



The Scottish Parliament  
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

## Official Report

# MEETING OF THE PARLIAMENT

Wednesday 6 June 2012

Session 4

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## Scottish Parliament

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[The Deputy Presiding Officer opened the meeting at 14:30]

### Time for Reflection

#### The Deputy Presiding Officer (Elaine Smith):

Good afternoon. The first item of business is time for reflection. It gives me particular pleasure to welcome today's time for reflection leader, Father Thomas Devine, from Our Lady and St Joseph's, Glenboig, in my constituency.

**Father Thomas Devine (Our Lady and St Joseph's, Glenboig):** I recently made a journey by bus—the first in 20 years—and was amazed to see familiar roads from that lofty position. It gave me a whole new perspective and made me feel secure—even superior.

My inner journey let me see similarities with the Catholic Christian church to which I belong. In the year 313, the Roman emperor Constantine made Christianity the state religion—hence the name “Roman Catholicism”. Overnight, the Church moved from the bottom to the top, from being oppressed to having power, from catacomb to basilica. It has remained on top for almost 1,700 years.

Some people perceive Christianity to be under threat today, in all sorts of different ways. That may or may not be true. I choose to see what is happening as being the work of the Spirit, which is leading us to see things in a different way.

Before Jesus began his mission, he too was led by the Spirit—out into the wilderness, to prepare himself for what lay ahead by facing up to himself and his demons. He experienced a triple temptation at the hand of Satan—the kind of temptations that all human beings face—of power, prestige and possessions. He was challenged to face the need to be effective, the need to be right and the need to be powerful and in control. In order to be authentic to himself and to resist Satan, he had to exorcise those demons, declare his total allegiance to God and renounce power in all forms.

I believe that today the Spirit is once again leading us, as Christians, into a spiritual wilderness for purification and for transformation. He is calling us back to our roots—to humble love and service and to simplicity. He is calling us to reclaim our position from the bottom and to find our true power in powerlessness.

I thank you for the invitation to share some thoughts with you this afternoon.

## Fuel Poverty

#### The Deputy Presiding Officer (Elaine Smith):

The next item of business is a statement by Alex Neil on fuel poverty. The cabinet secretary will take questions at the end of his statement; there should therefore be no interventions or interruptions during the statement.

14:33

**The Cabinet Secretary for Infrastructure and Capital Investment (Alex Neil):** Thank you for allowing me to update Parliament on the review, which I commissioned last October, of the fuel poverty strategy. In the light of rising energy prices, I wanted an independent body to take another look at how we are tackling the issue and to bring forward ideas. The review—led by the Scottish fuel poverty forum, which I re-established—was published today.

The forum represents a wide range of stakeholders, from energy companies to campaigning groups, so gaining consensus is difficult. However, it has produced an excellent interim report, which is backed by all its members. I thank the forum very much for its valuable contribution to the debate about how we can tackle the problem of fuel poverty. That problem is a disgrace in an energy-rich nation. I have met the chair of the forum—Professor David Sigsworth—to discuss the forum's main recommendations, and am happy to inform members that I support all of them.

Our building regulations for housing have the most demanding energy standards in the United Kingdom, and are comparable with the best in Europe. Despite that, we still have a major legacy problem in respect of poor-condition stock and fuel poverty in our existing stock. Around 80 per cent of homes across Scotland will still be in use when our final emissions targets are to be met in 2050. We must focus on the existing housing stock in order to tackle fuel poverty and to achieve the housing milestones that we need to reach in order to meet our emissions targets. That is why I will introduce a national retrofit programme, which will initially focus on areas of fuel poverty and related deprivation.

In the spending review, the Scottish Government showed its determination to tackle fuel poverty head-on. In contrast with the UK Government, we are not cutting our fuel poverty budget to ribbons, but are providing around £0.25 billion for fuel poverty and energy efficiency programmes. We need to identify solutions that will supplement that budget so that we can spend at least the £200 million annually that the Economy, Energy and Tourism Committee called

for in its excellent report on fuel poverty. I believe that we can deliver those sums by designing schemes that lever in obligations to be placed on energy companies. The forum will work with us and the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities in designing a national retrofit programme to work alongside energy company obligations, and to produce schemes that provide the biggest bang for everyone's buck.

The programme will prioritise fuel poor areas and will cover the whole of Scotland in around 10 years: it will finish the job that was started by our area-based insulation schemes and build on the successes of our current fuel poverty and energy efficiency programmes. Some 122,000 households have already received physical measures through those schemes, and a further 382,000 households have received other assistance. It is estimated that, over the lifetime of the measures that will be installed under the schemes, there will be a net gain in household income of around £700 million and a saving of 3 million tonnes of CO<sub>2</sub>.

We are working with COSLA to give local authorities a wider role in delivery of the new programme and in promotion of benefits to the community, because they have a great deal of knowledge about the areas that need to be tackled and there is a level of trust of them in their communities that allows them to make it over the doorstep and to assist householders to undertake essential work.

I also asked the forum to look at the definition of fuel poverty and to confirm whether it is still valid. By and large, the forum believes that it is still valid and has asked that further research be done in order to provide greater insight on the causes of fuel poverty. I welcome that approach because the problem cannot be defined away by using a different way of counting. We need to understand more about why fuel poverty is so prevalent, and where investment in the fabric of our housing stock can improve health and wellbeing. The problem touches all parts of Scotland, but is most acute in rural and remote communities that simply do not have access to mains gas and in which the housing is not always suitable for loft and cavity-wall insulation.

In our 2011 manifesto, we highlighted how we would, in order to establish a Scottish futures fund, use savings that were made by the Scottish Futures Trust and Transport Scotland in the deal that was reached to construct the Forth replacement crossing. That fund will enable us to take action to create opportunities and tackle injustice across our society. We have committed to investing £50 million in our warm homes fund in this session from the £250 million that will be saved, in order to deliver renewable energy and

energy efficient homes in the communities that are worst affected by fuel poverty. I will make a further announcement shortly about when we expect to launch the fund.

Extension of the gas grid, where it makes economic sense to do so, is an extremely effective way to reduce fuel poverty. We have taken that suggestion from the forum and made available £5 million in loan funding to provide connections. From 1 September, that fund will be open for business and will provide an opportunity for approximately 10,000 fuel-poor households in communities across the country to benefit.

However, energy efficiency can never be a total solution to fuel poverty. If we raised the entire housing stock in Scotland to a minimum of 10 on the national home-energy rating, we would still have a level of fuel poverty of around 14 per cent. However, as members know, we do not have full control over other causes of fuel poverty—yet.

Pricing has the biggest impact on fuel poverty, and I urge all energy companies to do their utmost to shelter the most vulnerable people from price increases. We must tackle energy prices and increase incomes if we are to eradicate fuel poverty.

We do not have the powers now, but we want to change that, so we will give the Scottish people the chance to rectify the situation in 2015. In the meantime, we will do all that we possibly can with the powers that we have to maximise incomes and to assist households to access lower tariffs and reduce their energy bills.

We are continuing to work with energy companies. At the summit that we hosted with the big six last November, the energy suppliers agreed to work in partnership to maximise the carbon emissions reduction target scheme and the community energy saving programme in their final year; to implement concerted action to contact vulnerable customers and to offer support to help them to transfer to the most efficient tariff; to achieve clarity, transparency, simplicity and fair choice for consumers; to offer support to the voluntary sector to engage with hard-to-reach groups; and to provide more detail on help through trust funds and so on.

Since then, we have worked with trusted intermediary organisations and the energy suppliers to deliver the actions that were set out in the communiqué. We have made good progress. Energy companies have already taken action to publish their best tariffs and best energy efficiency offerings in a common format; to signpost customers to the home energy Scotland hotline; to introduce greater incentives to encourage take-up of free insulation; to provide full information on and to proactively promote their trust funds; to reduce

prices and/or undertake annual and tariff reviews; and to work with intermediaries to maximise uptake of the CERT scheme.

We are engaging with the Office of Gas and Electricity Markets to consider how the retail market review will provide further progress on that, and to ensure that vulnerable customers can gain the benefits from the market that internet-savvy consumers who are regular switchers already enjoy.

All those measures are essential to tackling fuel poverty in Scotland. In conclusion, I take this opportunity to thank Professor Sigsworth and the forum for the interim report, and to confirm once again the Government's commitment to tackling fuel poverty and to implementing the forum's recommendations.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** The cabinet secretary will now take questions on the issues that have been raised in his statement. I intend to allow a maximum of 20 minutes for questions, after which we will move on to the next item of business. A number of members have indicated that they would like to ask questions, so succinct questions and answers would be helpful. I ask members who wish to ask a question to ensure that they have pressed their request-to-speak buttons.

**Richard Baker (North East Scotland) (Lab):** I thank the cabinet secretary for his statement and welcome the fuel poverty forum's excellent interim report. We were disappointed that the Scottish Government reduced spending on fuel poverty by a third last year, when too many people in Scotland remain fuel poor, but we welcomed the restoration of the budget to its previous levels in the spending review.

We also welcome the warm homes fund and look forward to its launch, given that we had proposed a green new deal to make 10,000 homes energy efficient. The proposals in the report can make a real difference to tackling fuel poverty, so I ask the cabinet secretary how much the Scottish Government will invest in the national retrofit programme, and how many people that will benefit.

Energy-efficient homes and pricing are crucial to tackling fuel poverty. The cabinet secretary likes to talk about powers that he does not have, but the Scottish Government could play a role in reducing prices now, through promoting the collective purchasing of energy by local authorities and housing associations, as the report highlights. Will the Scottish Government take forward that proposal?

Finally, does the cabinet secretary believe that, through those and other measures, the Scottish

Government will meet its target of eradicating fuel poverty by 2016?

**Alex Neil:** Housing associations already have access to the relatively cheap electricity tariffs that are available through the national public sector contract for electricity. Along with other intermediary organisations, we are taking measures to increase take-up by housing associations of that opportunity, which could make a substantial difference to the tariffs that are paid by tenants of housing association properties. Local authorities are, of course, already part of that deal, and we are keen to extend it as far as possible across the social rented sector.

Secondly, as far as budgets are concerned, the Economy, Energy and Tourism Committee report called for a total of £200 million to be spent on tackling fuel poverty every year. It is my intention that, between what the Scottish Government puts in and what we can expect as our share of the energy company obligation commitments under the new arrangements that are being introduced under the Energy Act 2011, we will meet the commitment to spend £200 million a year. About £120 million will come from the energy companies. The amount that we provide through the warm homes fund will go up to about £18 million in 2014-15. With existing funding, that will add about another £66 million or £67 million. Together, those funds will help to fund the national retrofit programme.

**Alex Johnstone (North East Scotland) (Con):** I, too, congratulate the Scottish fuel poverty forum on the content of its interim report, and I join the minister in accepting the nature of the demands that are made in it. The report represents a major contribution to achieving our objectives.

I have a couple of specific questions. The minister mentioned his wish to target resources at communities that are in greatest need and went on to describe the problem as it exists in some areas of rural Scotland. Will he guarantee that isolated rural communities will not be left to the end of the 10-year period but will be assisted at the beginning of it?

That ties in with my second question, which relates to mains gas, an issue on which I get a great deal of correspondence from villages in the north-east. How much does the minister expect to achieve with the £10 million loan fund? Will he consider extending the fund if it can be proved early in the day that it is a successful measure?

The minister brought up independence—that is only to be expected—but is he really telling us that fuel poverty could be eliminated in an independent Scotland, when the SNP Government's prospectus is entirely dependent on squeezing every last tax penny out of the oil and gas

reserves, and when its current policy is driven exclusively by generation of electricity by means that are dependent on feed-in tariffs and renewables obligation certificates, which are already costing Scotland's energy consumers a fortune?

**Alex Neil:** Given the utter mess that George Osborne made of oil taxation, I do not think that any Tory is in a good position to criticise us.

Alex Johnstone asked two substantive questions. First, I give an absolute guarantee that isolated rural communities will not be at the tail end of the programme. Indeed, it could be argued that many of those communities should be at the front end of the programme, because many of them are in the most dire need when it comes to fuel poverty. The range of options that is open to people who live in towns and cities is just not available to people in such communities—access to the gas grid is a classic example of that. Therefore, they are pretty restricted in how they can tackle fuel supply and fuel poverty. It is incumbent on us to prioritise those communities.

