the opportunities that are afforded by external meetings for local people, schools, and community groups to watch the meeting, to meet members and to take part in some way. We do not want to just turn up, have our meeting and then leave because to do so would be of little interest or value to people. During our inquiry, witnesses constantly pointed to the lack of understanding of what the Parliament stands for and the need for it to work harder on engaging and involving people, so in Alness we gave the public the chance to ask us about what we do. We are taking that work forward with the Parliament's education and community partnership team, who have been testing out ideas about how to encourage public engagement in committee business at that and future external meetings.

We highlighted the importance of the problem. Increasing awareness of what the committee does and of the public petitions process as a route for engagement is a challenge that we are addressing. It is similar to the challenge with which Parliament is faced in broadening people's understanding of its role, and to the challenge that individual members of the Scottish Parliament face in encouraging citizens to get involved in the democratic process in whatever shape or form. As we say in our report:

"We accept that we will never capture everyone. But we must try, and be seen to be trying, to visibly put a strategy in place that has the core function to reach beyond the usual suspects, the people that we know will engage and do, to those that do not because they do not know how to or worse, that they can."

We must think creatively about how to increase people's understanding of the public petitioning process. That is what we will do in the coming months, through our ideas and in co-operation with the education and community partnership team.

The final issue that I will refer to quickly is the potential for local authorities to establish their own petitioning processes. Many petitions originate from local issues but, as the national Parliament, we must focus on petitions that have a national dimension and an impact on national policy. We are successful in balancing petitioners' local concerns with our more national focus, but we wonder whether more locally based petitioning systems in local authorities would provide greater opportunities and benefits to local people.

I thank my fellow committee members. The committee is a good example of how the Parliament's founding principles can, and do, work. We work in a consensual manner and always focus on the petitioners and the issues that they bring before Parliament. I also thank each and every person who worked with us during the inquiry, including those who gave us ideas and suggestions as to how we can improve the petitions process further.

As a committee member, I look forward to the coming months, during which we will continue to roll out the ideas in the report, hold another series of external meetings and take forward the issues that people raise with us.

I move,

That the Parliament notes the conclusions contained in the Public Petitions Committee's 3rd Report, 2009 (Session 3): *Inquiry into the public petitions process* (SP Paper 300).

15:17

The Minister for Parliamentary Business (Bruce Crawford): The Government welcomes the Public Petitions Committee report on its inquiry

into the petitions process. On behalf of the Government, I acknowledge the hard work that the convener and members of the committee have undertaken. Like John Farquhar Munro, I acknowledge the valuable input by all those who participated in the committee's evidence sessions and public meetings throughout Scotland. I am pleased to take part in the debate.

As we all know, the petitions process makes an essential contribution to implementing the Parliament's founding principles. The Parliament should be accessible, open and responsive and it should develop procedures that make possible a participative approach to the development, consideration and scrutiny of policy and legislation. The petitions process was designed so that the rules on who may petition Parliament and what happens to petitions are deliberately broad and inclusive. For example, Parliament is obligated under the standing orders to consider all competent petitions. Petitions can be submitted directly, including electronically, and they do not require the support of an MSP. Importantly, petitions may be submitted in any language.

That process is in stark contrast to the petitions system at Westminster, where individuals have the right to petition the Parliament through their member of Parliament, but have no guarantee that the petition will be given consideration. No doubt that is why the petitions process became one of the Scottish Parliament's successes and has gained a deserved worldwide reputation, with many other Parliaments looking at the Scottish example.

Although much has been accomplished and a great deal of progress has been made, we cannot be complacent. Professor Macintosh's warning at the committee's round-table discussion in April is clear—other Parliaments are moving ahead on processes and technology. In her words,

"Ten years is an awfully long time ... it is time for the Parliament to move on, too."—[*Official Report, Public Petitions Committee*, 21 April 2009; c 1678.]

The committee's comprehensive report recognises that although the fundamentals of the petitions system are sound, more work needs to be done. We need to embrace new ideas for better engaging the Scottish people. We must connect with young people and the harder-to-reach groups—the people who, for differing reasons, find it difficult to be heard.

More effective involvement of young people in the development of policy has been a focus for the Scottish Government. "Valuing Young People: Principles and connections to support young people achieve their potential", which was published on 27 April, is a framework of principles that were agreed by the Government and partner organisations for working with young people in any

context. They include the delivery of services that reflect the reality of young people's lives, the recognition and promotion of young people's positive contribution to society, and the early involvement of young people in developing services and opportunities.

We need to tap into young people's creativity and how they think, and we need to be more open to ideas and approaches that might not be achieved through more traditional forms of consultation, as was rightly highlighted during the committee's inquiry. Several young people suggested new ways in which the committee could engage, such as through the social networking sites Digg, Reddit and StumbleUpon. Those sites were complete news to me, which shows members how much I have to learn about that particular way of going about social conversation. It is not easy: an active policy or strategy of digital engagement is needed in order for that to be effective. For example, we could use existing structures that work, such the Scottish Youth Parliament and the Young Scot portal to encourage users to carry the message through their Facebook and Bebo pages—I know about those. Any means that better engage the interest of young people and encourage an exchange of views and greater participation in the democratic process are worth using.

The same can be said in respect of increasing awareness among disabled people and facilitating their access to the petitions process. I welcome the committee's recognition of those issues and its intention to work with the Parliament's education and community partnerships team on that. The involvement of disabled people in the decision-making and policy process is a continuing concern of the Government. We will provide £1.3 million between 2008 and 2011 for numerous projects that have the aim of increasing participation by, and inclusion of, disabled people in the work of the Government, and in all aspects of daily and public life. The funding has been provided through national disability-led organisations, such as Inclusion Scotland, the Scottish Disability Equality Forum, communication forum Scotland and the Scottish Council on Deafness. I mention those organisations because I believe that the committee could draw usefully on the expertise and knowledge of groups such as Young Scot, Inclusion Scotland and the Council of Ethnic Minority Voluntary Sector Organisations, to name just a few. They are organisations with which the Government currently works successfully and with which the committee could also engage.

I note from the committee's report that it proposes to invite several organisations to provide links from their websites to the committee's site so that the public can navigate from them to the committee's site. That is a useful idea and a good

start. I will be interested to hear how the committee develops that work in the year ahead.

It is vital to engage with more than the

"middle-class men of middle-class age"—[*Official Report, Public Petitions Committee*, 21 April 2009; c 1680.]

as ex-Presiding Officer George Reid put it so elegantly—I guess he could have been describing me—during the round table discussion with the committee in April. With that in mind, the Government welcomes the fact—as was mentioned by John Farquhar Munro—that during the course of its inquiry the committee met in various locations throughout Scotland, including Duns, Glasgow and Fraserburgh. During those visits the committee engaged directly with school pupils, local residents and community groups. In building on the success of those meetings, it is good that the committee plans to undertake another series of meetings in various parts of Scotland.

I know that the committee met in Alness academy on Monday, because I heard a fair chunk about it on Radio Scotland when I was travelling in my constituency of Stirling. I thought that, given the way that young people described what was happening, the work that the committee was doing at the event was very valuable not just to the committee but to the standing of the Scottish Parliament. I thought that that was an excellent piece of broadcasting.

I also understand that as part of the preparation for the committee meeting, the Parliament's education outreach officers visited three secondary schools in Dingwall, Dornoch and Invergordon. That combination of outreach and the committee meeting seems to be a useful and practical way of not just explaining more about the work of the committee and the Parliament, but of allowing others to see it in action. No doubt that contributed to the success of the meeting. If that is repeated in the future, it could provide a real opportunity to open up the Parliament to many more people. I will be interested to see how the committee develops that work throughout the year. My officials and I are happy to assist it in any way.

The Public Petitions Committee has evolved; it has moved away from the postbox function of the early days. It is important that the committee continues that evolution and builds on its successes. As I said—actually, I did not say this, because I did not get to that bit of my speech, but I am saying it now—my officials and I are more than happy to assist in any way that we can as the committee continues its important work on behalf not only of itself, but of the Parliament as a whole.

15:26

Michael McMahon (Hamilton North and Bellshill) (Lab): I thank the Public Petitions Committee for providing us with this opportunity, through producing its report, to consider how far the public petitions system has come in the first 10 years of devolution.

The most important aspect of the committee's latest report is that it shows us that we are not content to believe that Scots have access to the policy-making process purely because we assert that that is so. In asking Dr Carman and Ipsos MORI to look again at our petitions system, Frank McAveety and his colleagues have taken the lead in showing that Parliament is not prepared to rest on its laurels.

When I am asked—as we all often are—what makes the Scottish Parliament different from Westminster, I invariably use our petitions system as the prime example of the central difference that exists, which is that we here are enhancing civic participation in the parliamentary process. Having had the privilege of being convener of the committee throughout the second session of the Parliament, I am particularly proud to have been involved in the introduction of the e-petitioning system. I believe that it enhances access to the policy-making process, which the petitions system was created to achieve from the outset.

Petitioning of Parliament dates back to the Magna Carta, so our system is far from being unique or novel. However, the way in which it operates and the way in which the committee handles petitions make it innovatory. I can testify that the ability to submit a petition to the Parliament electronically was an innovation that intrigued e-democracy exponents from throughout the world when we discussed it in Brussels. The Parliaments of many countries told us at that conference that they use information and communication technology to engage with the public, but we showed that Scotland led the way with discussion forums on our e-petitions system, which bring the world into our deliberations.

One thing that has been confirmed through Dr Carman's analysis is that it is difficult to gauge the level of attainment of the public petitions system, because assessment of the success of a petition depends on our knowing what the expectations of the petitioner were at the outset of the process. Logic tells us that the degree of anticipation will vary from one person to another. For some petitioners, the mere opportunity to bring their issue to Parliament will be considered a success, whereas for others, no outcome short of hearing total agreement with their views will suffice.

Some petitions have had an impact on public debate. Some, such as the petition on institutional

child abuse, have led to debate in the chamber and have brought about policy change. Others have resulted in changes in the law, such as when Parliament legislated in 2003 to prohibit the spreading of raw sewage on agricultural land. More recently, the inquiry into the availability of national health service cancer treatment and the debate on knife crime, which were mentioned by John Farquhar Munro, have clearly enabled members of the public to have a direct input into the political process.

The committee's report serves to confirm that our public petitions system has developed appreciably since 1999. Dr Carman's report in 2006 identified that some petitioners felt that they were not well informed about the progress of their petition. It is good to note that the current committee has addressed that situation by providing extracts from each meeting at which the committee considered the petition, information on decisions that the committee took, and links to the *Official Report* and to Scottish Parliament information centre briefings and the written submissions on the petition that were made to the committee.

The inquiry shows that there is still a lack of knowledge about the Scottish Parliament's responsibilities and that people are generally unaware of the opportunities that are available for engagement with the petitions system. It has also exposed the fact that, although it has been innovative on e-petitioning, the Scottish Parliament is not maximising the use of modern information technology.

We showed that we were miles ahead of Westminster on petitioning at the outset of devolution in 1999, and we moved even further ahead in 2004 with our e-democracy, so it is disappointing that, by 2008, Westminster had established a dedicated YouTube channel and was experimenting with Twitter before the Public Petitions Committee had generated its own blog and Wikipedia page. That blog and page will now permit greater interaction between the committee, petitioners and interested members of the public and are welcome additions to the petitions process.