The second question was about what the new fund for gas connections will achieve. To a large extent, that will depend on who applies for the funding and how big the villages are. For example, some villages that qualify for funding might be very small—more like hamlets of 30 or 40 houses—while others may be of 200 or 300 houses. The cost difference between them might not be that big because we are paying for the basic connection. It will be very difficult to give an accurate estimate. Undoubtedly, there is a huge pent-up demand for that kind of funding throughout Scotland so I anticipate that the take-up will be very high indeed.

**Aileen McLeod (South Scotland) (SNP):** I also welcome the excellent interim report from the fuel poverty forum and congratulate it on the work that it is doing on behalf of the Government to alleviate fuel poverty in Scotland. What are the next steps towards introducing the area-based national retrofit programme? What assurances can the cabinet secretary give that delivery of the programme will efficiently target the needs of those who are affected?

**Alex Neil:** The top priority is to ensure our share of ECO funding under the new arrangements in the new Energy Act 2011. We hope to have agreement on that with the UK Government and the energy companies within the next few months. We will then be able to make much more detailed plans for implementation of the national retrofit programme, which we intend to start at the beginning of the new financial year in 2013.

From the index of multiple deprivation, we know down to postcode area where poverty is at its

greatest. Those communities will be given priority in the implementation of the programme.

**Elaine Murray (Dumfriesshire) (Lab):** I also welcome the cabinet secretary's announcement of the introduction of a national retrofit programme and note that it will be focused on areas of fuel poverty and related deprivation. I am also reassured by his answer to Alex Johnstone that the focus will include rural areas. As the cabinet secretary will be aware, rural homes are frequently older single-wall properties that can be difficult and expensive to insulate. Will the national retrofit programme have a strand to tackle specifically that rather difficult problem?

**Alex Neil:** I am very keen to ensure that there are no technological restrictions on the programme so that, for example, cavity wall and loft insulation can be made available to everyone in Scotland and not restricted, as it is at the moment. Pre-1919 and hard-to-heat housing, which was built in the days when roofs and attics were not built to be particularly accessible, can be a problem but we have to compensate for that with other forms of insulation to ensure that every house in Scotland meets the necessary standard. I take Elaine Murray's point that we should try to ensure that the choice that is available is wide enough to cater for all possibilities.

**Stuart McMillan (West Scotland) (SNP):** I warmly welcome the report and the cabinet secretary's statement. As he is aware, energy efficiency and tackling fuel poverty are important for helping people to keep their homes warm and for bringing down carbon emissions. How is the Scottish Government going to work with the newly elected local authorities to build on the measures that he announced in his statement?

**Alex Neil:** My officials have been in close dialogue with COSLA during and after the council elections. Once COSLA has appointed its new spokesperson, I will arrange an early meeting on fuel poverty. The previous spokesperson, Councillor Harry McGuigan, was very helpful under COSLA's previous regime and I am sure that we will have a good working relationship with the COSLA representative. There is general agreement with COSLA that we have to move along with the national retrofit programme. I understand that there is a great deal of enthusiasm for the principle of the programme—in particular, for the idea that local authorities will be primarily responsible for delivering it.

**Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab):** The minister will be aware that people who are in fuel poverty are unable to invest in microrenewables, which could provide them with major savings. Will the minister look at ensuring that the fuel poor can access microrenewables and the funding to install them? Can priority be



given to people who are off the gas grid? Will he also look at alternatives to deprivation indicators in rural areas? The indicators often work against the fuel poor in mixed-income communities?

**Alex Neil:** That latter point is a very fair one. We will look at the issue, because we do not want to miss out anybody. However, I emphasise that the purpose of the programme is to cover the whole of Scotland, so although we are prioritising fuel-poor areas, we will move on to the non-fuel-poor areas because, in order that we can meet our fuel poverty and emissions targets, we will have to cover the existing homes stock to ensure that it is up to standard.

I do not have funding in my budget for microrenewables, but I take Rhoda Grant's point on that and I will raise it with my colleague Mr Swinney.

**John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP):** I welcome the statement and the emphasis on vulnerable groups, including people with severe disabilities and terminally ill people, and on carers. Can the cabinet secretary give an estimate of how much carers are currently helped and will be helped under the new measures?

**Alex Neil:** As John Mason will be aware, last year I extended the energy assistance programme to cover carers, who make a major contribution to looking after vulnerable members of our community. I anticipate—in fact, I am absolutely sure and determined—that carers will qualify for the national retrofit programme, just as they qualify today for the energy assistance programme.

**Mark Griffin (Central Scotland) (Lab):** I note the statement and the national retrofit programme, but has the cabinet secretary considered the supply side as well as the demand side? Will he consider feasibility work on the retrofitting of power stations, particularly in relation to coal generation and implementing district heating schemes around power stations to reduce consumption and to lift those who live near power stations out of fuel poverty?

**Alex Neil:** My colleagues Mr Swinney and Mr Ewing are considering the role that district heating can play as it falls within their bailiwick, rather than mine. However, we are on the same page on the issue. Where we can use district heating systems to alleviate fuel poverty and reduce emissions, we should try to do so.

**Colin Beattie (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP):** I welcome the cabinet secretary's statement and commend the Scottish fuel poverty forum for its report. Fuel poverty is a significant issue in my constituency, where there is at least one death each year from hypothermia. A major contributory component is the failure of many people on low incomes, particularly

pensioners, to claim the benefits to which they are entitled. Although those benefits are in part reserved to Westminster, what steps can and will the Scottish Government take to encourage higher uptake?

**Alex Neil:** We have down the years run various campaigns to encourage uptake. It is an on-going battle to encourage more people, particularly pensioners, to take up the range of advice and support that is available, including access to lower tariffs and, in some cases, additional benefits. If members want to help their constituents, I suggest that they get them to phone the freephone number 0800 512012 to access advice on all aspects of the benefits to which they are entitled, and on how to improve their heating situation.

**Liam McArthur (Orkney Islands) (LD):** I thank the cabinet secretary for providing advance sight of his statement, much of which I welcome—although perhaps not the suggestion that the referendum on separation has slipped back to 2015. I, too, congratulate the members of the fuel poverty forum on its interim report. I also look forward to welcoming David Sigsworth to Orkney later this summer, where he will see at first hand some of the innovative collaborative work that is being done to tackle the problem, which is particularly prevalent in the island communities.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** Mr McArthur, we need a question.

**Liam McArthur:** Although I welcomed the cabinet secretary's comments about island and remote areas being at the front of the queue in the programme, what specific steps are being taken to ensure that the range of fuel poverty measures will fully address the needs of remote and island areas?

**Alex Neil:** I will just correct Liam McArthur. We are not having a "referendum on separation". We are having a referendum on independence. Separation is a 19th century concept.

Now that I have corrected the member, I will make two points. First, we are working with local authorities individually and collectively and we will work with them on the design of the programme to ensure that island and remote and rural communities are all covered by the programme and get the requisite priority.

Secondly—I know that this is a particular issue for Liam McArthur in Orkney—we intend that the programme will be delivered by local authorities, which I hope will have major spin-offs in local economies so that more local contractors and local jobs can be assisted by the associated spend. One of the lessons that we have learned is that, rather than arranging the delivery mechanism at national level, it is more effective to have the delivery mechanism arranged at local level—

particularly at local authority level. We hope that the major spin-off benefits of that will be more jobs, more investment and more economic activity in each local authority area.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** I will struggle to call everyone who wants to ask a question.

**Jenny Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab):** During the previous ministerial statement on fuel poverty, I asked the cabinet secretary about the Government's commitment to collective bargaining for energy. Today, the cabinet secretary has accepted the recommendations on collective purchasing and has said in response to Richard Baker that he is keen to extend the local authority tariff to the social housing sector—

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** I am sorry; I really need a question.

**Jenny Marra:** Okay.

For those reasons, I am puzzled about why measures to encourage collective bargaining are not included in the cabinet secretary's statement today. Will the cabinet secretary back collective purchasing, support the Dundee energy summit that I am holding in June to set up a scheme for Dundee and commit to roll out that scheme across the country?

**Alex Neil:** As I have already said to Richard Baker, we are already doing that through the national public sector electricity contract. Every tenant in every housing association in Scotland has, in principle, access to the tariffs under the public sector electricity contract.

**Joe FitzPatrick (Dundee City West) (SNP):** I want to follow on from Mark Griffin's question about district heating schemes. There are a number of good district heating schemes in Dundee and elsewhere in Scotland. Last week, I and other members of the Local Government and Regeneration Committee visited Shetland—

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** I really need a question.

**Joe FitzPatrick:** In Shetland, the committee saw the district heating scheme in Lerwick, which is powered by renewable heat, which would otherwise be lost to the sea or the atmosphere.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** I am sorry, but we really need a question.

**Joe FitzPatrick:** What efforts does the cabinet secretary suggest be made to encourage more such renewable energy schemes for heat?

**Alex Neil:** We already have a district heating loan scheme that is funding schemes across the country. It has a budget of at least £5 million for the next three years and is currently open to applications. I agree with those who have said that

that is not enough. We want to transform the scale of uptake of district heating in Scotland. As I said earlier, my colleagues Mr Swinney and Mr Ewing are working to that end and have set up an expert commission on district heating to identify the challenges and drive progress.

**Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green):** How much carbon would have been saved, how many jobs in the construction sector would have been protected and how many households would have been taken out of fuel poverty if the Government had implemented a national area-based, universal, all-Scotland 10-year insulation and retrofit programme when we proposed it four years ago, instead of digging its heels in and refusing to amend its budget?

**Alex Neil:** The fact of life is that we have run a number of successful fuel poverty programmes. The energy assistance package and both our insulation programmes have had a tremendous impact in terms of the number of people whom they have helped and the money that they have saved those people. The national retrofit programme is a natural progression from where we are today.

I am sure that Patrick Harvie thinks, with hindsight, that his ideas are always the best. No doubt, we all think that. I hope that, in the spirit of consensus that has been shown around the chamber, he will accept that a national retrofit programme is the way ahead.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** I apologise to the members whom I was unable to call. We must move on to the next item of business.

## Parliamentary Reform (Changes to Standing Orders)

**The Presiding Officer (Tricia Marwick):** The next item of business is a debate on motion S4M-03141, in the name of Dave Thompson, on parliamentary reform and changes to the standing orders.

15:04

**Dave Thompson (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP):** I am pleased to open the debate on behalf of the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee.

The motion in my name invites Parliament to note the committee's report on "Parliamentary Reform—Standing Order rule changes" and to agree the changes to standing orders set out in annex B to the report.

The changes to standing orders that we are debating follow the inquiry that the committee conducted into how Parliament can reform the way in which it conducts its business. Before I get into the details of the issue, I will explain briefly how we arrived at this point.

At the early meetings of the committee following the 2011 election, we discussed the idea of an inquiry into parliamentary reform. We were aware that voices within and outwith the Parliament had commented on how the Parliament could be more responsive to emerging and topical issues. Senior figures with significant experience of how this Parliament operates, including Henry McLeish, George Reid, Lord Steel, Lord McConnell, Bruce Crawford and the Presiding Officer—Tricia Marwick—all contributed to the debate. Some of those individuals were kind enough to share their ideas with us at our business planning meeting last summer and in our subsequent inquiry.

The Scottish Parliament is now 13 years old and has achieved much that is in line with its founding principles of sharing power, accountability, access and participation, and the inquiry confirmed that. For example, evidence to the committee from Scottish Environment LINK suggested that the Parliament has

"built an admirable legislative ethos and practice, consulting widely, building expertise and avoiding its committees being turned into servants of the executive".

However, we took the view that the Parliament could not continue to be successful and evolve if it was not willing to look at itself with a critical eye. We believed that this parliamentary session was an opportune time to review whether existing parliamentary practices are serving their intended purpose.

In August last year, the committee received a letter from the Presiding Officer that prompted us to think, in particular, about changes to sitting patterns and the reform of parliamentary questions. Momentum for change had also come from the Conveners Group, which had begun its programme for change in relation to the Parliament's committees. The Conveners Group has, for example, supported more focused and objective-based remits for committee inquiries in order to lead to increased quality of scrutiny and greater impact.

After due consideration, we launched our inquiry in September last year, with a tight deadline of completion by Christmas. Our objective was to conduct an inquiry that could provide a focal point for the parliamentary reform agenda. We wanted to explore on the record the different views on parliamentary reform and produce a clear set of recommendations for improving the way that Parliament operates.

In order to help us to focus, the committee developed three priorities for the inquiry: first, improving effective scrutiny in plenary session, including through more spontaneous and topical business; secondly, maintaining levels of engagement with outside organisations and individuals following change; and, thirdly, enlivening debate to improve the public perception of the Parliament and increase media interest.

**Margo MacDonald (Lothian) (Ind):** The member mentioned broadcasting, which is a very important element in all parliamentary activity because that is usually what connects us to the people. The broadcasters do not really think that we are worth broadcasting now. Does that not worry the committee?

**Dave Thompson:** I think that we are well worth broadcasting. I sometimes think that the broadcasters should pay more attention to what goes on in our committees and in the chamber and not only to the fights that we have. There is very little coverage when there is consensus and we are pushing forward on very good issues and ideas in the Parliament. Broadcasters often do not pay as much attention to such matters as they perhaps should.

The committee held a series of public evidence sessions to hear the views of those who had responded to the committee's consultation or had otherwise contributed to the discussion on parliamentary reform. We heard from a range of witnesses, including back-bench members, business managers, representatives of civic Scotland, journalists and even a former First Minister and a former Presiding Officer.

The committee took account of reports from previous Procedures Committees and of

approaches taken elsewhere, including in the Irish Parliament and the House of Commons, both of which have recently reformed their systems. The committee is grateful to all the witnesses who took the time to give evidence to the inquiry, and to the helpful officials and parliamentarians of the Westminster and Irish Parliaments.

The Christmas deadline gave us a tight timescale, and I am grateful to my fellow committee members and the clerking team for their hard work in successfully meeting that deadline with only days to spare.

On 21 December, the committee published its report on parliamentary reform, which set out a series of 17 recommendations to improve—as we saw it—the Scottish Parliament's topicality and responsiveness to events.

Following publication, the committee wrote to the Presiding Officer, the Parliamentary Bureau and the party business managers, highlighting the various recommendations that related to each of them and seeking a formal response to gauge the level of support for the recommendations.

In all of its deliberations, the committee has been mindful of the need to produce a report that does not gather dust on a shelf but instead forms the basis for real change to how the Parliament operates. To do that, we had to get wide agreement.

I am heartened by the fact that many of the committee's recommendations have received the support of the Parliamentary Bureau, particularly the committee's key recommendations for new sitting patterns and a new topical question time.

Following the Parliamentary Bureau's response, the committee published a short report last month that set out changes to standing orders to give effect to those measures. I shall highlight the key proposed changes.

The first, and perhaps most significant, proposed change is that Parliament would meet on three afternoons a week—on Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Thursdays. Committees would meet in the morning of those days. That is important because, at the moment, if something significant happens in Scotland on a Thursday night, the first chance that the whole Parliament has to deal with it is on a Wednesday afternoon. I believe that that needs to change. Moving to a sitting pattern in which committees meet in the morning and chamber business takes place in the afternoon, with the first parliamentary question time of the week on Tuesday afternoon, would improve the Parliament's ability to be the first forum for debating emerging issues of importance to the people of Scotland.

**Hugh Henry (Renfrewshire South) (Lab):** To help with my contribution later, will the member clarify whether the proposal for a Thursday afternoon means that committees will have to finish by 11.40? If so, in effect, committee meetings on those mornings will be curtailed.

**Dave Thompson:** It will be very much up to the Parliamentary Bureau to decide exactly how that will operate. At the moment, the suggested scheme indicates that there would be general questions at 11.40 on a Thursday morning. Committees can of course start at 9 o'clock rather than 10 o'clock, which would give them a bit of extra time. It is not an insurmountable difficulty. Some committees have much shorter meetings than others. It is readily manageable.

Secondly, the committee proposes the introduction of a new topical question time, which would enable back benchers to question the Government at short notice on matters that have national implications or national significance. At present, there is little scope for topical issues to be raised by back benchers at short notice, although there is a slot for urgent questions at First Minister's question time. The only other avenue is to lodge an emergency question for consideration by the Presiding Officer. Only seven such emergency questions have been taken in Parliament in 12 years.

Topical questions will help the Parliament to hold the Government to account more effectively. In addition, they will increase the overall time available in the chamber for the questioning of ministers to one and three quarter hours—an increase of 17 per cent.

In addition, and importantly, under the new sitting patterns, question times will now open business on Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Thursdays—a significant improvement on the current arrangements, whereby questions to ministers take place only on a Thursday.

A further improvement would be the committee's proposal for a shorter period between the lodging of a question and the date on which it is asked in the chamber. That will enable back benchers to ask more relevant questions and reduce the chance that questions are overtaken by events before they are asked.

The third main point is that there will be an additional members' business debate each week, as the Parliamentary Bureau has accepted the committee's recommendation that there should be more of a role for back-bench business in chamber proceedings, to remove the perception that chamber business is, as one witness put it to the committee,

"pre-programmed down party political lines."

A third members' business debate each week, which represents a 50 per cent increase in the time available for back-bench business, should increase the status of those debates.

The committee is proposing some further amendments to standing orders to allow procedures to work more easily and to make them easier to follow. For example, deadlines for the submission of questions are being aligned as far as possible. Taken as a whole, the reforms represent a significant evolution of the Parliament's working practices and procedures. I believe that they will lead to a more responsive and accountable Parliament.

In introducing the proposals, I acknowledge the collaborative nature of the committee's work and, in particular, the role of the Presiding Officer who, since her election last year, has played a key role in promoting the development of the Parliament as an institution. The committee has always shared the Presiding Officer's aims of improving the topicality of parliamentary business and increasing the Parliament's ability to respond quickly to emerging issues. The proposals, if approved by the Parliament, will go a long way towards achieving that.

The committee intends to keep a watching brief on how effective the parliamentary reforms prove to be and whether any further changes would be beneficial. The committee sees this as the start of a process that will run the full course of this session. We intend to look at the operation of committees and other matters after the summer recess.

The Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee, with its report on parliamentary reform, has begun an MOT of the Parliament's procedures. The overarching finding is that the Parliament needs to become more flexible in a number of ways, particularly so that it can respond quickly when matters of importance to the people of Scotland arise.

I consider that the package of changes being debated will increase the Parliament's ability to react more quickly to developing events and will improve scrutiny of the Scottish Government, and that the debate marks a significant step forward in the evolution of the Parliament's working practices and procedures. I look forward to continuing that work.

I have pleasure in moving,

That the Parliament notes the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee's 2nd Report 2012 (Session 4), *Parliamentary Reform – Standing Order rule changes* (SP Paper 138) and agrees that the changes to Standing Orders set out in Annexe B of the report be made with effect from 20 August 2012.

15:17

**The Minister for Parliamentary Business and Chief Whip (Brian Adam):** Presiding Officer, as outlined by Dave Thompson, the convener of the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee, you have played a significant role in parliamentary reform, in that you invited the committee to look at the area. I acknowledge also the role played by my colleague, the Cabinet Secretary for Parliamentary Business and Government Strategy, who, almost a year ago to the day, set out his view of the direction of travel that we should adopt.

It is important that parliamentary reform is led by the Parliament itself. However, on behalf of the Government, I welcome the opportunity to contribute to the debate and to put our views on record. In that spirit, I make clear at the outset that the Government is committed to helping to implement whatever reforms the Parliament adopts.

I acknowledge the role that the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee has taken in driving forward the parliamentary reform agenda, but that did not happen in a vacuum. Presiding Officer, you certainly played a role by commissioning the report on how the parliamentary week might best be organised and on how to ensure that question time is an effective forum for holding the Government to account.

The public perception of Parliament is important. A confident, positive and effective Parliament is an image that all of us in the chamber wish to project. Parliament must be relevant and be seen to be relevant. It must be a place where the topical issues of the day are debated and where the Government is held to account on them.

Margo MacDonald raised points linked to broadcasting. Broadcasting is certainly one way of communicating how members are involved in holding the Government to account and in putting forward alternative solutions to the problems of the day. How broadcasting fits in with plenary sessions and with committee sessions is equally important, because a lot of the scrutiny and the detailed work happen in committees—as the report demonstrates. As Hugh Henry pointed out, the timing of committees is also important.

**Margo MacDonald:** On broadcasting the work of the committees, did the minister approach the Parliament channel to find out whether it knows that there are committees in the Scottish Parliament? I think that so far the channel has not filmed any of the committees.

**Brian Adam:** That is not my responsibility as a minister any more than it is the responsibility of anybody else in the chamber. As Mr Thompson indicated, the matter will be under review as the

reforms are implemented, and I am certain that he noted Margo MacDonald's point. Material is available for broadcast because all committee meetings are recorded, as I am sure the member is aware. However, it is not the responsibility of the Government to tell the Parliament channel what it should show.

The committee consulted widely to inform the development of its recommendations. Broadcasters were just as able to communicate their views on what might best suit their interests as members of the Parliament were—and as those beyond the Parliament who had things to say were. The evidence sessions that the committee held ensured that a wide range of views could be taken into account. If those who have an interest in the Parliament chose not to contribute at that stage, I am quite sure that the committee would be more than happy to hear from our viewers as it monitors the effectiveness of the changes that we will, I assume, agree today.

I acknowledge the comparative work that the committee undertook, looking at the working practices of this Parliament and others—both close to home and further afield. The consideration of the issues has clearly been careful and thorough.

The committee was given a challenging task. Inevitably, there are conflicting pressures when one considers parliamentary reform in detail. For example, how to balance the desire to have a Parliament that is family friendly with the desire not to constrain debating time and how to strike the appropriate balance, particularly for MSPs from rural areas and further afield, between the dual responsibilities of MSPs—to be in their constituencies to address local issues and to contribute to the work of the national Parliament. Another part of the balancing act is the impact of adjustments to the parliamentary week on the important engagement between the Government and those who are governed. That engagement does not just happen in the Parliament. Ministers actively engage with communities right across Scotland.

No doubt other members will wish to comment on those issues and others, but the package of reforms that the committee has developed seems to the Government to have struck the appropriate balance.

I will not repeat the summary of the committee recommendations that Mr Thompson has already given. I will focus on two areas in particular.

First, the key change recommended by the committee is to the structure of the parliamentary week. The current sitting pattern has served us well, but it is appropriate to consider whether it remains the best one. The committee's proposals

have an obvious neatness and logic, with the recommendation to have committee meetings in the morning—even if there are some constraints around the timing, which clearly will need to be worked out in detail—and plenary sessions in the afternoon. However, the main practical benefit will be the additional flexibility to ensure that topical issues can be raised. The Government agrees that it is appropriate to reduce the time between the last plenary sitting in a week and the first plenary sitting in the following week.

The other key recommendation is on changes to question times. Both here and in other places, question times are often criticised as being parliamentary theatre—perhaps more beloved of broadcasters than is what appears to people to be the more mundane committee work—but there is no doubt that they interest the people. Question times can be criticised for having lots of heat but not a lot of light on occasion, and that may be true from time to time, but the facility for the legislature from which the Government is drawn to hold the Government of the day to account is a fundamental tenet of parliamentary democracy. Question times are a crucial means by which the Government of the day can be held to account, current issues of national importance can be discussed and matters of local interest can be brought to the attention of the national Parliament.

The Government supports the main changes that are recommended: moving to a situation where ministers will be questioned on three days a week rather than one; reducing the time between the lodging of questions and their being answered; and introducing a new facility for members to lodge short-notice topical questions for answer at the beginning of the parliamentary week. They are important new developments.

**Hugh Henry:** The minister has placed great emphasis on holding Government ministers to account and he said that question times are crucial in that regard. Does he agree, though, that it is a matter not just of extending the amount of time for questions, but of ensuring, perhaps through his own good offices, that ministers actually answer the questions that they are asked?

**The Presiding Officer:** Minister, you really do need to wind up.

**Brian Adam:** How ministers answer questions is of course a matter for them. We are all judged on how we deal with questions. I think that it would be beyond the wit of even someone of Mr Henry's calibre to specify when a question has been properly answered, because quite often that is judged on the basis of whether someone got the answer that they wanted as opposed to whether they got an answer.

**Margo MacDonald:** Will the minister take an intervention?

**The Presiding Officer:** I am sorry, but the minister must wind up.

**Brian Adam:** Okay.

None of the changes that I have just described will make the life of the Government or of ministers easier. There will be real challenges for the Government in balancing ministerial duties outwith the chamber with the Parliament's ability to hold ministers to account at committee and in plenary on three days of the week. However, the Government agrees that these are important and necessary changes to improve the topicality of parliamentary business and to increase the Parliament's ability to respond quickly to emerging issues. The Government is therefore committed to working constructively in their implementation, if they are adopted by the Parliament today.