We must acknowledge that, even with our best efforts so far, there remains a gulf between the Parliament and the public. More work needs to be done, but it is clear that Frank McAveety, his MSP colleagues and the clerks know that their response to the report provides evidence that the petitions system is continually and gradually closing the gap. The report and the implementation of its recommendations will ensure that the gap between the public and the political system will close further and I thank the committee for bringing the report to our attention.

15:31

Nanette Milne (North East Scotland) (Con):

The report that we are discussing is the culmination of a significant amount of work by the Public Petitions Committee to encourage more people throughout Scotland—particularly the many young people and others for whom the Parliament may hitherto have seemed remote and inaccessible—to engage with the work that we do as part of the democratic process.

I will confine my remarks to the outreach events that we undertook, the conclusions that we drew from them and the need to expand and improve how we publicise the petitions process to attract those who remain unaware of it. However, before I do that, I thank and compliment the committee clerks and our support services for the enormous effort that they put into arranging and preparing for the committee's successful visits to Berwickshire high school in Duns, Easterhouse and Fraserburgh academy in Aberdeenshire as part of our inquiry; and to Alness academy this week, where we received a real Highland welcome—piper and all—as we started to deliver our resultant plan to hold committee meetings in all regions of Scotland.

I was unable to attend the Easterhouse meeting but, by all accounts and to judge from the *Official Report*, it was an extremely well-attended and lively event. The school meetings were, without exception, extremely successful in engaging with the young students who attended them and took part in the committee's work by presenting their own petitions to us.

Two things struck me forcibly about those external meetings: first, before our visit was announced, few of our attendees knew anything about the Parliament's petitions process; and secondly, our visits were popular and very much appreciated by those who attended. Furthermore, once people understood how our petitions system worked, they thought that it was excellent and wanted to engage with it.

At each of the three schools that we visited, pupils presented two petitions to the committee, all on significant and interesting topics. In Duns, we heard about local shortcomings in funding for enterprise education and the inadequacy of rural bus services. In Fraserburgh, we heard a very well-researched petition that urged the Prime Minister, as leader of the G20 summit, to take urgent action on African poverty and debt, as well as one that highlighted some problems with NHS services in rural Aberdeenshire. In Alness, there was a very timely petition urging action to increase the number of blood donors in Scotland—timely because there is a members' business debate on the topic tomorrow afternoon, during which I hope to bring the petition to the attention of the Minister

for Public Health and Sport. That petition was followed by a well-presented case for equity in funding for educational school visits. All were excellent petitions, which would probably never have come to us if we had not made the effort to visit the schools.

As well as hearing those petitions and considering others that we had previously discussed, the committee had a good question-and-answer session with not only the pupils but other members of the communities who turned up at the meetings in each school. As an aside, those of us who met the colourful character Mr Tupy the previous evening were slightly disappointed that he did not make an appearance at the Alness meeting.

We had good feedback from our external meetings. As Bruce Crawford indicated, they resulted in significant media coverage. The people whom we met in the communities we visited were very appreciative of the fact that the committee had reached out to them. I have no doubt that they will continue to take an interest in and engage with the Parliament and the petitions process.

That said, there are many communities across the country that we are unable to visit. The challenge is to reach out to people in those communities and raise awareness of what we do. When people get to know about the public petitions process, they become very positive about it. They see it as a worthwhile engagement route into the Parliament. Indeed, people come forward with ideas on how to make what we do more relevant to them.

As a result of our inquiry, we committed to holding further external meetings, the first of which was held this week in Alness. If possible, three further meetings are planned for next year in locations where no parliamentary committee has visited. We want to encourage two-way dialogue with the people who come to our meetings. Where possible, we intend to involve the Parliament's education and community partnerships team in facilitating that activity. Alongside our external meetings, we intend to make presentations to explain the committee's work. Local schoolchildren and disability, community and equality groups will be encouraged to attend and take part in those sessions. We tried out that approach in Alness with primary school children and it will be evaluated and developed for future use.

In response to a suggestion from a pupil in Fraserburgh, we are looking into the possibility of running a young people's petitions meeting, at which it is suggested that we will discuss only petitions from young people. If the meeting succeeds, we will consider holding similar meetings that focus on petitions from disability groups, equalities organisations and the like.

We also heard suggestions for improving the ways in which to bring our existence and work to people's attention. The suggestions included producing better leaflets in more languages and formats, improving our website and using the latest electronic technologies to reach younger people—technologies that I confess to neither using nor knowing about, but in which other committee members have a particular interest.

Our inquiry was interesting, enjoyable and revealing. I am pretty sure that the people whom we met and with whom we held discussions are as enthusiastic about our petitions process as we are. Clearly, we want to reach out to and engage as many of Scotland's citizens as possible. As communication methods improve and evolve, I hope that the Parliament's Public Petitions Committee will become known to many more people and become increasingly recognised as a gateway to participation in the on-going and developing work of the Parliament.

15:37

Jim Hume (South of Scotland) (LD): I congratulate the Public Petitions Committee members and clerks on their hard work. Indeed, I congratulate all those who have participated in the work of the committee over the past 10 years. I welcome the opportunity that the debate gives to showcase how committees such as the Public Petitions Committee can help to make the Parliament more accessible and, in so doing, develop decision making for the benefit of Scotland as a whole.

I welcome the comprehensive inquiry report into the public petitions process. The report highlights many issues in setting out the committee's progress over the years and outlining ideas for future improvements, for example in accessibility and future methods of working. I refer to the ways in which we can better engage the youth of Scotland in their Parliament. It is, of course, correct that an inquiry should have been instigated, not because there was any doubt about the process but to endeavour to find better ways of working. Such an inquiry is, after all, the way in which to improve, scrutinise and progress the working of committees of the Parliament.

My Public Petitions Committee experience is limited to being a once-used substitute member in the first year of this session. Like other MSPs, I am well aware of the importance of petitions as a formalised way in which to access the Parliament and its decision-making processes. Accessibility is key—indeed, it should always be paramount—to the Parliament: there should be no ivory towers.

I speak in the debate as a former active lobbyist. Access to decision makers enabled me to inform

them of the consequences of their actions and those of Parliaments. I was also able to state what I believed could be changed for the better. That work made a huge difference. The ability to undertake it in Scotland is a huge benefit of our devolved Scotland. The difficulties in lobbying Westminster from Scotland when the decision-making process happens only there do not need to be spelled out. Such lobbying becomes the exclusive preserve of those who can afford the time and money to make trips down south.

The ability for people to gain access, be heard, and have their advice acted on is vital for the working of the democratic listening and acting Parliament to which we all aspire. The work of the Public Petitions Committee is a huge part of that.

Of course, there are several other ways of accessing the Parliament—for example, by directly contacting constituency MSPs, or the much busier regional MSPs, or through cross-party groups—but when there is a large public feeling of discontent about an issue, the Public Petitions Committee is an ideal, transparent and useful vehicle. If members doubt those words, they need only look at the statistics in the report. In its first 10 years of life, the committee has had an enormous number of petitions to consider—1,263, to be precise. That is more than one every three days, which is a colossal amount. As members have mentioned, in recent years the figure has increased by the use of e-petitions. Bruce Crawford indicated that the Scottish Parliament is world leading in that respect.

Many petitions have highlighted serious issues in communities and areas of Scotland, such as the danger of cheap alcohol, the need for building regulations to require the installation of thermostatic controls and the right of all members of the community to give blood, which John Farquhar Munro mentioned. There have been petitions on the management difficulties that will result from the proposed electronic identification of sheep and on the need to recognise the loss of life on the Lancastria—Britain's worst maritime disaster, with the loss of an estimated 4,000, perhaps 6,000, lives—during the war. I have even considered submitting my petition to keep Tesco local in Haddington, but perhaps I will send that to East Lothian Council. In every case that I have mentioned, the Public Petitions Committee highlighted the causes to which the petitions related. In the past decade, it has considered more than 126 petitions a year.

The report that the motion highlights shows that there is no sitting on laurels. I am pleased to note that the report recommends increasing the number of languages in which the committee prints its leaflets and proactively putting out literature in many more public places, which can only be

commendable. I look forward to seeing the soon-to-be-published “How to submit a public petition” in every public place possible. I am glad that, not satisfied with having led the way on e-petitions, the committee will consider using modern social networks such as Twitter and Facebook, as well as videoconferencing. Used well, those will only improve the accessibility of Parliament and the petitions process. I confess to using Twitter and Facebook, but I admit that all of my kids are much more familiar with those media—a clue to why they must be considered as means of engaging with that generation.

I welcome the committee's report, which goes a long way towards bettering the workings and accessibility of the Parliament and its decision-making process. We can be proud of the committee's achievements, and I am glad that there is a hunger for improvement. I advise all MSPs and committees to read the report and some of the recommendations, so that we can consider better ways of working for the benefit of the Scottish people and the workings of the Parliament.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Trish Godman): I call Tricia Marwick, who will speak on behalf of the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body.

15:43

Tricia Marwick (Central Fife) (SNP): The Public Petitions Committee has done the Parliament a great service by holding its thorough inquiry into the workings of the committee and the petitions system.

I will discuss the steps to which the corporate body is committed in the future, but it is important that we mark how successful the Scottish Parliament and its Public Petitions Committee have been over the past 10 years. Measures such as the transmission of every committee and plenary meeting on the web and our festival of politics have been copied by Parliaments throughout the world. When David Whitton and I were fortunate enough to be part of the Scottish Parliament's delegation to the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association meeting in Malaysia last year, we discussed how people can engage with their Parliaments. Speaker after speaker from throughout the Commonwealth paid tribute to the Scottish Parliament for the work that it had done and freely acknowledged that they had taken on board some of our initiatives.

As other members have said, it is important that we do not stand still and that we move forward. In this our 10th anniversary year, the SPCB's strategy shows considerable commitment to continuing to engage widely and directly with Scotland's

communities, especially those that have not yet engaged with their Parliament. A new Scottish Parliament website is in development, and we are using a range of online media, including video podcasts of our weekly “Holyrood Highlights” programme, audio podcasts covering a wide range of topics and, from this month, more interactive online educational tools to support the new style of personalised learning under the curriculum for excellence.

Visitor analysis indicates that personal experience can strongly influence and inform attitudes. In our engagement programme, we have therefore expanded the routes for people to gain a personal experience of the Parliament. We are now running with an annual programme of about 450 member-sponsored events, which accounted for 90,000 of our visitors over the past year. Those events, along with member-sponsored exhibitions, offer groups of all kinds an opportunity to engage with the Parliament by presenting their work to members.

The SPCB is committed to an annual programme of major events, ranging from committee-sponsored events such as business in the Parliament to events that examine key issues for Scotland, such as Scotland’s Futures Forum seminars. We know from feedback that hosting high-profile exhibitions such as the World Press Photo exhibition and programmes such as our groundbreaking festival of politics can play an important role in drawing in new audiences and encouraging them to learn more about the Parliament. The moving stories exhibition is a new method of community outreach, which is touring venues across Scotland this year. Various engagement events have been held at exhibition venues, including receptions for local groups and twilight training sessions for teachers.

In late November, the SPCB will pilot a new engagement event aimed specifically at grass-roots community groups and organisations that have not yet engaged. It is called the “Understanding and Influencing Your Parliament” conference. To be hosted by the Presiding Officer, and with several members already on board as speakers, the conference will focus on the practical aspects of engagement.

We have established the education and community partnerships team to focus on reaching communities beyond the central belt and those sections of society that are traditionally underrepresented in engagement programmes.