**The Presiding Officer:** I am sorry, minister, but I now call Paul Martin, who has six minutes.

15:28

**Paul Martin (Glasgow Provan) (Lab):** On behalf of the Scottish Labour Party, I advise members that we will support Dave Thompson's motion on behalf of the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee. However, while we support the principles of the committee report as the convener set them out, I would like to highlight a number of issues that we believe require further consideration by the Parliament.

First, the committee's recommendation that the Parliament plenary sessions take place on Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday afternoons—the committee referred to it as the remodelling of the parliamentary week—sounds good and laudable, but the extension of plenary sessions should ensure that the Scottish Government is, in fact, held to account. It is not often that I would look to Westminster for inspiration on parliamentary reform, but I would like to highlight how quickly Westminster was able to have a chamber statement from Jeremy Hunt, the Secretary of State for Culture, following the Rupert Murdoch story. Within hours of his aide resigning, we saw Jeremy Hunt giving an urgent statement to the House of Commons. In this Parliament, we still await a statement from the Government on the Murdoch issue, and any scrutiny that has taken place has been during First Minister's question time.

**John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP):** The member makes the interesting point that, at Westminster, statements are perhaps produced more quickly and more often. However, does he accept that there is a tension here? On a Monday,

the House of Commons starts at half past two and goes on until 10 o'clock at night, so it has a lot more time to play with. Taking an hour or 40 minutes out of a debate is therefore not as serious as it is for us.

**Paul Martin:** That sounds to me like something from John Mason's database of excuses for why Governments cannot be held to account. Governments should be held to account, and we should take cognisance of the example that Westminster has set. We are considering some parliamentary reforms that have not taken place at Westminster, but we should also look at areas in which it has tended to get things right. In the case of the Murdoch story, the fact that Jeremy Hunt was before the Westminster Parliament within hours sets an example to this Parliament, as does the scrutiny that the Prime Minister found himself under.

**Margo MacDonald:** Will the member take an intervention?

**Paul Martin:** I will let Margo MacDonald in in a moment.

We also welcome the proposal for topical questions, which we see as a good opportunity for members to press the Government on issues that have seen significant coverage in the public arena. However, the Government of the day will need to ensure that ministers fulfil their responsibility to answer the topical questions that are put to them. Hugh Henry was right to make the point that it is important that ministers answer questions. That challenge has been put to the current Government, but it was put to previous Governments as well. We should learn from the experience that we have from the time of the previous coalition Governments. They did not always answer questions. I remember being on the receiving end of that on many occasions. We should approach the issue maturely and ensure that members are given respect when they ask questions in Parliament.

The remodelling of the parliamentary week will see us move away from Thursday mornings in the chamber, which have traditionally been set aside for Opposition business, so that the business lands in the middle of the parliamentary week. We are concerned that the new arrangements raise the possibility of a majority Government dictating that Opposition business should be placed at the end of the parliamentary week. On behalf of the Scottish Labour Party, I make it clear that we will oppose any attempt to place Opposition business at the end of the parliamentary week. We will do that not just because of the current challenges that we face, but for the benefit of future Opposition parties that find themselves in the same position.

I will take Margo MacDonald's intervention.

**Margo MacDonald:** The point that I wanted to comment on has passed, but in case I am not called to speak in the debate, I say in response to John Mason's point that the Presiding Officer—or the Speaker, in the case of the House of Commons—can often determine whether a subject that is raised is relevant and whether a member is being apposite. Also, we should remember that, if we lose 40 minutes from a debate, somebody can move for an extension of 40 minutes in the next debate.

**Paul Martin:** Margo MacDonald's points are well made, and they are issues for further consideration by the committee.

We heard from the convener of the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee a commitment to review the effectiveness of the reforms. I welcome that. We need to recognise that we have not been effective at reviewing earlier parliamentary reforms. Let us put down a marker that we will review the reforms that we are discussing today to ensure that they are effective in helping us to hold Governments to account.

We might also wish to consider the possibility of an independent report, so that we have an effective audit of the delivery of the reforms.

We welcome the committee's work and the fact that various external stakeholders were involved in the debate. I finish by stressing the importance of ensuring that Governments are held to account. We must ensure that the parliamentary reforms that we are discussing today are effective in ensuring that accountability.

15:34

**John Lamont (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con):** It is fair to say that all parties share the desire for the Parliament to be modern, flexible and fit for the job that it was established to do—to pass laws that will benefit the people of Scotland and to hold the Scottish Government to account. Of course, the latter point has been given greater significance by the results of last year's elections. It is more important than ever that the Parliament can hold ministers and Governments to account.

It has been 13 years since the Parliament first met, and it is right that we are now considering whether reform is necessary. The passage of the Scotland Act 2012 earlier this year means that the largest ever transfer of financial powers to Scotland since the United Kingdom was created has taken place. The Scottish Government will have to decide how best to use those significant new powers. As the Parliament's powers increase, the ability to hold to account those who exercise those powers must be robust and effective.

Presiding Officer, parliamentary reform has been discussed before, but you must be praised for creating the momentum for change. The Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee was tasked with considering chamber and committee sitting patterns and reported on the topic last December, as we heard from the committee's convener. A range of recommendations was made, including the recommendation that the changes should be implemented before Easter. It is important to take our time to get any changes right, but that should not be used as an excuse for delay. Equally, we should view the reforms not as the final stage but as part of the process of continuing evolution of our Parliament.

The focus of our debate is the committee's second report of 2012, on parliamentary reform, which outlines the standing order rule changes that are required to implement the proposals. The committee and the Parliamentary Bureau share the same aim for reform. The bureau did not accept some of the committee's initial proposals, but it has supported fundamental changes to the Parliament's working practices.

It is important to note that some of the committee's recommendations involved matters that are outwith standing orders and therefore beyond the committee's control and remit. For example, the committee recommended a trial of allowing a smaller number of longer back-bench speeches in open debate. In response, the Presiding Officer was correct to point out on behalf of the bureau that such a proposal is not for standing orders. I note that the Presiding Officer strongly shares the committee's aim of encouraging debate and I commend the actions that she has taken to encourage interventions. To that end, we will continue our approach of sharing with members information on debates.

I turn to the recommendations that the standing order rule changes are to implement. The Scottish Conservatives are broadly in favour of the proposed changes. The creation of a three-day plenary working week will enhance Parliament's ability to respond to live events. The proposal will not increase the length of the working week, but it will mean that three days a week are available for parliamentary business.

However, as we noted in our initial response to the committee, that change should be more than mere tokenism, and substantial business must be scheduled over all three days. The inclusion of question time on all three days and the introduction of topical questions will further enhance Parliament's ability to respond to recent events and hold ministers to account.

The recommendation that committees should be able to meet at the same time as chamber



business takes place, when circumstances do not allow them to meet at any other time, is a sensible suggestion to streamline committee business. It is right that that procedure should be used only in exceptional circumstances.

Some of the proposed changes raise concerns in my mind and the minds of my Conservative colleagues. The proposed changes will allow debates to take place on Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday afternoons. In theory, Government or Opposition debates could be scheduled on any of those afternoons. However, given that the Government in effect controls the allocation of debating time, the concern must be that a Government that was under pressure would allocate Opposition time to the Thursday afternoon, to avoid closer scrutiny.

Thursday afternoons are undoubtedly less attractive for a number of reasons, not least because they are at the end of the week and because the media focus on Thursdays is on First Minister's question time. Like Labour, we argue strongly for a presumption against using the Thursday afternoon debating slot for Opposition debates.

It is correct to reduce the time between lodging and asking questions, but the bureau's suggested timetable will mean that the deadline for lodging all questions will fall at 12 noon on Mondays. Although I am supportive of that, there is a risk of duplication of questions and a reduced opportunity for Opposition members to question the Government on a variety of topics, as all questions will be lodged around the same time. We may want to review how that is working in a few months' time.

As made clear in the initial report, the committee sees this as the start of a process. It is important that the effects of any reforms are considered and further changes made, if necessary. It would be regrettable if another 13 years were to pass without any further consideration of the Parliament's working week.

I am pleased to confirm that the Conservatives will be supporting the committee's motion.

**The Presiding Officer:** We move to the open debate. Members have six minutes for speeches, but time is extremely tight and I may have to cut that time as we near the end of the debate.

15:40

**Paul Wheelhouse (South Scotland) (SNP):** Thank you, Presiding Officer. At your request, the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee looked at the possibility of holding committee meetings on Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday mornings with plenary sessions being

held in the afternoons, as others have mentioned. You also asked the committee to review ministerial question times.

Self-evidently, as someone who was elected just last year I found that challenge both interesting and somewhat daunting, as I am a relatively new kid on the block. However, although some procedural aspects are still unfamiliar to me, after a year in the Parliament I have been working here for long enough to form my own view on some strengths and weaknesses of the parliamentary week. I have seen things from my perspective, but I have also tried to see things from others' perspectives. Although I am disadvantaged by a relative lack of experience in this place, as a new member I have one advantage, in that members who were elected in 1999 may never have been able to look upon the Parliament with the benefit of an outsider's view,

"to see ourselves as others see us."

We have some excellent debates and we have some poor ones. I welcome in particular the increased availability of time for members' business, because members' debates often tackle some of the most interesting subjects. Often the degree of enlightenment can be constrained by speeches being limited to four minutes, so I welcome the allocation of additional time. I will highlight a couple of examples: the debate on the cumulative impact of wind farms, which is referred to in the committee's report, and the debate that John Lamont mentioned on rail services between Edinburgh and Berwick. Both subjects were very good and generated stimulating debates, but the debates would have been greatly strengthened if we had been able to have longer speeches with more scope for interventions.

However, even six-minute speeches can be constraining when we are dealing with complex, multifactorial issues or technical subjects, and interventions can be made impossible in those circumstances—although perhaps too often members resort to using that as an excuse not to take interventions.

I am new enough still to have that perspective and, based on conversations that I have had with outside voices and stakeholders who gave evidence to the committee—the convener mentioned a number of them—I have come to the view that change is needed. We did all that we could to retain a family-friendly ethos, but we needed to strike a balance between realigning the parliamentary week to generate additional plenary opportunities, time for members' debates—which has obviously been accepted—and opportunities for topical and ministerial questions, and allowing sufficient time for members, particularly those from rural areas, to attend constituency events, engage with local and regional stakeholders and work in

their constituency or regional offices. The revised proposals meet those tests.

Moreover, if the committee's reforms are adopted that will mark an important step in the evolution of the Parliament. Tony Blair showed his contempt for the Parliament when he infamously described it as having no more powers than an English parish council. Frankly, that said more about him than it did about the Parliament. This place is now a key part of Scots' everyday lives and has a growing influence on them, as shown in the Scottish social attitudes survey.

As John Lamont said, regardless of the ultimate constitutional future of Scotland, this place will have to take ever-greater responsibility for the governance of Scotland. Even the somewhat limited powers that were delivered by the Scotland Act 2012 will require additional scrutiny in areas associated with repatriated powers and, especially, regarding the tax powers in areas such as the Scottish rate of income tax, landfill tax and the stamp duty land tax.

One of the biggest concerns of former colleagues and people in the media and academia who gave evidence to the committee was the evident lack of topicality of matters for debate. As the convener stated, currently we have a wait from Thursday afternoon until the following Wednesday to see the chamber sit, and an even longer wait for themed questions and First Minister's question time.

The lead time for lodging questions further contributes to the lack of topicality and the reduction in perceived relevance to the public, media and other stakeholders. That lack of topicality is not good enough, and the changed sitting times and topical question session will address those shortcomings—I warmly welcome the bureau's acceptance of that.

Those of us who have ambition for the Scottish Parliament to be a truly national Parliament—last week's debate on Scotland's future suggests that that is the majority of us—should see this as an opportunity to reposition the Parliament in the public eye. As Margo MacDonald said, Westminster dominates the media coverage between Mondays and Wednesdays, with Prime Minister's questions on Wednesday afternoons. Only on Thursdays does the Scottish Parliament seem to get much oxygen, with First Minister's questions, which is the only bit of theatre during the week. Topical questions and increased scope for ministerial questions have the potential to generate greater media interest if they lead to more topicality.

I hope that, in due course, the Presiding Officer and the bureau will consider the opportunity for more supplementary questions to be asked. That

would be good for ministers but it would also allow members to hone their abilities and to probe deeper into the issues. By its nature, the chamber rota that we all sit on means that we will have to cover only one Tuesday afternoon session every three weeks—certainly, in the case of the SNP group—unless we volunteer to do more. Those members who have neither a Tuesday committee nor a place on the Tuesday chamber rota could find themselves largely unaffected by the change in sitting patterns.

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

I remind the member that we are not all on a rota to come here. I am certainly not on a rota—I say that with my party's chief whip sitting in front of me. I am here by choice to listen to this interesting debate.

**Paul Wheelhouse:** I am delighted that Mrs Scanlon is here to listen to this interesting debate. However, as not all her party's members are in the chamber for every session in the week there seems to be a pattern to their attendance.

**The Presiding Officer:** You are beyond your time, Mr Wheelhouse, please sit down.

**Paul Wheelhouse:** If I could just mention one final thing, Presiding Officer—

**The Presiding Officer:** No, you are beyond your time.

15:47

**Helen Eadie (Cowdenbeath) (Lab):** I apologise, Presiding Officer, for being a minute or two late. I have no good excuse; I can only say that it is the earliest that I have ever been late.

Parliamentary reform is one of those rare pieces of work that has had the Presiding Officer, the Conveners Group, the Parliamentary Bureau and the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee undertake an MOT of the Parliament. Therefore, the work has been thorough. I am in full agreement with the thinking that the Scottish Parliament needs to be able to respond swiftly to topical issues and that it must be seen to be responsive. However, in committee, I took the view that the proposal whereby the committees would sit every morning and the Parliament would meet every afternoon would gain little additional chamber time for the Parliament. The phrase "moving the deckchairs on the Titanic" came to mind: a lot of perceived effort but little gain. I took that view at a relatively early stage in the deliberations—in December last year, when we published our report—and I do not think that any political grouping in the Parliament had, at that time, arrived at a view. Subsequently, however, the Labour Party deliberated on its views and agreed that the proposed change should be

endorsed. I shall respect the party's view and endorse it.

There will be political implications for any Government, as it will need to arrange to be in Parliament much more and to spend less time visiting hard-to-get-to areas of Scotland. For any Opposition that will be good news, as it will help to pin down ministers and their back benchers, who will be required to be in the Parliament for parliamentary questions, ministerial statements and the like. While Labour is in opposition, that will give SNP ministers a particular headache because, instead of campaigning for their referendum around the country, they will be pinned down here in the Parliament.

I was extremely concerned about the effect of the proposed change on the committees, which are perceived to be the jewel in the crown of the Scottish Parliament—that reputation will, undoubtedly, be affected. It is virtually certain that the time that members spend in committee will be forcibly restricted, as Hugh Henry said. The committee's report acknowledges that that is the main negative issue. A few MSPs might welcome that, but I do not. For the reasons given, I suggest that the change will have unintended consequences for committees—and for the worse, as far as parliamentary scrutiny is concerned.

Not everyone approved of my former parliamentary colleague Bristow Muldoon's convenership of long committee meetings, but the output of the meetings was certainly thorough. I well remember a meeting that famously went on until about 10 pm. Most commentators, especially committee members, questioned the wisdom of having such long meetings.

The changes will have other unintended consequences, so I am glad that the committee acknowledged in its report that further changes might be needed down the line, in the light of experience.

**John Mason:** Does the member accept that there is flexibility to allow committees to sit for longer? For example, the Scotland Bill Committee, which was convened by Linda Fabiani, sat for extended periods while the Parliament was sitting and in the evenings, because permission was given.

**Helen Eadie:** The approach requires each occasion to be brought to the Parliament for permission to be given, which removes flexibility on the part of committee members.

In the world of real politics, there is no putting the genie back in the bottle once it has been let out. Any suggestion that MSPs do not work hard enough usually resonates with public perception. I know that the public cannot understand why we are not all in the chamber all the time.

In the more than 13 years during which I have been an MSP, I cannot recall a time when I was not a member of two committees and was not in the Parliament three days a week and in my constituency for the rest of the time. Occasionally I needed to be in the Parliament on a Monday or a Friday, but that was relatively rare. In the course of the inquiry, I was surprised to learn that some MSPs have tried to be in the Parliament only on Wednesdays and Thursdays. That was an eye-opener for me. Some people said that a driver for the proposed change was the need to ensure that all MSPs are in the Parliament three days a week. What a sad reflection it is on our Parliament that some parliamentarians have tried to restrict their presence in the Parliament to two days. No names were given to me, so there can be no pack-drill in relation to the MSPs who have done that.

I hope that if we make the changes, committees do not find that there are severe limitations on them. I also hope that no wider parliamentary concerns emerge.

I am concerned that the Parliament did not begin to consult its staff on the changes until after the publication of the committee's report. There was therefore no input from the Parliament's clerking teams on changes in the working week, which is hardly the way for a progressive employer to behave. Consultation after the event, with no feedback to MSPs on staff views, means that we are taking decisions without being fully informed about the impact of the proposed changes.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer (John Scott):** You must close now.

**Helen Eadie:** I support the motion. Like the convener, I thank our clerks, who worked hard to ensure that all committees' views were reflected.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** We are extremely tight for time. Speeches of less than six minutes would be welcome, and we might have to take time off the closing speeches.

15:53

**Margaret Burgess (Cunninghame South) (SNP):** I am a member of the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee and I thank the clerks and committee staff for all their work during our inquiry. I also thank the Scottish Parliament information centre for the briefing papers that it provided. Like Paul Wheelhouse, I was experiencing a parliamentary inquiry for the first time since becoming an MSP, and I thought that staff did an excellent and impressive job. I also thank everyone from inside and outside the Parliament who gave evidence, which helped to inform our discussions and deliberations.

My first parliamentary inquiry meant a steep learning curve for me on parliamentary procedure, which is not the most riveting topic, however important it is. Some people might ask how someone who is just in the door can decide on changes to the parliamentary week, when they barely know how the current arrangements work. However, the combination of newbies such as me and members who were more experienced in the Parliament's workings, along with witnesses who gave evidence, meant that we could look at the situation from every angle and, as the convener said, conduct a thorough MOT for the Parliament. The Presiding Officer's commissioning us to conduct the inquiry and to look at the Parliament as an institution and its relevance was the right way to do things.

During the inquiry, I was struck by the evidence from the Speaker of the southern Irish Parliament, which had recently reformed its week. The Parliament there and its politicians had been under constant attack by the press, which left the Irish public thinking that the Parliament was rarely in session and the deputies had an easy job. Because of that, every party in southern Ireland campaigned to increase the Parliament's hours. That was done, but they are now struggling to fill the hours with relevant business, and the deputies are finding it difficult to find time for constituency work, which the public expect them to do. The Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee did not want to make that mistake. It was clear that changes should not be made just for the sake of making them.

It has been said that there were valid arguments both for and against changing the sitting patterns for plenary sessions, but I believe that having plenary sessions three afternoons a week is the right way forward. After all, this is our national Parliament, and very few—if any—national Parliaments meet on only two days a week. It has also been said that the Parliament has additional powers from the Scotland Act 2012. No matter what happens in 2014, we know that the Parliament will have more powers, so it is essential that we gear up a notch in preparation for that. I also support the view that plenary meetings on Tuesday afternoons will increase the ability to respond to issues that have emerged over the previous five days.

I want to take up some of the points that have been made about the committees. The committee recognised that reduced time for committees could have a negative impact on the parliamentary process, but the proposals should not adversely impinge on committee time, as there is sufficient flexibility to allow them to meet on Mondays or Fridays during particularly lengthy inquiries if they choose to do so. As we have heard, in exceptional circumstances and with the approval of the

Parliament a committee can meet at the same time as a plenary session is in progress.

The issue of scheduling is not for the committee, but we looked at the scheduling of committee meetings and how long they have met for. It was clear that not every committee meets for two or three hours on every occasion. Therefore, I think that the proposals can work without taking away committee time. The committee holds the view that plenary sessions on Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday afternoons with committees meeting in the mornings strikes the right balance.

The proposed question time changes, with questions at the start of every sitting, will provide more time to hold the Government to account, and shorter lead-in times for lodging questions will allow more topicality in the issues that are raised. I think that most of us have lodged questions that have been redundant by the time that we have got round to asking them. There will have been a debate on the issue the day before, or the question will have been answered previously. Therefore, I am sure that everyone will welcome the proposed question time changes.

The proposals to allow more time for back benchers' business, with an additional members' business debate each week, should be welcomed. I would have liked to go further on that by allowing the member whose motion was debated an opportunity to respond to the points that have been raised, although the minister would still be given the last word. I would also have liked to see other changes to members' business debates, but I accept that they are in the remit of the Presiding Officer, not the committee.

To conclude, I believe that the proposed changes will meet the set objectives—that is, that they will improve the topicality of parliamentary business, lead to more effective scrutiny of the Scottish Government, and increase the ability to respond to emerging issues. We also have the assurance that the committee will keep things under review and propose further changes if they are required.

15:58

**Duncan McNeil (Greenock and Inverclyde) (Lab):** I welcome the opportunity to speak in this debate on parliamentary reform.

I suppose that it is surprising how quickly we can become set in our ways. When change is not part of the culture, as in this institution, it is often difficult to create the necessary change. Thankfully, we had the consultative steering group, which has been mentioned. Henry McLeish, the late Campbell Christie, Joyce McMillan, George Reid and Jim Wallace among others foresaw the need for on-going change in

the Parliament, and they recommended that there should be self-assessment, monitoring and a taking stock of our policy and performance on an annual basis, set against the principles of power sharing, access, participation and equal opportunities.

I welcome the committee's work: although the changes have been long in coming, that is no reflection on the work of the current committee. I look forward to its on-going work, which has particular relevance for the business of the committees.

The consultative steering group envisaged powerful committees that would ensure that our Parliament would not simply focus on debates in the chamber. The committees would have powers and responsibilities to initiate legislation, scrutinise the Government of the day, conduct inquiries and play a pre-legislative role in the development of policy. By any assessment—self-assessment, monitoring or taking stock—and balancing the results against the principles of the Parliament, the committees are sadly unable to meet that expectation.

Why has that happened? Perhaps the expectations were too high. In our desire to be different from Westminster, we created committees with both standing and select functions, but we have been more successful in the area of scrutinising legislation than we have been on policy development. Perhaps the steering group was too optimistic in the degree and level of cross-party co-operation that it expected to take place.

There are other practical intrusions such as the loss of institutional knowledge—which is sometimes referred to as churn—when the members of committees change, which does not add to the strength of those committees in some instances. There is limited time in which committees can be independent and proactive, and set work programmes with those who have an interest in them.

We have lost out institutionally to an Executive, to its desire and drive, and to its policy and manifesto. None of those is a crime in itself, but I am suggesting that there are imperatives in that regard that work against the stature of our committees. Political parties are reluctant to share power on policy—indeed, they think that only they should be developing policy.

Given the focus on the chamber and the set-piece debates, the Parliamentary Bureau, with its need to get the job done in the squeeze of time, impacts on committees and what they are able to do. The SPCB, with all its responsibilities to run the Parliament efficiently, naturally works with those powers in the Parliament to achieve that

aim. It is clear that the 15 committees of this Parliament are no match for that collective, but that situation has led to an unequal balance of power within the institution, which was clearly not the consultative steering group's intention.

The committees have been passive in that process, which has happened over a period of time. They now reflect the majority in the Parliament, which is an added complication that we need to examine. The system was never designed for a Government with a majority, but the process has been happening over time. Committee members and conveners have been too passive and too willing to accept the pressure of time; too willing to toe the party line; too slow to accept innovation and change in the committees; and too ready to discuss issues in private rather than in public.

I say that as someone who has some understanding of all the committees. I have been a whip in the Parliament, so I have had responsibility for ensuring that others toed the party line. I served two terms on the SPCB, I am currently serving my second term as a convener of a committee in the Parliament and I have served on the Parliamentary Bureau. I am therefore complicit in the process, but I am afraid that our committees have lost out.

Many of those issues have been recognised, and the Presiding Officer recognises them too. Many solutions have been discussed, but although they may improve the situation in the short term, we now need to ask the hard questions about whether we as parliamentarians want to fulfil our ambitions for our committees.

I now—

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** I regret to say that you must close.

**Duncan McNeil:** We need to ask whether our committees are fit for purpose at present, for dealing with additional powers or, indeed, for the situation that some foresee, which would involve an independent Scotland.

16:05

**Bob Doris (Glasgow) (SNP):** I very much enjoyed Duncan McNeil's speech, in which he raised many key issues that the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee—of which I am a member—will look at in the future.

I thank the clerks to the committee, the witnesses from whom it heard, the MSP colleagues from all parties who sidled up to me to give me their views on parliamentary reform, the Parliamentary Bureau, business managers and, of course, the Presiding Officer for all their work in

driving forward the reform agenda. I make special mention of the committee's convener, Dave Thompson, and his absolute dedication and focus in driving forward the reform process. It should not go unsaid that his work has been absolutely remarkable.