A new pilot, the community partnership project, is now running, with groups from three audiences that research has shown are underrepresented in public engagement. Those groups are young people, especially difficult-to-reach 16 to 24-year-olds, people with disabilities, and people from

black and ethnic minority backgrounds. The real strength of the project lies in the fact that it encourages local people to use their issues and enthusiasm to engage with the Parliament. For example, one of the project partners has already submitted an e-petition on NHS translation and interpreting services.

The SPCB is backing a further pilot project on committee outreach, which will result in an incremental increase in the scale of community engagement support accompanying each outward committee meeting. That is being carried out initially with the Public Petitions Committee, but it might be possible to consider similar support for other committees in the future.

Educating young people and supporting teaching about the Parliament has been a key service since 1999. Over the past year, the SPCB has increased capacity for both the inward and outreach educational programmes. The inward service has almost doubled uptake from young people to 11,300, with about 35 per cent of them coming from schools that had not previously taken part in the education programme. The outreach programme has held sessions in schools in 88 per cent of constituencies in Scotland, supporting engagement with 110 members.

I am pleased to note—I am sure that all members are, too—that this week the SPCB has introduced free guided tours, thereby making all aspects of visiting and engaging with the Parliament free to the public.

The SPCB will continue to work with the Public Petitions Committee and all the other parliamentary committees to ensure that the work that is being carried out across the Parliament supports our aspirations to engage comprehensively with all the people of Scotland, regardless of where they live and whatever their personal circumstances are.

As we move into the second decade of our re-established Parliament, we note the many successes and the many challenges, but we all recognise that the work does not stand still, and that more needs to be done.

15:49

Marlyn Glen (North East Scotland) (Lab): I welcome the opportunity to take part in this debate on the report on the public petitions process. The year-long inquiry has been an important piece of work for our uniquely public-facing Public Petitions Committee.

I joined the committee just a year ago and, faced with my first lengthy agenda of new and current petitions, I found it hard to understand the drive to increase the number of petitions further—I will

move on quickly. However, the enthusiasm of current and past members of the committee and of the clerks is catching, and more petitions from a more diverse group of petitioners are to be encouraged. There is confidence that the system will be able to handle an increase in volume.

It is all too easy for members to forget how important it is that people are encouraged to make a real connection with the Scottish Parliament. Ten years on, I know that we all still meet people who are visiting the Parliament for the first time, and are keen not just to look around the building but to engage and participate.

As we have heard, the committee has taken on the role of visiting different parts of Scotland to publicise its work. We have visited schools, where pupils skilfully have presented their petitions. This week, during our outreach visit to Alness academy, a pupil asked about the proportion of petitions that are successfully accepted and adopted. That may be one of the first reactions to the petitions process, but it misses an important point. I worry that too many petitions are rejected or closed, without their goal being attained and with no further action being taken.

However, the connection with the Parliament is also important, in the sense of being part of the democratic process beyond casting a vote in elections. The petitions process allows and encourages members of the public to bring their ideas forward and engage in policy development. Those ideas range from having national suggestion boxes to encouraging the provision of high-standard changing places toilets in town centres for people with profound and multiple learning disabilities

The personal stories that people bring to the committee are often very moving and illustrate their needs much more vividly than any expert paper could. The petitions process also ensures that topical subjects, such as community prisons, are brought to the attention of members. We can too easily forget the effect of policy development on people at a local level. By bringing a petition to Parliament, local community members can explain their concerns, which can be extremely wide ranging. For example, petition PE1150 calls for consideration to be given to whether large prisons that are remote from prisoners' families offer the best way of rehabilitating offenders, and asks whether localised community prisons should be supported to maintain genuinely easy access to family links. The petitioner did not feel that the consultation input during the review on the issue was sufficiently discussed, so they turned to the Public Petitions Committee. I look forward to further discussion on the topic, and perhaps a debate on it.

We know that the petitions process works, because petitioners report that they have such a positive experience. That is the result, to a great degree, of the excellent work of the clerking team, of the convener's treatment of all petitioners, and of committee members' serious consideration of petitions.

The Scottish Parliament is a leader in this field, but we need to update and review procedures regularly to keep pace with, for example, IT innovations.

It is interesting to look at petitions at different levels of government, as some people have already done. One early petition suggested having interparliamentary petitions between the Scottish and United Kingdom Parliaments. Petitions on reserved matters can cause some difficulties. The committee at the time agreed that there were a number of mechanisms by which views expressed in Scotland on reserved matters could be communicated to the Westminster Parliament, and closed the petition.

It is interesting to note that

"One of the fundamental rights of European citizens"

is to

"exercise his right of petition to the European Parliament under Article 194 of the EC Treaty."

However, as John Farquhar Munro, the deputy convener, said, perhaps the most pertinent development for us is that some local councils in Scotland have set up petition systems of their own that are modelled on the Parliament's system. That may allow a much more joined-up approach and help to direct petitions more appropriately and increase awareness of the whole process. At the moment, Renfrewshire Council and Stirling Council—two out of 32 councils—have their own petitions system, but the committee would like to see that replicated across Scotland.

Sadly, as has been said, a key finding from the research that was commissioned was that there was widespread ignorance of the remit of the Parliament as a whole and a lack of understanding of its powers. That is a significant challenge for not only the Public Petitions Committee but the whole Parliament.

The committee report and this debate are important steps towards meeting that challenge. There is an impressively long list of conclusions and action points in the report. I particularly commend the points that are designed to make us more inclusive, such as welcoming petitions in any language, including BSL. There is a real mood to include hard-to-reach groups, and the practical steps that are outlined in the report will help to make that a reality.

15:55

Nigel Don (North East Scotland) (SNP): As I expected, other members have considered the processes of engaging with the public. In the brief moments that I will have this afternoon—my speech might well be constrained by my throat rather than by the clock—I want to consider some of the processes whereby we investigate the petitions that come to us.

I share Marlyn Glen's thought that we usually feel that we have had enough by the time that 5 o'clock on a Tuesday afternoon approaches, but the reality is that we would like to do more. We would like to receive more petitions and we would like to speed up the process of considering them. If we are to do that, we need to look at the system whereby we investigate petitions.

I am grateful to a lady by the name of Sybil Simpson for her suggestion—in an early written submission—that, instead of bringing every petition straight to the committee, a “senior person” from the committee should first look at each petition to see whether it might be pointed in the right direction and to make some initial inquiries. I am not sure who she thought the senior person might be. Clearly, the convener and deputy convener would fit the bill, although I am not sure that they would thank me for suggesting that they consider all petitions before we consider them.

I suggest that one way in which we might operate is to have a pair of committee members—possibly on a rotation basis, but we could surely sort that out—consider each petition. They could consider the issues and do the obvious things, such as writing to the appropriate health board or Government and the various other things that, from considering petitions over the years, we know that the committee automatically does. I suspect that, if a couple of us did that, we would not miss much—although we might miss something—and we would be able to start the process earlier. We would also be in a position to ensure that most petitions were investigated personally, because scheduling a couple of us to talk to the petitioner would be very much easier than trying to get everyone along to a meeting, which we have already established is impossible.

I commend that suggestion as a way forward for the committee. I am concerned that, if we are successful in attracting more petitions, we will be making a rod for our own back. Therefore, I suggest that we need to examine how we deal with petitions.

Finally, like Nanette Milne and others, I pay tribute to the work of the clerks. It is probably fair to say that every parliamentary committee is dependent on its clerks, but I am very conscious that the Public Petitions Committee is

extraordinarily dependent on the good work that is done by our clerks, first in trying to knock the public's views into an acceptable petition and then in steering the petition through our hands. I am grateful to them.

15:58

Bill Butler (Glasgow Anniesland) (Lab): As a relatively new member of the Public Petitions Committee, I have pleasure in taking part in today's debate and in commending our excellent and hard-working team of clerks. Nigel Don is right to say that we would be quite lost without them.

As John Farquhar Munro mentioned, petition PE1065 was the catalyst for the inquiry. The remit of the inquiry was to

“identify and implement measures to improve ... the public petitions process”

so that it meets the needs of petitioners, the committee, the Parliament and public bodies in Scotland. In other words, the committee's goals for the inquiry were first, to increase people's awareness of the public petitions process, and secondly, to improve not only petitioners' participation in that process but what the committee does with petitions when it receives them.

Although increasing the number of petitions must always be balanced against the committee's core responsibility to each petitioner—namely, properly to investigate their petition—I believe that the committee is correct to take the view that is stated in paragraph 42:

“An increase in the number of petitions lodged must not be at the expense of proper and effective scrutiny”.

I acknowledge Nigel Don's suggestion, although there is some danger in it. However, it is worth while and could be explored.

The number of petitions has dropped from its high point during the first two years of the Parliament, although it must be stressed that

“the fluctuation is not drastic.”

That is a charming phrase, which I believe was inserted by the clerks. However, members expressed concern that, predominantly, petitions are still drawn from too narrow a cross-section of Scottish society. That is a problem.

However, research has revealed reasons to be optimistic if not complacent. For example, the research survey that was conducted on behalf of the committee showed that

“petitioning was seen as the most likely method of policy engagement with 89% of ... respondents saying they would sign a petition.”

Indeed, 78 per cent of respondents viewed petitioning

“as a positive way of getting something done and making their voices heard.”

Surely that is the object. Nevertheless, a considerable challenge faces the committee and, indeed, the Parliament in raising awareness of the public petitions process at Holyrood and in encouraging much wider participation in it by all sections of our nation.

We know that the petitions system has had considerable successes down the years since 1999. For example, petition PE223 called on the Parliament to ensure that multiple sclerosis sufferers in Lothian were not denied the opportunity to be prescribed beta interferon, which led the Scottish Executive to announce that the drug would be available to all MS sufferers across Scotland. The success of petition PE1108, by Tina McGeever, on behalf of Mike Gray, guaranteed that cancer sufferers would be treated equitably across Scotland. I had the privilege of listening to Mike Gray make the case for others who, like him, were suffering from terminal illness. I will never forget his humility, dignity and courage, and his commitment to advancing the cause of his fellow citizens. None of those of us who were present will.

Those, and many others, are signal successes of our public petitions system, but although Scotland can be justly proud of them, we as parliamentarians must do more to allow more citizens across our country to make use of that democratic mechanism. A section of the population that has not, as yet, made significant use of public petitions is the young citizens of Scotland. However, there are exceptions. In petition PE1259, one of my constituents, Ryan McLaughlin of Drumchapel, highlights his shine on Scotland campaign, which calls on the Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to produce new guidelines on vitamin D supplementation for children and pregnant women, and to run an awareness campaign highlighting the benefits of vitamin D in combating MS. Ryan's hard work and inventiveness in promoting the petition, with the support of his family, has made an extremely positive impression on many young and not-so-young people across Scotland—I include my good friend Bill Kidd, along with myself, among the not so young. I am hopeful that the Scottish Government will continue to be receptive to the issues that the petition raises, and I look forward to discussing how we can assist with its advancement at our meeting on 4 November.

Despite that fine example of a young school student highlighting an issue of national importance, such instances are still too few and far

between. That is why I am certain that the committee's decision to hold

“a further series of external meetings”

in 2010 is correct. As well as allowing parliamentarians to bring the work of the committee to rural and isolated parts of our country, it will—because of our policy of deliberately holding those meetings in local comprehensive schools—offer a better chance to involve young people.