Like others, I would like to provide some context for the debate. The Parliament is gearing up for additional powers. Those powers are coming anyway; there is no constitutional debate about that. The new Scotland Act 2012 is being put in place. Whether we are talking about devo plus, devo max or independence post-2014, there is a general consensus that this place will have substantially more power. Given that we will have greater powers, we must ensure that we scrutinise the work that is done in this place more effectively and that, as well as continuing to be topical and relevant, we are seen to be topical and relevant by the people whom we represent. I believe that the Scottish Parliament is held in high esteem across Scotland, but we should never be complacent. We must seek to enhance our structures to better meet the needs of the people whom we serve—the Scottish public.

I want to comment on the issue of the topicality of Scottish Parliament debates. In particular, I mention the proposed topical question time on Tuesday afternoons, which I believe is a fundamental part of the reforms. The current outbreak of legionnaire's disease in Edinburgh is a relevant example of the need for such a question time. I am pleased that a statement will be made to the chamber on that issue tomorrow, and I acknowledge that Tuesday was a public holiday, but—

**Duncan McNeil:** Will the member take an intervention?

**Bob Doris:** Of course—when I have finished my point.

The fact that there is to be a topical question time on Tuesday afternoons means that it will be possible for events that emerge over the parliamentary weekend—which begins on a Thursday evening—to be dealt with routinely.

In addition, the current system of themed question time and general question time involves a seven-day lag between the submission of a question and the asking of a supplementary. Many MSPs take a punt on what will be topical in seven days' time. I do not find that acceptable. Having the ability to lodge a question on a Monday lunch time that can be asked of a minister on Tuesday afternoon represents a substantial step forward for this place.

**Duncan McNeil:** I will take advantage of Bob Doris's mention of legionnaire's disease. Does he recognise that it is also important for the work of

the committees to be topical? Next week, there is a space in the Health and Sport Committee's work programme, when we could get in, rather than the politicians, some of the people who will not make a statement tomorrow—namely, someone from NHS Lothian, someone from the Health and Safety Executive and other people who are involved in the process. Let us do that next week.

**Bob Doris:** I am the deputy convener of the Health and Sport Committee, and I say gently to the committee's convener that if I had intervened on him to make such a suggestion, he would quite rightly have chastised me and told me that the committee's work should be decided by committee members at a committee meeting and not in an ad hoc way, on the basis of a knee-jerk reaction, in the chamber. I appreciate the member putting that proposal on the record, but I think that it is a matter for the committee to discuss. As Mr McNeil knows, due process is rather important.

I turn to members' business debates. I welcome the idea of having a third members' business debate, which will be embedded in a plenary session rather than being an add-on at the end. I genuinely welcome that, although the slot after First Minister's question time might be seen as an add-on in itself. We will have to monitor that. I am disappointed that the person who secures a members' business debate will not have a right to reply after other members have had their say, but before the minister sums up. However, I take on board the Presiding Officer's concerns that that might change the dynamic of members' business debates, and that it would have to be handled quite seriously.

I have one or two further comments to make. We will have a plenary session on Tuesday afternoons. Some MSPs do not come to Parliament until Wednesday, although it is not because they are not working; they are working in their constituencies. That can mean that Tuesday afternoons and evenings are a bit of a graveyard slot when it comes to wider engagement with the public and evening events. If more MSPs are here on a Tuesday afternoon, it might mean a more vibrant Tuesday evening and more engagement with civic Scotland. That could be a benefit.

Paul Martin talked about holding ministers to account. The Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee's report says that we favour fewer questions being asked of ministers but more supplementaries. If a member is dissatisfied after asking their question and their supplementary question, rather than another member getting to ask the next question, the original member could get a second or third attempt at a follow-up question. The Presiding Officer has said that she will consider allowing that

in the future once the current reforms have bedded in.

This is quite a dynamic set of reforms, which contains a lot of good news. Although I might wish the reforms to go further, it is important for the Presiding Officer and the Parliamentary Bureau to take a balanced approach. The reforms will deliver, not as an end in themselves but as an improvement to how we represent the people of Scotland.

16:11

**Alison McInnes (North East Scotland) (LD):** I ask colleagues to excuse my voice; I have a bad throat today.

From the outset, there was clear determination to make the Scottish Parliament a different kind of Parliament. "Shaping Scotland's Parliament", the report of the consultative steering group that was set up in advance of the new Parliament, stressed the desire for a modern Parliament that was open, accessible and visible, while being family friendly. The standing orders that were adopted in the first session of the Parliament largely achieved that.

I am glad that our Parliament is a business-like one that is not hung up on archaic procedures. Standing orders have served us well and we have achieved a great deal in the formative years of the Parliament. However, no one should expect everything to stay the same as the day it was set up. It is right therefore to reflect on and review our *modus operandi*. Our parliamentary procedures should evolve in response to our changing role and public expectations.

As the Parliament matures, the Scottish people increasingly look to us to respond quickly to emerging concerns, but there is a sense that the current shape of the parliamentary week restricts our ability to respond as swiftly as we would like. I congratulate the Presiding Officer on her determination to make this parliamentary session the time for procedural reform. She has been resolute in that. We have already benefited from some changes that were within her remit to make, such as more time for questions from back benchers, longer speaking slots in debates, and so on.

Today we are considering what changes are required to standing orders to enable us to reform the parliamentary week. I thank the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee for the research that it has done for its report. It has helped us to see ourselves as others see us and has set out a well-reasoned case for reform of the parliamentary week. Scottish Liberal Democrats support the proposed changes and I am glad to note that there is cross-party support for them.

I do not doubt that the proposals will have an impact on MSPs. As elected representatives, we have a number of roles, and the challenge for us all is to strike the proper balance between constituency and parliamentary work. I am content that the proposals that we are considering today keep things in reasonable balance, but I welcome the indication that the matter will be kept under review.

We do need to monitor the impact on committee work. We need to ensure that committees do not feel squeezed. The proposals will limit the opportunity for committees to sit for a whole day, although in practice few currently do so, given that a number of members sit on more than one committee on the same day. With a little adjustment of start times, committees should have sufficient time to tackle their business. However, the proposals could further restrict the ability of committees to take their work outside the Parliament. In the early days, there was a hope that the Parliament would take its meetings beyond Edinburgh, and be active in communities across Scotland. That has not happened as much as I would have liked, so perhaps further consideration could be given to that.

Our Parliament has no revising chamber and our committees were intended to have a key role in scrutinising and amending legislation. They have a patchy record in doing that and we need to look again at that in the light of the changing circumstances relating to the majority Government that we have at the moment. We should not be afraid to question how effective our committees can now be. I hope that that will be the focus of further work by the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee and others.

A key role for MSPs is to scrutinise the Scottish Government's work. The Parliament needs to have the time and opportunity to do so regularly. Current question times are rigid and, as members have said, there is a long run-in time for the lodging of questions, which makes them far from topical. Extending the plenary sessions as suggested into a Tuesday afternoon will provide a welcome opportunity for more frequent questioning, especially on developing issues.

The proposal to have topical questions on Tuesday, portfolio questions on Wednesday and general questions along with First Minister's questions on Thursday will give MSPs a much better range of opportunities to scrutinise the Government and to explore issues of concern. If, as anticipated, the Presiding Officer selects a maximum of one or two topical questions per week, that will give the member who asks the question, and other members who are trying to follow through, plenty of scope for in-depth questioning of ministers. That is an important

reform. The reduction in lead-in time for questions will engender more topicality.

The Parliament was set up to be as family friendly as possible, in recognition of the fact that we have other commitments as parents, carers, partners or whatever. A modern Parliament should strive for that healthy balance, which is why I am pleased that we have not opted for a blanket extension to sitting hours into the evenings on a Wednesday. For some of us who travel down from the north, a blanket extension would make no difference, as we are away from our families for at least three days a week anyway but, for those who can travel home of an evening, I wish to protect that ability and ensure that they can continue to travel home at a reasonable hour that allows for some family time.

**Dennis Robertson (Aberdeenshire West) (SNP):** As we are a family-friendly Parliament, surely that extends to the staff who work in the Parliament, whether in human resources, security, allowances or other areas. Have we taken enough cognisance of their needs?

**Alison McInnes:** I agree entirely that we must consider the family of people who are involved in the Parliament. I hope that, in developing the proposals further, we will give due regard to those needs. That takes me back to my point that it is important not routinely to extend the sitting hours, although it is correct to reserve the possibility of meeting for longer on Wednesdays if necessary; for example, when we deal with complex bills at stage 3. The business managers and the Parliamentary Bureau have a crucial role in ensuring that there is not a drift in the direction of doing that routinely.

I recognise the concerns that the Labour and Conservative business managers outlined and believe that there should be a presumption against having Opposition business on a Thursday. However, I accept that it is for the business managers on the bureau to try to accommodate that.

This process should be just the start of the reform. We must strive to continue to be open and accountable while being more flexible in our approach.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** I call Hugh Henry. You have up to five minutes, Mr Henry.

16:17

**Hugh Henry (Renfrewshire South) (Lab):** The fact that I have up to five minutes indicates one of the problems with the way in which the Parliament operates. If someone has a contrary view to express, their opportunity to advance that in the Parliament is limited. That is one of the reasons

why we need change in the things that actually matter about the way in which we do our business. I have been an advocate of change for some considerable time and I agree with Paul Wheelhouse that change is needed. I support the Presiding Officer's efforts to bring about change; the issue is just that I do not think that what is on offer is good enough to effect the change that we need.

Dave Thompson is right that we should approach the matter with a critical eye. We should look, root and branch, at the way in which we operate and we should be prepared to be radical if that is required. We should not rest on our laurels and say that we are a new Parliament and we do business better than Parliaments elsewhere, including Westminster. If others do things better than we do, we should be prepared to acknowledge that and learn from it. It is in that spirit that I say that, frankly, this is a wasted opportunity. We need fundamental change in the way in which we do our business.

One thing that has disappointed me in the debate is that members have spoken about the Parliament sitting only on a Wednesday afternoon and a Thursday. They treat the committees of the Parliament as though they are somehow different. I am sorry but, no, the Parliament meets on Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday. It is just that the committees of the Parliament meet at certain times and at other times the Parliament meets in plenary. To separate out the committees in that way does a disservice to what was seen as one of the pillars of this new Parliament.

I agree entirely with the points that Duncan McNeil made about the committees. If we were truly determined to change for the better, we should have started with the fundamentals of the committees. How do we improve our committees? How do we make them more effective? How can we make their ability to hold the Government to account that bit better than it is just now?

**Margo MacDonald:** How do we lessen the grip of the whips?

**Hugh Henry:** That debate has been going on since time immemorial and, as I have only five minutes, I will not even attempt to go there.

We should be looking to strengthen the role of the committees. We should have been thinking about bringing in ministers to the committees more regularly and for longer, in order to allow more detailed debate and scrutiny in the committees, with members having the opportunity to ask the minister question after question until they get some satisfaction. If we wanted to be truly radical, we should have asked why, given that the chair of the Public Audit Committee is always automatically allocated to a member of the



Opposition, we do not do likewise with the chairs of the Finance Committee and some of the other important committees in the Parliament. That would help to ensure that committees are doing their job and holding the Government to account. Further, why not think about giving committees more time to do post-legislative work?

I am sorry, I know that I am rushing my points.

Although I am in favour of having questions that are more topical, we should ensure that, in those precious 15 minutes that have been allocated for topical questions, members can ask not only one follow-up question but two, three or maybe even four follow-up questions, so that they can get to the heart of the problem and ministers are not able to brush them off with a flippant or irrelevant answer. [*Interruption.*] Brian Adam says that someone of my calibre cannot say whether a question has been answered properly. That might be something that we need to look to the Presiding Officer to do, not just with regard to the detail of the answer but with regard to pointing out when the minister has not bothered to speak about the topic of the question that was asked.

We should have thought about taking some of the items of members' business into committees, so that members of the public could be brought closer to the debate and be made to feel part of the process as it is televised and recorded.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** I regret that I must ask you to close.

**Hugh Henry:** There is much more to say on this matter. I think that, to an extent, we are guilty of participating in a cosmetic exercise. We are tinkering. I worry that we are enfeebling committees and I sometimes think that we are in danger of consolidating irrelevance.

16:23

**John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP):** I will respond to the previous speech by saying that structures are important, and I support these reforms, but what we do with structures is important, too. I do not believe that there is a perfect structure. The challenge to us is to do with how we use the existing and future structures.

I am a fairly new member, but I have had the opportunity of seeing how other places work. I support the proposed reforms. Meeting in the chamber three days a week makes sense. The constituents might want to see us in the constituencies, but I have constituents who feel that the real work that I am doing is done in the Parliament, and they are always asking how long I am here for and what I do while I am here. The idea of having more members' business debates is also good, and I suggest that more of us need to

sign the motions of members of other parties in order to encourage a wider range of subjects for debate. I also welcome topical questions.

If there are disadvantages to the proposals, they are to do with the curtailment of time in the constituency. However, we need to strike a balance. Under the Scotland Act 2012 we are getting more powers and that will require more time in the Parliament.

I will make a few comparisons with Westminster—I realise that some people do not like us making comparisons with Westminster and that, if I say anything good about the place, some of my colleagues will probably shout me down, but I think that we compare well with Westminster. We are more transparent, in that it is easier to tell who is getting to speak, when and for how long. We are fairer, in that it is not those who are the longest serving who get to speak the longest. Our voting system is more sensible, in that we do not have to go through lobbies and be counted through doors. Further, making even the changes that we are discussing today would be hugely unlikely at Westminster, where there is enormous resistance to any change at all.

We must, however, be realistic. There are 129 members here, whereas down south there are more than 600 members. That allows Westminster to do things that we probably cannot do, such as regularly have committees meet at the same time as the chamber. The downside is that members of Parliament can hide in the House of Commons, which I suggest is much harder for us. I find the time here more pressurised than it was down there.

I was in London for four days a week with no chance of getting back to my constituency through the week, although many of us here can obviously go back to our constituencies in the evenings. The point has been made that we have more time to meet civic Scotland, be it charities, national groups or whatever. The introduction of the new system should mean that activities that have taken place on a crammed Wednesday evening and Wednesday and Thursday lunch times can also take place on Tuesdays.

Some ideas are not being taken forward and it will be good if those can be looked at again in the future. I support the idea of encouraging interventions. It is noticeable that some members do not take interventions, although I am grateful to all those who have taken interventions from me during the debate. We need to have sympathy for members who do not like taking interventions, but the public enjoy and appreciate interventions. One idea, which comes from down south, is that at Westminster an extra two minutes are sometimes allowed for a speech if a member takes an intervention.

The issue of published questions from party leaders, especially at First Minister's question time, has been commented on. It strikes the public and newcomers such as myself as a bit odd that the same question is repeated by the same person week after week. I accept that there are reasons for that and that it allows a width of supplementary questions, but that is perhaps another practice that could be revised.

I am happy to support the motion. There are wider questions in all this about the good of democracy as a whole. There is a low turnout at many elections and the public clearly wants politics to be done better. Although most of us are in parties and tend to put the party at the top of our agenda, we must balance that commitment with our responsibility for the good of the whole Parliament and our duty to strengthen democracy itself.

16:27

**Willie Coffey (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP):** I am grateful for the opportunity to offer a small contribution on the issue. Although parliamentary reform would not exactly be up there along with the great debates heard in the chamber over the years, it is a crucial part of how we go about our business on behalf of the Scottish people.

The Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee members have done a pretty thorough job and have responded well to the Presiding Officer's request that they re-examine, after 13 years, ways in which to better meet the needs of the people we serve.

Members have already covered the ground pretty well. As speaker number five from my side, I probably do not need all of the allocated time and hope not to repeat too many of the messages that members have already heard.

The principal change, which members have already discussed, is the move to what the media might call a three-day week. It has always been unfair to portray the Parliament, as some sections of the media chose to do in the lead up to the reform, as being part-time and operating in session for only one and a half days a week. As members will confirm, our time is pretty well allocated throughout the three days to a variety of duties that involve committees—as Hugh Henry mentioned—engagements with constituents and debates in the chamber. However, the new proposal appears to level the workload out a bit and should bring the work of the Parliament to the attention of a greater number of people across a wider part of the week. Of course, time will tell, and the real test of the reforms will be the quality

of the business that we transact and the attention that it gains from the wider public.

**Margo MacDonald:** Will the member take an intervention?

**Willie Coffey:** No, thank you. I have only four minutes and I have already chopped two pages off my speech.

The extra members' business debate is very welcome, as is the increased provision for back-benchers' topical questions.

As a member who was lucky to secure quite a number of members' business debates in the previous session of the Parliament, I would say that the quality and topicality of members' business debates has improved in this session.

The move to permit a wider scope of subject material for members' business debates in the future will significantly enhance the role that back benchers can play in the Parliament. If we consider the experience and knowledge that many members of the Parliament bring to this place, it is a positive step forward to open up this part of our work so that we get the most from the experience of parliamentarians.

Who knows, in future members might be treated to a members' business debate from me looking at the Scottish software industry, or at how Scottish and Irish traditional music has helped to shape the cultures of both countries, or at how the emerging democracies in the former Balkan countries, such as Kosovo, are looking to Scotland when they establish systems of governance and accountability, or even perhaps a glance at the impact of local football clubs, such as Kilmarnock Football Club, in contributing to their local economies. We do not hear from members on subjects that they have some knowledge of or are close to their hearts because there is not the scope to do that under the current arrangement. The new arrangement offers new opportunities to us all and will, I hope, enhance the reputation of the Parliament.

If the proposals are agreed to by the Parliament, I very much hope that the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments committee, and indeed the members, keep an eye on what is and is not working. We are right to claim that our Parliament is family friendly and I am certain that that aspiration can be maintained even if we spread the business across the three days as proposed. The fact that most of our parliamentarians will be here on the three days means that we can look forward to more requests to come here and I hope that we will see yet more schools and community groups coming to visit us after the changes take place.

The committee has carried out invaluable work on our behalf and has carefully weighed up the advantages to the Parliament as a whole of the changes that it proposes. I commend the work done by the committee members on the subject, and I look forward with great interest to the implementation of its recommendations.

**The Presiding Officer (Tricia Marwick):** We now move to the wind-up speeches. I regret that Ms MacDonald was not called.

16:31

**Annabel Goldie (West Scotland) (Con):** I am for change, but not just for the sake of change—only when the case for change has been established. That is why I want to examine some of the proposals objectively. I will go back to some of the founding watchwords of the Parliament. It was to be family friendly, modern in practice, and certainly it was not to replicate the sitting practices of Westminster.

As a devolved Parliament of 129 MSPs, it was to balance the needs of constituents, public interest, representation and parliamentary function with allowing MSPs and staff to operate as parents and components of family. I am signed up to that. I warmly support the concept of family, and that breadth of representation has made this Parliament, as an elected forum for MSPs, accessible by people of all ages, not least those with parental or other family responsibilities. From 1999, the beneficial effect of that influence has been obvious and it has enhanced the breadth of contributions to debates and committee proceedings.

Presiding Officer, you are being vigilant and sensitive when you express the desire to ensure that the Parliament is responsive to developments and meets the needs of the people of Scotland by ensuring topicality and relevance in its deliberations. There are two sets of circumstances that did not apply in 1999, but which now give an added piquancy to such a desire. One is the overall majority of one party in the Parliament, and the other is the significant additional powers conferred upon the Parliament by the Scotland Act 2012. The former calls for a heightened emphasis on accountability and the latter places an even more onerous obligation upon our committees. I shall address that latter aspect in more detail in a moment.

I have never taken the view that the more MSPs sit, the better they get on. Indeed, for such a notably garrulous grouping as politicians, the opposite is probably the case. Hugh Henry is absolutely right to say that we should not be dealing with parliamentary sittings and committees in silos. What matters to me is why we sit, whether

in the Parliament or on a committee, and what we do when we sit. If the extension of parliamentary sittings is to provide flexibility in dealing with topical issues and more accountability by debate and use of ministerial questions, then the time is spent usefully. If the extension of sittings is cosmetic—the “Well, it looks as though we’re working harder” approach—then, frankly, we are kidding ourselves, we are failing the Parliament and we are failing our constituents. The extended sittings can be justified provided that they are manifestly for the purpose of satisfying topicality and accountability.

I have one profound concern about the mechanism for asking questions, which operates utterly by chance on the outcome of a ballot, with the exception of First Minister’s question time. In my case, that has meant that over the past few months, I have been selected for questions on health, transport and justice. That is all very interesting, but the area for which I am the spokesman is culture. I last asked a culture question three months ago.

If we are really serious about accountability, surely the MSPs best able to ask ministers questions, to challenge them and to put them under the cosh, are the shadow spokesmen in the opposition parties. They know about the portfolio in depth and they are briefed by external organisations about issues. However, those MSPs—the ones who are most likely to give ministers a hard time—have to rely on chance to be able to ask a relevant parliamentary question.

**Margo MacDonald:** Does the member agree that Westminster has a better way of doing that? If a member is known to have a track record on, or a good knowledge of, a particular subject, the Speaker—in our case the Presiding Officer—makes sure that they contribute to the debate.

**Annabel Goldie:** Hugh Henry alluded to that point and it is an important one. The current structure cannot possibly serve either topicality or accountability. Surely it is not beyond the wit of man—or woman, Presiding Officer—to change that structure.

We must never forget the unique importance of our committees in a unicameral Parliament—Hugh Henry made that point powerfully. Their scrutiny of legislation is vital and their ability to do that thoroughly and robustly is essential. That role cannot be adequately discharged without oral evidence. The committee structure is not there to suit us—it is there to be accessible to and by the public, not least to witnesses.

We need to ensure that witnesses are not deterred from giving evidence by an inconveniently timed committee meeting or by the brevity of the proceedings, because neither will

serve the integrity of this Parliament's committee structure well.

Given the founding watchwords of this Parliament, I was startled to find out that no equalities impact assessment had been carried out on these proposals at an early stage. There are implications for MSPs and for Parliament staff who are parents or who have other family responsibilities. Any regression in that respect would be a negative development for this Parliament.

My party supports change, but the changes that we make must be closely monitored and measured. They should be subject to a probation period of six working months—Paul Martin is correct about the need for review. The test must always be not what suits us because we happen to be here, but what serves the people of Scotland best—wherever they are.

16:37

**James Kelly (Rutherglen) (Lab):** I welcome the opportunity to close the debate for the Labour Party and to indicate that we will support the motion at five o'clock. It has been an interesting debate, and a number of strong views have been expressed across the chamber. Although there will be consensus when it comes to the vote at five o'clock, there are clearly some deep concerns about how we should take the issues forward. Members would do well to bear in mind some of the powerful speeches that have been made.

On taking forward the reform of the parliamentary week, we must bear in mind how effective we are as a Parliament in holding the Government to account. We must also take on board the theme of many of Margo MacDonald's interventions, which was about how we relate parliamentary business to the public, and why BBC Parliament is not interested in some of the afternoon debates.

The reality is that on far too many afternoons we sit in the chamber and have filler debates—we while away the afternoon. We all enjoy a good debate and discussion, but what are we achieving as MSPs? What are we doing to represent our constituents? How are we stimulating interest in the Parliament? That is what we need to examine.

On the specific reforms that the committee looked at, Brian Adam made the case that the change to plenary sitting times will give a consistency to the parliamentary week, in that we will have committee meetings in the mornings and plenary sessions in the afternoon. There is a certain logic to that.

The debate around topical questions is interesting, and Annabel Goldie made a relevant

point about members' experience of asking questions. I have recently got in a couple of questions in the rural affairs ballot, but there are not too many farms in Rutherglen and Cambuslang. To an extent, that illustrates Annabel Goldie's point.

I agree with Paul Wheelhouse's point about members' business debates. The change to having three such debates a week is encouraging because it will allow more members to bring to the chamber issues in which they are interested and which are important to their constituencies.

**Margo MacDonald:** Does the member agree that there might be a more democratic way of allocating members' business debates? Perhaps it could be done by ballot, which is how it is done in Westminster.

**James Kelly:** Obviously, last year's election gave the Scottish National Party an overall majority. I accept the parliamentary rules in that regard, but it means that the SNP has far more members' business debates than any other party, which I think is an issue.

**The Cabinet Secretary for Parliamentary Business and Government Strategy (Bruce Crawford):** Would it not be true that, according to the law of averages, the largest party would still obtain the most members' business debates in any ballot?

**James Kelly:** I am not trying to diminish the result of last year's election and I accept how the parliamentary rules operate in that regard. I am merely pointing out that the schedule for members' business debates shows that the SNP dominates them. Perhaps that is the issue that Margo MacDonald was alluding to.