I believe that that strategy is beginning to work. The two external meetings that I have been able to attend, at Fraserburgh academy and Alness academy—where this week's meeting was held—have been successful. The attendance and participation have been first class. I especially mention the petitions by young school students that have been heard at those events, which covered subjects as diverse as international aid and rural transport. That is evidence that if we make the effort to engage with citizens young and old in their communities, we will get a positive response.

However, we must acknowledge that there is much more to do if we are to achieve maximum accessibility to the process for all the people of Scotland. We must recognise that to reach that objective, we must use modern technology, when that is appropriate.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You should be finishing now, Mr Butler.

Bill Butler: We must all become, especially if we are to succeed in engaging our young citizens, “digital natives”, as one witness said. George Reid, a former Presiding Officer, said—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I am sorry, but you will have to finish now.

Bill Butler: I was just about to praise George Reid, but if you do not want me to do that, I understand.

16:05

John Wilson (Central Scotland) (SNP): As a member of the Public Petitions Committee—I should say a voluntary member of it—it gives me pleasure to speak in this debate. I served on the committee briefly as a substitute, but liked the experience so much that I asked to be a member.

Members will have their own experiences of how the committee deals with petitions. The emphasis of the inquiry into the petitions process was more on the public's perception of the mechanism—hence the reason for a year-long inquiry. The committee's report asks whether the inquiry was needed; the clear answer is yes. That need was even greater given that the committee is regarded

as one of the public's main means of access to the Parliament. The need to engage with the public is paramount.

As other members have stated, three principal issues were considered in the inquiry: the awareness of the existing process, participation levels and the essential role of the scrutiny that the committee undertakes. A significant amount of evidence was submitted during the inquiry, and the committee commissioned research. That followed a well-established principle, which the committee adopted in 2006.

The research study centred on public engagement and highlighted the innovative nature of the model that the committee has used—for example, e-petitions are allowed. Ipsos MORI used qualitative research among the general public as part of the methodology. The research identified a clear link between awareness and knowledge of the petitions system and people's reactions to it. It noted that, once participants in the focus group were informed of the main features of the petitions process, their reactions were fairly positive and they agreed that petitioning would be worth a try.

The fact that a petition that has only one signature can be discussed and commented on needs to be examined. Some people might say that more public support should be required before a petition is brought to the committee.

The inquiry process involved the committee going out to other parts of Scotland, rather than just meeting in the Parliament in Edinburgh. It was agreed that those external meetings would be in the south, west and north of the country. The committee must bear in mind the important aims of openness and transparency, to use two well-worn buzzwords in the modern political lexicon, and a key recommendation from the committee's point of view is that there is a requirement to develop public awareness and, especially, to promote the option of petitioners and others talking to us using videoconferencing. Not surprisingly, the committee also referred to promoting information on the process of public petitioning and meaningful engagement with communities.

I welcome the recommendation that local authorities should introduce petitioning processes. Marlyn Glen mentioned that. Renfrewshire Council and Stirling Council, for example, have taken that forward significantly. Another important political principle is accessibility, and proper decentralisation is vital to ensure that issues are aired and communities are effectively represented. Many petitions that have come before the committee during my membership of it are clearly on matters that could find a focus at a local level.

From the committee's perspective, I welcome the statement from Tricia Marwick on behalf of the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body on how it will support the redevelopment of the e-petition system and the use of other methods of communication with the public.

Soon, more than 1,300 petitions will have come to the Parliament. The public should be allowed to make representations to their Parliament on a range of issues, whether Scottish or international in origin. It is therefore important that petitions are not restricted, especially when it comes to considering devolved or reserved matters.

I appreciate the work that the committee clerks have done in delivering successful events throughout the country, and compliment the Parliament's education unit and broadcasting team, and, in particular, its security staff who have had to follow us around the country to enable external meetings. I welcome the report and have found it interesting to debate the role of the Public Petitions Committee. We must ensure that we have a robust mechanism that is both modern and meaningful so that all the people of Scotland can participate.

16:10

Helen Eadie (Dunfermline East) (Lab): What I like about the report is the fact that it asks over and over again what we can do better. That shows an openness and willingness to change and respond to the needs of our people. In my opinion, that attitude is critical to all that we do.

I was a member of the Public Petitions Committee for eight years, including the first two years when the number of petitions that were processed was at an all-time high. The number has since reduced, but not markedly, as Bill Butler pointed out. I enjoyed those years on the committee very much and had a real enthusiasm for the committee's work. I was the deputy convener in the first session, when John McAllion—that is a name from the past—was the convener and still a Labour MSP. How dare I mention his name?

Over the years, I have observed things really changing as a consequence of the Public Petitions Committee. Many petitions made a real difference to our lives, such as the petition from the communities of Saline and Blairingone, in my constituency and in the Ochil constituency of George Reid. The committee undertook an inquiry into that subject, as well as others. It no longer undertakes inquiries, but at that time we found it interesting and illustrative to do so, and it made a difference. However, I understand the reasons why the committee changed its direction and decided not to undertake inquiries any more.

Another action that really made a difference was the closure of the Carntyne abattoir, the campaign for which was spearheaded by Dorothy-Grace Elder, a member for Glasgow, who took the petition to the European Parliament. That resulted in the European Parliament's public petitions committee visiting Glasgow and insisting that the abattoir be closed.

Then there was the ship-to-ship transfer of oil on the River Forth. I took a petition to the European Parliament on that.

All those things combined over the years, along with many others, to make a difference to the people whom we represent. I even remember a petition from a Scot who was living in Canada. That really surprised me.

Then we had a meeting of the Public Petitions Committee in Selkirk, where more than 300 people turned out for one of the many public meetings that were held by the committee.

Over the past year, several high-profile petitions have been lodged, including the petition on cancer treatment drugs, which Bill Butler mentioned; the petition on mandatory custodial sentencing for knife carrying; the petition on school bus safety; and the petition on the right of healthy gay and bisexual men to donate blood. Without individuals lodging petitions on such matters, based on their experiences, would the issues have been considered by policy makers?

A vital aspect of the committee's work, however, is the management of public expectations. That involves being honest about what people can expect, understanding how they can see the process work for them and closing the loop so that they know the outcome, whether it is good or bad. It is all about empowering people to bring their petition to the Parliament and giving them the opportunity to put something on the agenda. The petitions system provides that direct route into the Parliament for citizens who want their issues to be considered.

The way in which the public interacts with the Public Petitions Committee and the Parliament is crucial. The biggest challenge for the committee and all MSPs, as Marlyn Glen and others have said, is to involve the groups in society who are underrepresented—disabled people, people from ethnic minorities and women. When I read the report, I was encouraged by the words of George McGuinness, the chair of the Baillieston community reference group. At the committee's meeting in Easterhouse, he said:

"Politicians keep saying that it is the people's Parliament. One easy solution is to bring the Parliament to the people, instead of us having to go to the Parliament all the time. I applaud what the committee is doing today. I never thought that I would sit in a room with MSPs, ministers and people

like that. It is the people's Parliament, so we must start bringing the Parliament to the people by having much more of what has happened today. Thank you."—[*Official Report, Public Petitions Committee*, 27 January 2009; c 1413.]

I am sure that that chimes with the views of many people across Scotland.

I know that delivering that sort of involvement has been a huge task for the committee clerks and the members of the committee. I used to be quite awestruck at the work of the clerks to the Public Petitions Committee, not only because of what they did but because of the fact that they did that job part time, as they worked for another committee as well. How they undertook that huge volume of work, I do not know. The previous committee clerks and the current ones deserve plaudits.

We read in the report that, at various meetings, the committee ran out of seats for the public. That happened in Selkirk and Easterhouse, for example. I attended a Public Petitions Committee meeting in Paul Martin's constituency that was held in a huge gymnasium and, even there, the committee ran out of seats.

Many interesting and valuable pieces of work have been done.

I thank the chamber for listening to my input. I think that the work of the Public Petitions Committee is hugely important. I applaud everyone who has enthusiasm for it and wish them well in the future. I hope that the committee will go on to win again the awards that it has won before.

16:16

Anne McLaughlin (Glasgow) (SNP): The founding principles of the Public Petitions Committee are centred on transparency, openness and integrity. That is why the committee has a worldwide reputation that encourages people from legislatures around the world to engage with it and consider how they might develop their own petitions set-up.

The ability to deliver results is a defining characteristic of our committee. It has paved the way for some of this Parliament's most defining moments, as members have heard, and has provided the basis for some incredibly important debates and even legislation.

Now that we have established ourselves it is, indeed, time to consider how we can develop the committee. The discovery in Dr Carman's research that the average petitioner was older, more middle-class, better educated and living in a more affluent area than the average Scot gave us something to get our teeth into.

I say "us" but, of course, that process started before I found myself in Parliament and on the

committee. At this point, therefore, I would like to pay tribute to my predecessor in Parliament and on the committee, the late Bashir Ahmad MSP, who I understand played a significant role in advising the committee on how it might better engage with the black and minority ethnic community.

The committee had to look beyond the average petitioner—not that we want to discourage anyone, average or otherwise, as we recognise the fact that, often, a petition from someone whom we view as being an average petitioner can raise issues that affect people from other groups more than they affect that particular individual.

As others have said, our focus was on engaging with marginalised groups, including young people, people with disabilities and members of the black and minority ethnic community.

As other members have gone into some detail about the conclusions of the report, I thought that it might be worth considering what individual parliamentarians can take from the report and how we can each become more open and accessible. Of course, the best way to do that is to find out what we are doing that makes us inaccessible, and the best way to determine that is simply to do what the committee did, and talk to people.

At the Public Petitions Committee's meeting at Fraserburgh academy, a pupil told us how intimidating they found the way in which the tables were set up—including, apparently, the use of tablecloths—and said that they would appreciate something in their own setting, aimed at them. In response, as members have heard, the committee decided to action a special young people's meeting of the Public Petitions Committee, at which only young people's petitions would be discussed. I do not want to look at the committee clerks when I say this, but I am sure that we will think about the set-up of the room and the use of tablecloths.

A campaigner for people with learning disabilities, who has learning disabilities herself, told me that she found the set-up of MSPs' surgeries intimidating. She described sitting with a queue of others in a draughty school hall and seeing the MSP sweeping in. We think that we are approachable, but we need to work with people such as that constituent of mine to establish what will make them feel less intimidated.

The Public Petitions Committee is also considering the possibility of holding a special meeting for people with hearing impairments, at which we would provide British Sign Language interpreters. In the spirit of consensus and opening up the Parliament to marginalised groups, MSPs might think about holding cross-party surgeries,

and pooling our resources to bring in people such as BSL interpreters.

The Public Petitions Committee will also produce a new leaflet that will be made available in various languages and formats. I have carried out a consultation in two languages, and am in the process of setting up a multilingual surgery, with interpreters available for a number of languages. I appreciate that funding might be an issue and that, as the report accepts, we will never reach everyone. However, members who represent areas in which a number of people speak English as a second language might find such action worth considering.

I believe that people want to engage with us. During one of the committee's evidence sessions, it was suggested that part of the problem was that people no longer found the petitions system exciting. It is true that we who have known the system all along might no longer find it exciting, but all my experience and almost all the evidence that the committee received suggests that when people know about the petitions system, they find it relevant and exciting. The challenge lies in finding ways to ensure that people know about it.

One of the most important things that we have done in that regard is to engage with new technology, of which the most significant aspect is the Public Petitions Committee blog. As a prolific blogger myself, I pay tribute to the committee clerks not only for setting up the blog, which does not take terribly long, but for maintaining it and keeping it dynamic, relevant and up to date, which—as I know only too well—can be extremely time consuming. Although the committee has committed to holding more external meetings, we cannot, as Nanette Milne pointed out, go everywhere. However, the blog can. It is not only people in Scotland who can and do access the blog: this week, it has been visited by people from Australia, the Ukraine, France, the USA and Belgium.

We have a job to do in breaking down barriers and keeping alive the founding principles of transparency, openness and integrity. I welcome Tricia Marwick's acknowledgment that the Public Petitions Committee has done a great service for the whole Parliament, and I believe that all 129 of us, as MSPs, should familiarise ourselves with the report's findings.

As Helen Eadie noted, Mr George McGuinness, in applauding the visit of the committee to Easterhouse, said:

"I never thought that I would sit in a room with MSPs, ministers and people like that. It is the people's Parliament, so we must start bringing the Parliament to the people by having much more of what has happened today."—[*Official Report, Public Petitions Committee, 27 January 2009; c 1413.*]

If we do more of that—and of what the report recommends—as individuals, as committees and as a Parliament, our constituents will in time rightly view MSPs and ministers not as “people like that”, but as people like them—and then it truly will be the people’s Parliament.

16:22

Jim Hume: The debate has highlighted the importance of openness, transparency and accountability in the Scottish Parliament, and the need for people to hold organisations, democratic processes, ministers and the Parliament to account—a point that John Farquhar Munro made very well.

We can truly say that the Scottish Parliament is totally accessible because—as Bruce Crawford said—there is no need for MSP sponsorship, which makes the whole process entirely fair and equitable. It is welcome that the committee recognises the need for constant review, and I congratulate members—and the committee clerks, whom everyone has congratulated—on their hard work.

It is even more important that the review was effectively given a kick start by Young Scot, which submitted a petition on ways to increase the engagement of young people in the democratic process. Marlyn Glen echoed that view and Anne McLaughlin discussed the need to engage with everybody, including ethnic minorities.

I particularly applaud the committee’s commitment, as Nanette Milne mentioned, to hold external meetings—not least in Duns in my region—because that is crucial in bringing the Parliament to the people. The key issue is to reach young people in particular, and I look forward to seeing how that aspect of the committee’s work develops in conjunction with education and community partnerships.

I spent half an hour this morning with Dunbar grammar, and I saw at first hand—as anyone who watches a school group in session with the Parliament’s education service will see—the value of that work in opening up the democratic process to young people. It is vital to extend that work, and I whole-heartedly welcome the committee’s research into who uses the petitions system, general public awareness and what can be done to extend that to all communities throughout Scotland to ensure that all demographic groups are represented. I believe that that work can be undertaken with local groups and organisations, including community councils, which play a huge role in communities.

People are often put off from coming to the Scottish Parliament to make a representation because it is somehow seen as a huge, inanimate

organisation. For the past two summers, I have conducted a tour of all the main rural shows in the South of Scotland, including some of the local festivals. When I embarked on this now yearly schedule, I was enthusiastic, but at the same time I had a feeling of the unknown. Would people be interested in learning about the Scottish Parliament, my work for the South of Scotland or, indeed, how they can lobby for policy changes? People are interested. They are out there, and it is our job to make ourselves available to them. That is why the Public Petitions Committee’s work is so important.

Many members mentioned the use of technology to reach people. It is essential that we keep up with that. Tricia Marwick mentioned podcasts and other events, but we also heard about Twitter, Delicious, Digg, Facebook and Bebo. However, use of the technology must be targeted, and as the report states, the benefits should be established at the outset.

My view is that face-to-face contact is always the best way to engage with individuals, schools, local groups, community councils, voluntary groups and so on. It would be good to see the Public Petitions Committee conducting some kind of summer roadshow each year. I do not know whether time could be found for that, but my experiences as a fresh MSP have given me invaluable information about the people I represent and what they want from their MSPs. Most important, my tours have given my constituents a link to their MSP and broken down a perception of not quite knowing what the Scottish Parliament does.

We heard good contributions from Nigel Don, who was interested in the system of investigations and proposed speeding up the process by pairing up MSPs to scrutinise petitions, and Bill Butler, who sounded a note of caution and said that we must ensure that all petitions are properly scrutinised. I am sure that we will find a way to do that. I was interested to hear John Wilson say that he volunteered. I hope that there was no inference that the rest of the committee members were press-ganged into being on the committee. I am sure that that is not the case.

In closing, I reiterate that Scotland has a good, thorough and accessible public petitions system, but as the committee and the likes of Helen Eadie have said, improvements can always be made. We must always strive to ensure that all communities in Scotland are aware of the tool that is available to them and know that they, as individuals or groups, can hold the Parliament to account.

In turn, we as MSPs should acknowledge that we must never rest on our laurels. The committee’s report focuses on the public petitions

system, but its conclusions about reaching our audience can surely be applied to each of us as an elected representative. The Scottish people need to be—and I hope are—proud of their first Parliament in 300 years, but we must also give them reason to be proud by serving them as we were elected to do.

16:28

Jamie McGrigor (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I am pleased to sum up for the Scottish Conservatives. Like others, I pay tribute to the committee members, the clerks and other committee support staff, all of whom played their part in producing the positive, comprehensive and pragmatic report that we are debating.

As the minister and others said, the Parliament's Public Petitions Committee has been one of the real success stories of devolution. The fact that other Parliaments and countries have looked into replicating our model speaks volumes about its success. I am not surprised that the report points out that the committee provides a real and effective route into the Parliament for a wide range of organisations and individuals. Members have mentioned many individual success stories that arose from particular petitions.

Constituents and groups in my region, the Highlands and Islands, have made significant use of the committee, submitting petitions on a diverse range of issues including the cost of ferries, the costs that students in the Highlands face in travelling to events in the central belt, public transport costs for students, residential care places for the elderly, and the campaign to upgrade the A82. I regret to say that the petition on the latter has produced a few words but not much action from the Government.

Many have spoken positively about their experience of the Public Petitions Committee. Jim Hume mentioned the electronic identification of sheep, which is an important issue for people who live in rural areas. The public petitions process is a great way of getting across issues that greatly affect people's everyday lives. People like getting their voices heard in the Parliament, especially on such important issues.

At the same time, it is right for our committees—and indeed for all parts of the Parliament—to keep thinking about how we might provide a better service to the people of Scotland and how we can reach out to and engage all sections of the community, including those who have not yet become involved. The Public Petitions Committee gives ordinary people confidence that issues of importance to their daily lives and localities will be articulated in the Parliament.

I am particularly pleased with some of the report's many and varied conclusions. As a Highlands and Islands MSP, I am delighted that it commits the committee to holding a further series of external meetings in various parts of Scotland and, where possible, in locations that no other parliamentary committee has visited. I hope that some of those meetings can be held in the remote, rural and island parts of my region, where constituents can feel that Edinburgh is another world—or, indeed, on a different planet.

I was interested to read about the efforts to reach out to individuals and groups from sections of our society, such as some of our ethnic minority communities, who have not yet made as much use of the Public Petitions Committee as others have. Although I know that ensuring greater black and ethnic minority political involvement is an issue not just for individual committees but for all of us, at all levels, across the Scottish political sector, I think that it is right that leaflets about the committee should be readily available in Arabic, traditional Chinese, Bengali, Urdu and Punjabi and I look forward to their publication later this year. As many will agree, the public petitions process could be a route for minority communities to gain what one would hope would be a positive and constructive taster in the Scottish parliamentary process and to become even more engaged and take more of a part. We certainly want our minority communities to make full use of what should be one of the most accessible avenues into the Scottish Parliament.

Nanette Milne admirably outlined the committee's important role in outreaching to young people and local communities, and Marlyn Glen's point about a council petitions system was well made. Although council meetings are open to the public, people cannot contribute to them or ask questions, and a petitions system would allow for more democracy. Nigel Don made a good speech, although I do not believe that having a reporter system for committees would necessarily be a good thing.

Helen Eadie highlighted the welcome fact that debates in the Parliament had been initiated by petitions on cancer drugs and knife crime, while Anne McLaughlin was correct to mention the increasing importance of new technology and blogs. However, I wonder whether having cross-party surgeries would not simply lead to cross politicians.

With regard to our disabled citizens, I am pleased that a new British Sign Language version of the committee video will be produced in consultation with the Scottish Council on Deafness and others and launched later this year. That is another important and very positive addition. The committee is right to state very clearly that it will make whatever arrangements are necessary to

accommodate the submission of a petition in BSL and to meet the needs of deaf and blind constituents, who will welcome the new leaflet in Braille.

The report, which will be welcomed by and beyond the chamber, contains many practical and sensible recommendations that I look forward to seeing implemented as we seek to build on the very real progress and success that have been achieved. We must ensure that more people can get involved in the public petitions process and raise the kind of real concerns to themselves and their communities that would struggle to be raised if we did not have the Public Petitions Committee.

16:34

Michael McMahon: We have had a good debate, which has demonstrated how highly MSPs value the public petitions process. It has also demonstrated that, in debates on issues on which a lot of consensus exists even before we start, it is a good idea for members to leave something out of their opening speech if they know that they will be required to wind up.

I agree with colleagues who rightly noted the system's positive aspects. John Farquhar Munro outlined the hard work that the committee has undertaken on engagement. It is right that we should thank the clerks whenever the opportunity arises for their hard work in ensuring that MSPs have the opportunity to undertake that engagement. Bruce Crawford mentioned the absence of a requirement for the involvement of MSPs in our system, which is unlike the petitions system at Westminster, where MPs must be involved. The committee took that important step some time ago, as it was found that too many petitions reflected the desire of an MSP to exploit a local situation to grandstand, rather than help a local community engage in the policy process.

Nanette Milne and Jim Hume highlighted the range of petitions that the committee has addressed and rightly looked forward to consider how we can give access to people so that they raise even more issues for consideration, even if that creates greater consternation for Marlyn Glen. Marlyn Glen identified an important issue in the report and argued that, if local authorities were to set up petitions systems, the petitions that come to the Parliament might be more focused.

Tricia Marwick and Bruce Crawford helpfully outlined how the SPCB and the Government intend to help expand public engagement, which is welcome. Nigel Don addressed the process of consideration and investigation and made valid points about the danger of making rods for the committee's back and about getting the balance right in meeting the public's needs without

overburdening the petitions system. That point was driven home by Bill Butler who, typically, put the interests of the public to the fore in considering where that balance should lie. John Wilson proved beyond any doubt that the willing horse gets the most work. My fellow business managers and I appreciate it whenever we find a member who is willing to volunteer and take on responsibilities.

Helen Eadie talked about change and referred to how John McAllion changed from being a Labour MSP. I am not sure that I welcome that particular type of change through the petitions system. Anne McLaughlin raised the important point that we need to take each petition on its merits, even if the source is narrower than we would like. She is absolutely right that we must focus on taking the Parliament to the people.

We agree on the positive aspects of the report and the petitions system, but we must recognise that flaws in the system remain and have not been addressed adequately. The main flaw that was highlighted in a report that was produced during my convenership of the committee is that the system is used mostly by people who are already politically active and that the typical petitioner is male, white, middle class and well educated. Several members rightly pointed to that. However, the fact that the issue has not been resolved should not lead to despondency; instead, it should make us all aware of how much remains to be done to make the process genuinely inclusive.

The consultative steering group identified that the Parliament must engage with groups in Scotland that are too often excluded from the democratic process. The petition that Young Scot lodged in June 2007 was therefore apposite in calling for the use of social media, online technology and other methods that should generate greater involvement with at least one of those groups—the important one of young people in Scotland.

During my time on the committee, I always enjoyed considering petitions from young people, especially school students. It was no accident that the 1,000th petition came from All Saints secondary school in Glasgow. That petition was heard as part of a civic participation meeting in one of the city's most deprived areas, so it is hardly surprising that the subjects that were covered that day related closely to the concerns that impact most on such communities—health, crime and financial support for hard-pressed families. That the committee had to get out of the Parliament building and physically meet in the midst of a deprived community to hear those petitions is perhaps indicative of the committee's problem in reaching groups in society that feel distant from our proceedings.

As paragraph 88 of the report notes, the innovative approach that the Parliament sought from the outset “has perhaps been lacking”. That part of the report relates to the use of information and communication technology, but it could just as well refer to the Parliament’s general difficulty in encouraging hard-to-reach groups to engage. The debate has shown that the Public Petitions Committee is well aware of that challenge. The test for the rest of the Parliament is to support the committee’s efforts on public engagement and social inclusion.

The report contains good proposals for the use of social networking sites and web technology and on how to develop further the outreach strategy. We rightly continue to pride ourselves on having been at the forefront on civic participation since 1999, but we must now look forward, and the report will stand us in good stead in our efforts to do so. Once again, I commend it to the Parliament.

16:39

Bruce Crawford: Since everybody else has been handing out thanks, perhaps I should start by offering thanks to the committee convener before he even gets to his feet. I look forward to Frank McAveety’s contribution.

John Farquhar Munro laid out well the committee’s perspective in its inquiry and described the three elements of the committee’s work. John Farquhar Munro has a passion for public engagement, particularly when it comes to extending a Highland welcome. I look forward to meeting him some day in Skye, not only for that Highland welcome, but perhaps for some of his famous Highland hospitality.

Michael McMahon described well his perspective on the importance of the committee process and how we must continue to develop it. When he mentioned Twitter, I was tempted to intervene so that he could explain to me how it works.

Anne McLaughlin made interesting points about how we must remove the barriers to people’s engagement with us. She mentioned several innovative ideas that might make it easier for ordinary people to contribute successfully.

Tricia Marwick responded positively on behalf of the SPCB and described clearly its commitment and support. A great many good points were made by members; I will try to respond to some of them, but it will be impossible to mention them all.

On behalf of the business managers union, I say how much I will enjoy voting for John Wilson as my politician of the year. His commitment and self-sacrifice are beyond doubt. Perhaps business

managers do not always need to send e-mails to get what they want—we need only have people such as John Wilson on our side.

It is safe to say that some genuine issues, on which we can all agree, were raised in today’s debate. First, the petitions process has a unique function. Its workload is set not by Government legislation or the need for public scrutiny, but by issues that are brought to the Parliament by the Scottish public. The committee was the first in the world to accept e-petitions, which shows the Parliament’s progressive and innovative approach. The system has gained an international reputation, providing a model for other Parliaments and showcasing our innovative approach around the globe. It is considerably more advanced and more appropriate to the needs of modern democracy than is the archaic Westminster system.

In the past few days, in meeting John Bercow, the new Speaker of the Westminster Parliament, I have been impressed by the way in which he has asked questions about how we do business here and by how he has been trying to learn from how this Parliament—as well as others further afield—operates. I hope that through the process with which John Bercow is involved not only will Westminster learn from us, but we will have the chance to learn from others about how we can improve, adapt and make things here better in the future.

Bill Butler rightly touched on how the petitions process has produced genuine change. If I remember correctly, he spoke specifically about Mr and Mrs McQuire’s petition on the prescription of beta interferon for MS sufferers. The then Scottish Executive responded to that petition and allowed all MS sufferers in Scotland to benefit. Bill Butler described that process eloquently and with feeling, as members might expect him to on such issues.

Other petitions deserve to be mentioned, such as the one on the Scottish burned children’s club that sought to change building regulations, which happened in 2006. That example and others that have been offered by members around the chamber show clearly how the Government and Parliament of the day have responded to people’s needs that are brought to them.

There was a petition from the sma folk of Gillies hill, a group in my constituency, which engaged successfully with the Public Petitions Committee on numerous occasions to try to keep alive an issue in its backyard. The pertinent questions that were asked by the Public Petitions Committee of various organisations, as well as the Government, were helpful in allowing the group to see its petition to a successful conclusion.

The process is essential. It provides a direct route into Parliament for people who want issues to be considered and it makes an important contribution to the implementation of the consultative steering group principles, which I mentioned at the beginning of the debate, of openness and responsiveness.

As part of its deliberations, the committee raised the possibility of having an annual debate on a petition in the chamber. I would very much welcome that; I am always willing to discuss securing more debating time for issues that arise from the petitions process. Regular debates on petitions would boost the committee's profile, promote its work and enable it to play a greater role in influencing opinion and policy. I look forward to more discussion around that.

The Government welcomes the committee's proposal to formally alert Government officials to new petitions when they are lodged. That will increase our awareness of issues that are coming forward and enable us to deal more proactively with the petitions once we receive them.

Over the past year—this reflects the committee's direction of travel—the Government has taken a number of steps to improve its internal processes for the handling of petitions, including setting up a tracker system to monitor responses. I will continue to seek further improvements within the Government in conjunction with the committee and its able clerks, who have been rightly applauded for what they do.

A number of members raised the issue of petitions being put to local councils. Councils are independent corporate bodies in their own right and it is up to them to determine whether a local petitions process would be appropriate in their local circumstances. We heard two good examples from Marlyn Glen. One of them was from my constituency of Stirling, which has a Scottish National Party council. The other was from Renfrewshire, where a local petitions system is working. Such good practice should be shared and other local authorities might look to see how they could bring it on board in their localities.

There was a fair bit of discussion about how IT could be better utilised. I look forward to seeing the benefit of new technologies. Social marketing tools can also be used; they can go hand in hand with social marketing strategy. I would be interested to see how the committee plans to develop that aspect over the coming year. We might want to return to that should the committee want to have an annual debate. That would be a good thing to have a debate on; it would allow a lot more parliamentarians to understand what is going on.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Alasdair Morgan): The minister should conclude now.

Bruce Crawford: I am very grateful for the opportunity to contribute to this fine debate and I very much look forward to hearing now from Frank McAveety.

16:48

Mr Frank McAveety (Glasgow Shettleston) (Lab): It is always nice to get such sweet inviting words from the Minister for Parliamentary Business.

On behalf of the committee members, I thank the clerks to the committee not just for the hard work that they have undertaken in the review of the petitions process but for their hard work generally.

There has been much mention of history and of why we are here. In a perverse and curious way, we are here only because of what would be termed petitions. The Chartists' petitions for universal suffrage in the 19th century have ensured that we have parliamentary democracy as we understand it, and the Scottish covenant petitioning for Scottish sovereignty and decision making created the opportunity for the Parliament to be established. My colleague Michael McMahon even invoked Magna Carta as the first model for a petition. I am reminded of that wonderful moment in "Twelve Angry Men" when Tony Hancock berates the other jurors by saying:

"Does Magna Carta mean nothing to you. Did she die in vain?"

What we really want to ask is whether the review process is going to die in vain. What we have heard in contributions from current members of the committee, members who served on it in the past as convener and deputy convener and various other contributors is a sense that we want to do better.

This is the 10th anniversary of this institution. I know that it is hard to believe from looking at me that I was 10 37 years ago, in the heady days of 1972. Ten is an important age because children who are 10 are probably in their final year of primary school and thinking about what they will do when they move up to the bigger school. We have done a lot of the primary development work for what the Parliament can achieve. Over the next period, we will have passionate arguments about Scotland's future constitutional direction. Interesting as that will be, we must ensure that the process that we have will make a difference in the here and now, even if we have different perspectives on what the long-term destination should be.

The fact that we have some fundamental questions to ask demonstrates appreciation of the committee's work and of all those who contributed to it. Who is the petitions process for? It is not for parliamentarians. Many parliamentarians use it effectively and that will continue to be the case, but the primary objective should be to ensure that the public participate, have the chance to participate and, in the words of those who instituted the Parliament, share the power with those of us who have the privilege to be elected members.

How do we share that power? One of the key challenges that our committee has to address and will continue to address is that too many folk from ordinary communities are still excluded from participation. We have heard references to the people who maximise their participation. That is understandable, given the opportunities that those individuals have to ensure that their voices are heard. How do we ensure that the voices of young people are heard more effectively? How do we ensure that we hear the voices of folk from ordinary circumstances, who are perhaps not as well educated and who do not have the benefit of understanding how to go through the inevitable bureaucracy? We need to continue to work on that, and we have come up with some recommendations, on which I will touch later.

Our national poet also said that we need

"To see ourselves as others see us!"

It is worth while considering how the petitions process—particularly the way in which we pioneered the role of e-democracy in it—is viewed internationally. Anne McLaughlin touched on how, through new technological developments, other individuals express views on the process. However, we cannot rest on our laurels. We need constantly to reinvent ourselves, redirect ourselves and ask ourselves in the chamber, in the corporate body and through the Presiding Officer's staff how we can maximise the committee's effectiveness even more.

Wherever we go in the world, including throughout Scotland, people recognise the process as a model that it is worth not only preserving and protecting but nourishing and developing. It is important that we try to do that over the next period. There are many models for doing that. We may not always agree and we may not always get the resources that we look for, but we need to ensure that the 130-odd petitions that we receive each year are moved on effectively.

There are three Es in the process: the entry point for a petition; the experience that the petitioner has as the petition journeys its way through the Parliament; and the exit strategy for the petition. The last E relates to whether the

petition has changed policy, whether it has helped the petitioner to address their concern and whether we have learned something and have a much better collective understanding of the concerns that a petitioner raised. That is important.

We need to invest in the petitions process. I know that that is a difficult plea to make because of the resources that will be available for public work over the next few years, but our petitions process—particularly the e-petitions process—is not as effective as it should be. We know from the evidence that was taken in the information sessions that people feel that it should be much swifter. We also know that, as we speak, technology continues to develop at a pace that will outstrip what we can do. Therefore, we need to try a wee bit more to ensure that the resources that we invest make a real difference over the next few years. We want the next 10 years to be as effective as the initial 10, if not more so.

In the discussions that we have had with the youngsters on many of our outreach visits, which will continue over the next period, we have tried to identify ways of involving them in the petitions process through technology. We have launched the blog. Those members who are more blog savvy have already navigated it, but I recommend it as something with which we can engage. It gives an instant response—good or bad. At times, we will get positive responses and, at other times, not so positive responses. In fact, we got a fantastic response the other day, although I would say that given that it said:

"The convener was excellent and was a model for dealing with the complete spectrum of attendees from schoolchildren to adults with passionate causes."

I say that not to draw attention to myself—I already have an ego that is as wide as the Clyde—but because of the efforts of the committee in trying to identify ways in which to work with young people, including at Alness academy a couple of days ago. The committee needs to ensure that we develop new technologies such as podcasting. We expect to make available a podcast facility in the very near future.

Youngsters identified another positive way in which to develop the petitions process by suggesting that people should be allowed to text their support for a petition. A vast number of people take texting as a given in communicating with one another and with family members. Surely we can find a way of ensuring that texting is connected into Parliament systems.

There are a number of ways in which the committee can take forward strategies using conventional communication methods. I welcome Tricia Marwick's contribution on behalf of the corporate body in that regard. I refer to initiatives

such as community outreach and the community partnership pilot, in which the Parliament is trying to communicate with groups that feel excluded or that have not participated in the process so far.

This week, our education outreach work was committed to ensuring that youngsters in primary and secondary school participated in the work of the committee. I hope that the youngsters will follow through on that in project work at school. There are many ways in which we can communicate and publicise our work and make the process more accessible and meaningful. In that regard, I welcome what Bruce Crawford said.

I encourage local authorities throughout Scotland to engage in the petitions process, which two authorities have done so far. I recognise the right of authorities to take that decision. I urge authorities that have considered and rejected the idea to reconsider it and I hope that those that have yet to consider the matter will do so in the near future.

I welcome what Bruce Crawford said about finding chamber time for Public Petitions Committee debates. Over the past year, we have tried to develop different ways of working and I would welcome dialogue with the Minister for Parliamentary Business on taking forward that work.

It is important that, over the next few weeks, the committee will look at further ways in which to include young people in the petitions process. We hope to work with petitioners such as Young Scot, members of the Scottish Youth Parliament and other organisations to take on board the views of young people.

The purpose of the review was to ensure that we create more choice for petitioners, make the process more accessible and provide greater information on how to petition the Parliament. More important, we wanted to find ways for people to engage with the decision makers on the Public Petitions Committee and other elected members at constituency and regional list level. We will ensure that we develop that process over the next period of time.

There will, of course, be major, passionate debates on the constitutional future of Scotland, which will be shaped and defined by our political experience. We are here because we recognise that the Parliament can make a difference to the lives of the people of Scotland. We have heard from ordinary members how the petitions process has made a difference to their lives. From our duties as parliamentarians, we know that the petitions process has assisted us in resolving concerns.

I have one final set of questions for the chamber. If we did not have a public petitions

system, would we introduce one? The answer is that we would. Given that we have such a system, do we cherish it? I think that we do. Should we improve the system? I think that we should. That should be the objective of all members of the Scottish Parliament.

Point of Order

16:59

Elizabeth Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. Can you confirm whether you have received any request from the Parliamentary Bureau for the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning to make a statement to the Parliament on the change to class-size regulations? A major policy announcement has been made today; will Parliament have the opportunity to scrutinise it in the normal way?

The Presiding Officer (Alex Fergusson): I point out to the member that it is for the Government, not the Parliamentary Bureau, to make such a request. However, I can confirm that to date I have received no such request.

Business Motion

17:00

The Presiding Officer (Alex Fergusson): The next item of business is consideration of business motion S3M-4904, in the name of Bruce Crawford, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, setting out a business programme.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees the following programme of business—

Wednesday 30 September 2009

2.30 pm Time for Reflection

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

followed by SPCB Question Time

2.50 pm Economy, Energy and Tourism Committee Debate: 7th Report 2009: Determining and delivering on Scotland's energy future

followed by Business Motion

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5.00 pm Decision Time

followed by Members' Business

Thursday 1 October 2009

9.15 am Parliamentary Bureau Motions

followed by Local Government and Communities Committee Debate: 12th Report 2009: Equal Pay in Local Government

11.40 am General Question Time

12 noon First Minister's Question Time

2.15 pm Themed Question Time
Rural Affairs and the Environment;
Justice and Law Officers

2.55 pm Scottish Government Debate: Role of Colleges in the Economic Recovery

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5.00 pm Decision Time

followed by Members' Business

Wednesday 7 October 2009

2.30 pm Time for Reflection

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

followed by Scottish Government Business

followed by Business Motion

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5.00 pm Decision Time

followed by Members' Business

Thursday 8 October 2009

9.15 am Parliamentary Bureau Motions
followed by Scottish Government Business
11.40 am General Question Time
12 noon First Minister's Question Time
2.15 pm Themed Question Time
Finance and Sustainable Growth
2.55 pm Scottish Government Business
followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions
5.00 pm Decision Time
followed by Members' Business—[Bruce
Crawford.]

Motion agreed to.

Decision Time

17:00

The Presiding Officer (Alex Fergusson):
There is just one question to be put as a result of today's business. The question is, that motion S3M-4770, in the name of Frank McAveety, on the inquiry into the public petitions process, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament notes the conclusions contained in the Public Petitions Committee's 3rd Report, 2009 (Session 3): *Inquiry into the public petitions process* (SP Paper 300).

Scottish Bible Society (Bicentenary)

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Trish Godman): The final item of business today is a members' business debate on motion S3M-4453, in the name of Dave Thompson, on the bicentenary of the Scottish Bible Society.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament notes that 2009 is the bicentenary of the Scottish Bible Society (SBS); applauds the work of the SBS over the past 200 years in taking the bible into the world, including Scotland, and in promoting its use in all aspects of national life, including family, work, church, health, education and elsewhere; commends the innovative and creative ways that the SBS has developed to deliver the bible's message of peace, hope, love and transformation to societies that would otherwise lack access; highlights the contribution that the bible has made and will continue to make to countries throughout the world, including Scotland, as a sure foundation on which to build a strong and sustainable society, and wishes the SBS success in partnering with the Bible Society of Brazil to convert a bus for the north east of the country to provide on-the-spot medical and dental treatment as well as a sheltered scripture-learning space, which will help to foster community inclusion and belonging.

17:02

Dave Thompson (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): I am delighted that the powers that be agreed to this debate and that I have the privilege to propose this motion of congratulation on the bicentenary of the Scottish Bible Society.

The Scottish Bible Society, which was originally known as the Edinburgh Bible Society, was formed in 1809 less than a mile from here. It has since gone from strength to strength and is now active all over the world. The society is not linked to any one denomination but seeks to promote the Bible with people regardless of any church connection. That is one of its strengths.

In preparing for the debate, I thought that it would be appropriate to explain the purpose of the Scottish Bible Society. I can do no better than use the words of the society's president, Lord Mackay of Clashfern, a man after my own heart, to whom I had the pleasure of listening a fortnight ago at the Kingsview Christian centre in Inverness. In his introduction to the bicentenary issue of *Word@Work*, Lord Mackay said:

"The Apostle Peter had many wonderful experiences but one of the most outstanding must have been when, with Jesus and James and John, he heard the voice from heaven. 'This is my Son whom I love, with him I am well pleased.'

Towards the end of his life, recalling this experience in his second letter to believers, he said 'And we have the word of the prophets made more certain, and you will do well to pay attention to it, as to a light shining in a dark

place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts.'"

Lord Mackay concluded:

"This 'more certain word' is the scripture, the Bible. What a privilege the Scottish Bible Society has enjoyed for 200 years providing this light to many parts of the earth as well as here in Scotland."

This light is a message of peace, hope, love and transformation that has relevance to all aspects of national life, including family, work, health and education. It is all the more important in an age that is blighted by addictions, greed and selfishness and that has seen the erosion of community and the rise of the cult of individualism, for which we are all counting the cost.

Unlike a millstone around your neck, the Bible does not stop people from doing what they need to do; it helps them to do it. There is no doubt that it has contributed greatly to the life of Scotland, and that it is a sure foundation on which to build a strong and sustainable society.

We need only look at our language—be it Gaelic, Scots or English—to realise just how embedded the scriptures are in our lives, although most people think that that is just an old wives' tale. They do not realise what an influence the Bible has had and how often they quote from its pages every day.

I wonder how many members noticed the use of biblical phrases in my speech so far—or have I just been casting my pearls before swine? Excluding the quotes from Lord Mackay, there were seven phrases: "the powers that be", "gone from strength to strength", "a man after my own heart", "counting the cost", "millstone around your neck", "old wives' tale" and, of course, "casting my pearls before swine". See if you can spot some more in the rest of my speech—there might be a wee test at the end of it.

As I have said, the Scottish Bible Society is active all over the world, and a little bird told me that the society began to provide translations in Nigeria in 1862 and Malawi in 1884. It expanded into China in 1863, Japan in 1875 and Korea in the 1880s. Those activities laid the foundation for today's active churches in all those countries and many more.

The society does not just provide scriptures; it also tries to help with medical facilities, for instance. That brings us to the Brazil project, which is the baby of Elaine Duncan, chief executive of the Scottish Bible Society and a good Samaritan. Elaine visited Brazil in 2007 and sailed on a boat called the Light in Amazonia, which is run by the Bible society of Brazil and which visits riverside communities up and down the Amazon. In the true spirit of doing to others what we would like them to do to us, it provides an holistic

ministry, encompassing medical and dental treatment, health education and citizenship training, all underpinned by the presentation of God's word.

During Elaine Duncan's visit, she heard about the needs of the north-east sertão region of Brazil, where some 40 per cent of the poorest Brazilians live, and she learned of the desire of members of the Bible society of Brazil to practise what they preach and extend their ministry into that impoverished region, using a road vehicle. That immediately reminded her of the Scottish Bible Society's own mobile Bibleworld studios, which takes the story of the Bible to children all around Scotland. So, the project known as light in the north-east was born, with not a doubting Thomas in sight.

The aim in this, the Scottish Bible Society's bicentennial year, is to raise £200,000 for the multi-purpose vehicle, which will provide health care, dental provision, primary education resources, Bibles and a sheltered scripture learning space to the remote sertão region of north-east Brazil. To date, more than £175,000 has been raised from supporters who know that it is better to give than to receive.

What a great way to celebrate a birthday: giving, not receiving. Does that not say it all about the Scottish Bible Society, and the God who gave his very own son so that we could have eternal life?

17:09

Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I congratulate Dave Thompson on his motion and on securing this evening's debate. As he said, the Scottish Bible Society, which is very important in Scottish life, has an important and admirable aim: to provide the word of God to people worldwide in a language that they understand, in an appropriate format for their use and at a price that they can afford.

It goes without saying that, for Christians, the Bible is the most important book in the world. It is a history, a narrative of the life of Jesus Christ, the inspired word of God and a practical guide to everyday life. However, it is not just Christians who should recognise the Bible's importance. It has been hugely significant in the development of Scotland as a nation.

One of the objectives of the reformation in Scotland was to ensure that the people had access to and could read the word of God in their own language: no more would it be the preserve of clerics. That ambition that drove reformers such as John Knox to promote universal education, with the consequence that, by the end of the 16th century, Scotland was probably the most literate nation in the world. One does not have to be a

Protestant to recognise the historical significance of the reformation, and it remains to me a source of regret that the Scottish Government has no plans to commemorate its 450th anniversary next year. However, I say gently to the Minister for Community Safety, who is present, that there is still time for even those sinners to repent and change their stance.

The Scottish Bible Society does a great deal of excellent international work, to which Dave Thompson referred in his excellent introduction to the debate. However, the challenge faced today here at home by the Scottish Bible Society is how to bring the word of God into the 21st century. At a conference on education that the Scottish Conservatives ran two weeks ago, I was struck by the contribution by Professor Lindsay Paterson of Moray House school of education. He said that when he started his career in lecturing teaching students more than 20 years ago he could make biblical references in his lectures, confident that they would be understood by his students without explanation. However, he said that that is not possible today, because familiarity with the Bible is no longer the norm among the young people who come to study. Incidentally, he also said that the same applies to Shakespeare, so there are clearly wider issues at play.

The Scottish Bible Society is aware of that disconnect and is trying to address the issue by working hard to find new and exciting ways of bringing scripture to congregations across Scotland and to a wider audience. For example, this year, four performances were backed by the SBS at the Edinburgh fringe, including a comedy about the book of Genesis called "In the Beginning".

We know that congregation levels have been in steady decline over past decades. According to data compiled by the group Christian Research, by 2010 the number of Scots who attend a Sunday service will fall below 10 per cent of the population. Nevertheless, the Scottish Bible Society works hard to provide materials for congregations across Scotland, and it is constantly looking for new ways of engaging people with Christianity.

One of the best ways in which it does that is through the Bibleworld exhibition in Edinburgh, which is a resource for schools and church youth groups. A visit to Bibleworld helps children understand how the gospel came to Scotland and continues to be spread throughout the world today. Children can dress up in biblical costume as a Roman soldier or a fisherman and take part in interactive quizzes about the life of Jesus. It is a very valuable project and well supported, and it shows what innovative ways can be devised to draw a new generation to the Bible.

My thanks go to the Scottish Bible Society and its volunteers and fundraisers. Because of their efforts, the Bible is a source of inspiration, strength and comfort, not only here in Scotland but in countries worldwide. Their work is to be praised and our heartfelt thanks are given to them. I congratulate the Scottish Bible Society on its 200th anniversary—long may its good works continue.

17:13

Karen Gillon (Clydesdale) (Lab): I, too, congratulate Dave Thompson on securing the debate, and I welcome those in the public gallery who have come from across Scotland for it.

From St Ninian and St Columba, to David Livingstone and Eric Liddell, to modern-day Christian movements, churches and organisations such as Tearfund Scotland and Christian Aid, the Bible has inspired countless Scots to look beyond themselves to the needs of others. The Scottish Bible Society has spent the past 200 years since its inception on 4 August 1809 seeking to highlight the relevance of biblical engagement in transforming society in our nation and across the world. The SBS has remained faithfully committed to Bible translation and provision of the Bible to people across the whole world. In doing so, it recognises the imperative connection between the message of the Bible and the real-life, day-to-day issues facing ordinary people across the world.

The Scottish Bible Society was established as great urban poverty gripped 19th century Scotland, with population rates exceeding welfare and housing provision, and with declining standards of living. At the same time, the institutional relationship between the state and the church was weakening. As a result, church members in Scotland began to carve out their role in the public sphere as education activists, colonial critics and missionary supporters.

The Scottish Bible Society's sensitivity to the societal challenges of the day, as well as its belief in the relevant wisdom of the Bible in contributing to meeting those challenges, is as strong now as it was 200 years ago. The society's faithful commitment to promoting the biblical message of personhood, of justice and equity and of belonging has laid the foundations of 21st century national and international commitments to—to name but a few—human rights, fair trade, debt cancellation and community cohesion.

Here in the Scottish Parliament, the aspiration that is contained on our mace—that we will represent the people of Scotland with “Wisdom”, “Justice”, “Compassion” and “Integrity”—can also find its reciprocal values in Christian scripture.

The Scottish Bible Society has been devoted to the promotion of biblical principles internationally

as well as in national life. At around this time last year, when my daughter Johann was born, a small contingent of Scottish Bible Society staff and volunteers embarked on a trip to Brazil. My good friend and mentor Maureen Clark was among them. Taking with them many familiar stereotypes of Brazil as a country rich in cultural and sporting prowess, they found the reality of the poverty in the favelas both startling and humbling. From speaking to Brazilians during their trip, the group became all too readily aware of the needs among that nation's poor, particularly for health care provision. David Thompson has already articulated how the group is now raising funds to support a mobile health unit. Despite the difficult economic situation in Scotland, the Scottish commitment to offer support to and solidarity with those in need is clearly unchanging.

I saw similar approaches when I met representatives of the Scottish Bible Society during a parliamentary delegation to Malawi. I was similarly moved by the challenges that Malawians face as they say prayers that we take for granted. For people in Malawi, “Give us this day our daily bread” means absolutely that.

In both those countries and throughout its bicentenary, the Scottish Bible Society has always encouraged an holistic partnership between faith and action. At home, the interactive displays of Bibleworld, the free insertion of “The Glasgow Gospel” in a recent edition of *The Herald*, and the presentation of the DVD “The Passion” to Scottish secondary school pupils all reflect the Scottish Bible Society's creative commitment in 2009 to the 200-year-old promise to present the Bible in a way that people can understand and engage with—and at an affordable price.

In the face of contemporary urban poverty, family and community breakdown, and cultural and racial divisions, a committed united biblical Scottish church is an essential partner as a force for good in challenging such concerns. Indeed, in an age of scepticism over the role of faith initiatives of any kind, the practical demonstration of faith in action as a force for social justice can only be positive. Working alongside other faith groups, Government agencies and third-sector organisations, the Scottish Bible Society is equipping the Scottish church with the inspiration and example to articulate an agenda for social transformation. The society joins a long legacy of faith-based activism that contributed to promoting literacy for all in the 16th century, the abolition of the slave trade in the 19th century and, more recently, the Jubilee 2000 campaign, which resulted in more than \$88 billion of debt cancellation.

In the opening verse of Bishop Timothy Dudley-Smith's specially commissioned hymn to celebrate the Scottish Bible Society's bicentenary, we read:

"Light on the path, a lamp about our way,
wisdom to lead us through the longest day,
guiding our steps as once the Saviour trod:
here in the Scriptures is the word of God."

In closing, I again congratulate the 200-year-old Scottish Bible Society on the constructive impact that it has had here in Scotland, which was once known as the "Land of the Book", and in Brazil, Malawi and other far reaches of the world. I wish the society's members every success in all that they do in the future, and I acknowledge them as partners with us in building a better Scotland in the years to come.

17:19

Andrew Welsh (Angus) (SNP): Amazing is the power of faith, for I can truly say that I agree with every word that has been spoken so far in the debate.

I should declare an interest, because I am greatly honoured to be a trustee of the Scottish Bible Society. I thank and congratulate my colleague Dave Thompson on securing this debate to celebrate its bicentenary.

The mission of the society, which is part of a worldwide network of 145 societies serving 200 countries, is to provide God's word to all people in a language that they can understand, in a format that they can use and at a price that they can afford. The Bible message is made available in all formats—Bibles, CDs, DVDs and software. I have seen modern-day media being used at first hand in Bible house, where the most up-to-date audiovisual resources that are available bring the Bible stories to new life.

The work of today's Scottish Bible Society is based on a long tradition of Scots taking the Bible and its teachings to the wider world. That tradition continues to this day. The Scottish Bible Society has moved with the times to present and broadcast the unchanging wisdom and truths of the Gospel.

I recommend a visit to Bibleworld at Bible house in Edinburgh. Careful testing and retesting for clarity of text and ease of understanding, and a range of helpful guides that are based on the highest levels of scholarship, all ensure faithful adherence to the Bible's message.

Participation in activities spreads into and beyond the churches to schools and other organisations through a Scottish Bible Society that welcomes all to share in its good news. Its influence is worldwide and its translations span the

globe. I know because I have a Bible in Chinese that I purchased at Bible house in Edinburgh.

The work of the Scottish Bible Society crosses all continents and frontiers, and it knows no boundaries. I have listened to reports of the work that it does through its Bibles and bandages for Brazil project, which reaches out to remote areas, creates employment, assists personal and spiritual development, and combats poverty and disease wherever they exist.

The inspiration of the Bible brings hope and practical help through the positive work of the society. At home in Scotland, the Glasgow Bible is but one example of the society's innovation and desire to reach out, whenever possible, in the language of the people.

I wish a happy 200th birthday to our national Bible society and thank all who work in, organise and fundraise for it. I thank the office-bearers for their constant faith and faithful witness, and I wish the society a long life and success in the continuing story of Scotland's outreach of the Christian gospel nationally and worldwide.

17:23

The Minister for Community Safety (Fergus Ewing): I congratulate Dave Thompson on securing the debate and on allowing us to have such a debate this evening. I also thank all members who have taken part in the debate.

As Dave Thompson and other members have done, I congratulate the Scottish Bible Society on reaching its bicentenary, which is a significant landmark. I fully endorse its key messages of peace, hope, love and transformation to societies with which we share the world.

We have all learned from the Bible at an early age the importance of meeting—in an open and inclusive way—the needs of people who are disadvantaged, whether they are poor or in ill health, and whether they are living in despair or are depressed. We cherish those values. Such support underlies the work that all of us seek to do, even though we sometimes come at it from rather different perspectives. I think that I have been cast in the role of a sinner by Murdo Fraser—which is probably not the first time that has happened over the past 10 years, as members might recall.

Dave Thompson mentioned sayings that first appeared in the Bible that have become famous; he spoke about casting pearls before swine. Given that I am addressing the Presiding Officer, she might think that it is more a case of a swine addressing a pearl. I am cognisant of another quotation—from Matthew chapter 19, verse 30,

which many of us might want to ponder as we approach all sorts of elections:

"But many who are first will be last, and the last first."

I prefer the latter part of that extract.

To be serious, I want to praise the work of the Scottish Bible Society. Members have alluded to various aspects of its work. Andrew Welsh mentioned that it has worked in China for many years. I think it is correct to say that Andrew Welsh is a speaker of Mandarin; he is also modest. He will know about the role that the society has played in China. In 1987, the Amity Foundation and the United Bible Societies opened a large printing press in Nanjing that was capable of printing 12 million copies of the Bible per annum. Donations from Scotland have supported that work and kept the cost of the Bible for poor rural Chinese people—such people often work for 50p a day—to a minimum.

The long history of connections between Scotland and Africa—in particular Malawi—has been referred to. I know that Karen Gillon, as a result of direct experience, has taken a close interest in Malawi and has visited there at least once. I know of her evident care about the conditions in which people in that country live, and I know about the contribution that she has made, as she will appreciate. For many years, Scottish printers who have been linked to the Scottish Bible Society have produced scriptures for the Sahara and Nigeria. Bibles have been sent to Malawi for almost a century. In response to HIV/AIDS, the Bible societies in Africa have formulated literature and imaginative teaching material for sufferers, carers, contacts and those who are at risk. That literature and material has found an enthusiastic response well beyond the religious community.

Borneo has not been mentioned. I have been assured that Scottish printers have developed useful and unusual skills: New Testaments for hot and humid Borneo required humidity-resistant paper and cloth, anti-cockroach glue for their spines, wrapping in tarred paper to withstand motorised-canoe transit up jungle rivers, and packets sized to fit local backpacks for onward carriage. No one can argue that we are not a practical people.

As well as taking Bibles to people abroad who do not have them, the SBS works to persuade people at home who have easier access to Bibles to read them. I think that Andrew Welsh mentioned that its Edinburgh headquarters contains the SBS Bibleworld exhibition, which I recommend to all members.

I think Karen Gillon mentioned the SBS partnering with the Bible Society of Brazil to convert a bus for the north-east of the country to provide assistance, including on-the-spot medical

and dental treatment. That is surely an excellent example of the positive action that Scots are taking throughout the world to help those who are more disadvantaged than we are.

In our own country, we should not, of course, tolerate any form of religious intolerance, regardless of whom it is perpetrated against. The one Scotland campaign continues to send a clear message on that front. It is also reasonable to say that we are leading the way in many respects in our interfaith work in bringing together people across churches and various faiths. However, there is always more work to do.

In conclusion, we cannot afford to lose our aspiration to be a welcoming, cohesive, inclusive and diverse society. We must stand together as a nation—as one Scotland—to make a better future for all people in our society. By working together, and perhaps by putting into practice some of the tenets that we learn of in the Bible, we can continue to build a fair, diverse, competitive and prosperous Scotland of which we can all be proud.

Meeting closed at 17:29.

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