I turn to concerns that were raised during the debate. Alison McInnes and Duncan McNeil made powerful speeches about the role of parliamentary committees in general, not just in relation to the proposed reforms. We need to examine closely what is being proposed, and we need to be wary of diminishing the role of the committees. The point was made that, with committees finishing at 11.40 on a Thursday morning, there is a chance that committee business could be curtailed. That situation will need to be monitored closely.

Helen Eadie made the point that although we will have an additional plenary session, that does not necessarily mean that the time that we spend in the chamber in a week will be much greater than the current total. We must examine whether the new way of working will make a substantial difference.

Hugh Henry made an important point about accountability and engagement. There is a real challenge for the Government in taking the

proposals forward. The Government must engage with the proposals and show respect to the other parties in the Parliament and to the Parliament itself.

This has been an important debate. We must make the Parliament relevant to the public. In my experience of five years as an MSP, there have been substantive and serious debates, but too many debates take on the nature of an afternoon university debating society. We need to move away from that if we want to be a serious Parliament moving ahead in the 21st century.

16:43

**Brian Adam:** We have had a wide-ranging debate. In response to some of the serious issues that have been raised about parliamentary committees, I point out to colleagues that, in phase 2 of its inquiry, the committee will look at precisely that issue. The committees, with their scrutiny activity, are indeed a very important part of the Parliament and its work. As Duncan McNeil suggested, there is no doubt that we can get set in our ways, but there will be real benefits from the rhythm of a week that will have committees meeting on Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday mornings and plenary sessions on Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday afternoons.

I am perhaps a little surprised that no member described how the changes will impact on them personally, but that shows that members have risen above personal interests in addressing the proposed changes.

On the length of speeches and the number and nature of supplementaries, we already have flexibility, which lies in the hands of the Presiding Officer and her two deputies. It is they who determine who gets to speak, who will ask supplementary questions and how many supplementaries there will be. However, they are constrained by standing orders, and I am not aware of anything in the motion or the proposed changes to standing orders that will change that. Perhaps that might be given further consideration by Mr Thompson and his colleagues on the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee.

I am certain that everybody benefits from having a rhythm to the week and some degree of certainty about how it will flow. It is not just members who benefit, but those who watch us, whether they do it professionally, such as broadcasters and other members of the media, or otherwise. It is important for people to know what will happen and when.

The other substantive point that has been made by the business managers from the Opposition parties is that they are concerned about when

Opposition time will be allocated. There is nothing in the motion or the proposed changes to standing orders that will change the current practice. I heard the suggestion that Thursday afternoon is the fag end of the week. It is indeed, but I have never been aware of any politician who did not want to have the last word.

**Paul Martin:** Does the minister recognise that, except on eight occasions, Opposition business has been held on Thursday mornings? Does he accept that there should be consistency in when Opposition business is held and that it should not be at the end of the week?

**Brian Adam:** There is nothing in the motion or the proposed changes to standing orders that will change the current practice. I am more than happy to continue to engage with representatives of the Opposition parties on how we deal with the issue in future.

**James Kelly:** Will the minister take an intervention?

**Brian Adam:** I ask the member to give me a minute or two.

Members in different parts of the country face different challenges in balancing their constituency roles with being members of the national Parliament, and we need to be sensitive to that.

I was pleased to note the constructive tone that was taken in many of today's speeches, and I express again my gratitude to the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee for the thorough inquiry that it carried out. I am certain that it will be equally thorough during phase 2 of its inquiry, which should address many of the questions that were raised by Hugh Henry, Duncan McNeil, Alison McInnes and others.

**James Kelly:** On the point about Opposition time and there not being any changes, surely the fact that we will no longer be sitting on Thursday mornings means that there will be a change from when Opposition debates have been traditionally held.

**Brian Adam:** If we agree to the motion and the proposed changes to standing orders are made, Thursday morning will not be an option because it will be committee time. What has to be fitted into plenary sessions are the items of business that are covered in standing orders, which include Opposition time, committee time and members' business debates, as well as, quite properly, Government business, whether that is general debates or part of the legislative process.

I assure members that I am willing to listen and engage. Nothing on which we will decide today will change current practice, other than the fact that Thursday mornings will no longer be an option, as James Kelly was right to point out.

**Margo MacDonald:** Will the minister give way?

**The Presiding Officer:** The minister does not have time to give way. You have 30 seconds, minister.

**Brian Adam:** The package that we have been offered strikes the right balance. It is only right and proper to reflect on whether procedures and practices continue to be fit for purpose. I do not know whether we need a six-month limit for a review. I note that no amendment to that effect has been lodged.

**The Presiding Officer:** Minister, you must wind up.

**Brian Adam:** On the Government's behalf, I am delighted to support the proposals. I assure the Parliament that the Government will do all that it can to help to make the changes work well in practice, which will include continuing to engage with Opposition members on when Opposition time should be allocated.

16:51

**Dave Thompson:** I never thought that standing order changes could lead to such an interesting and at times impassioned debate. Of course, the proposals will lead to a fundamental change to the Parliament's working practices, if members agree to them at decision time in only a few minutes.

As I said in my opening speech and as has been repeated by others, the major changes relate to the Parliament's ability to respond quickly to emerging issues and improving back benchers' ability to hold the Government to account. Like many members who have spoken, I believe that moving to morning committee meetings with afternoon plenary sessions of the full Parliament, tied in with the new short-notice topical question time on Tuesdays and additional members' business debates, will help to achieve the aims that I described.

Those measures—plus more time overall for questions and debates; shorter periods between lodging and asking questions; allowing committees to meet on a planned basis at the same time as chamber business takes place; ministerial questions at the start of business on Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Thursdays, instead of only on Thursdays, as at present; members' business debates in core plenary time; and the Presiding Officer's encouragement of more interventions—will fundamentally change how the Parliament operates.

**Margo MacDonald:** Can I ask the committee convenor a question?

**Dave Thompson:** Yes.

**Margo MacDonald:** The member referred to the Presiding Officer's role. Does he agree that the Presiding Officer would have the full Parliament's support if they slapped down ministers who were being irrelevant or wandering from the topic that was at hand?

**Dave Thompson:** That is very much a matter for the Presiding Officer. Later on, I will touch on other issues that might help with that.

In his opening speech, the minister made the point that the changes will not make the Government's life any easier. That is true. Ministers will have to respond at 2 o'clock on a Tuesday to questions that were lodged only at 12 o'clock on the Monday. Ministers will have to be in the chamber to answer those questions, and that short notice will create more difficulties than the present situation does. However, it will be manageable. Ministers and the Government will just have to accept the Parliament's decision and deal with it.

I have no doubt that the proposals will make the Government more accountable and will allow back benchers, Opposition spokespersons and everyone else to lodge questions at what will be short notice, in comparison with the current system. That is a huge step forward for the Parliament.

I welcome the assurances from all the Opposition party spokespersons who said that they would support the motion at decision time.

Paul Martin and a number of other speakers raised the issue of keeping matters under review. I assure him that the committee is very keen to do that. He also said that there would perhaps be a need for an independent inquiry into some of these things. I do not believe that that will be necessary.

What we have before us today is the start of a process. Members will agree that the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee came to the right decisions when it drafted its report, and the bureau has accepted a lot of the recommendations. I assure members that the members of the committee and I are very independently minded, and that we approached the subject by looking at the benefit for Parliament and not whether the reforms would benefit any particular party or the Government of the day—the report shows that. I accept the point made by Hugh Henry and others that we can improve things, on which I will touch later, but the report shows that, even with a majority Government, major changes to the Parliament—changes that the Government will not necessarily like—can be brought forward through our committee system, and that we can get them through Parliament. That is a huge plus for the Scottish Parliament.

John Lamont raised a point about there being no increase to the parliamentary week, on which he was not exactly right. There will be increased time for questions of about 17 per cent and for debates of about 6 per cent. The draft programme that the bureau submitted in its reply to the committee shows increased time for debates and questions in the chamber.

John Lamont also raised the review of lodging times for questions. It was a good point—we will need to keep an eye on that. As part of keeping an eye on the whole process, the committee will review everything at the end of this year, as we move on. We will consider our work programme next week and will have that very much in our mind.

Paul Wheelhouse made a good point about the length of debates and speeches. One of the committee's recommendations was that speeches should be longer, with more interventions. *[Interruption.]*

**The Presiding Officer:** I ask members who are coming into the chamber to keep quiet, please.

**Dave Thompson:** We are quite keen on that recommendation and the bureau did not reject it out of hand—it said that it would look at it in future, once some of the other changes had bedded down. The committee is happy for that to be the case. Such matters will be taken back for further consideration and I am sure that the committee will watch developments very carefully.

I thank my deputy convener, Helen Eadie, for her support and work during the inquiry. Helen took a particular point of view in December and she has stuck to her guns today, on which I congratulate her. I do not accept the point that Helen made about ministers having a problem—

**The Presiding Officer:** Please refer to the member by her full name.

**Dave Thompson:** Sorry. I do not accept Helen Eadie's point that ministers will find it harder to get to all parts of Scotland. I am sure that ministers will manage that very well indeed.

We will look further at committees—an important issue that the conveners group is already looking at—in phase 2 of our inquiry. We decided to kick off with sitting times as we wanted to tackle things in bite-sized chunks—we are very much aware that the committee's previous reports have sat on shelves and gathered dust, and that nothing happened with them. We are very pleased to bring forward very quickly a report on one aspect. We will come back to committees.

I see that my time is running out, so I will close there.

## Business Motions

**The Presiding Officer (Tricia Marwick):** The next item of business is consideration of business motion S4M-03181, in the name of Bruce Crawford, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, setting out a revision to the business programme for Thursday 7 June.

17:00

**The Cabinet Secretary for Parliamentary Business and Government Strategy (Bruce Crawford):** I inform the chamber that the purpose of the motion is to insert, tomorrow morning at 9.15, a ministerial statement on the Legionella outbreak.

I move,

That the Parliament agrees the following revision to the programme of business for Thursday 7 June 2012—

after

9.15 am Parliamentary Bureau Motions

insert

*followed by* Ministerial Statement: Legionella Outbreak

*Motion agreed to.*

**The Presiding Officer:** The next item of business is consideration of business motion S4M-03183, 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 13 June 2012

2.30 pm Time for Reflection

*followed by* Parliamentary Bureau Motions

*followed by* Scottish Government Debate: Improving Services for Victims and Witnesses

*followed by* Business Motions

*followed by* Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5.00 pm Decision Time

*followed by* Members' Business

Thursday 14 June 2012

9.15 am Parliamentary Bureau Motions

*followed by* Labour Party Business

11.40 am General Question Time

12.00 pm First Minister's Question Time

2.15 pm Themed Question Time

Rural Affairs and the Environment;  
Justice and the Law Officers

2.55 pm Scottish Government Debate: Young People and Economic Growth  
*followed by* Parliamentary Bureau Motions  
 5.00 pm Decision Time  
*followed by* Members' Business  
 Wednesday 20 June 2012  
 2.30 pm Time for Reflection  
*followed by* Parliamentary Bureau Motions  
*followed by* Stage 3 Proceedings: Criminal Cases (Punishment and Review) (Scotland) Bill  
*followed by* Business Motions  
*followed by* Parliamentary Bureau Motions  
 5.00 pm Decision Time  
*followed by* Members' Business  
 Thursday 21 June 2012  
 9.15 am Parliamentary Bureau Motions  
*followed by* Scottish Government Business  
 11.40 am General Question Time  
 12.00 pm First Minister's Question Time  
 2.15 pm Themed Question Time  
 Health, Wellbeing and Cities Strategy  
 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.*

**The Presiding Officer:** The next item of business is consideration of business motion S4M-03184, in the name of Bruce Crawford, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, setting out a stage 2 timetable for the Welfare Reform (Further Provision) (Scotland) Bill.

*Motion moved,*

That the Parliament agrees that consideration of the Welfare Reform (Further Provision) (Scotland) Bill at stage 2 be completed by 13 June 2012.—[Bruce Crawford.]

*Motion agreed to.*

## Parliamentary Bureau Motions

17:01

**The Presiding Officer (Tricia Marwick):** The next item of business is consideration of three Parliamentary Bureau motions. I call Bruce Crawford to move motion S4M-03185, on approval of a Scottish statutory instrument, and motions S4M-03186 and S4M-03187, both on the suspension and variation of the standing orders.

*Motions moved,*

That the Parliament agrees that the Public Appointments and Public Bodies etc. (Scotland) Act 2003 (Treatment of Office or Body as Specified Authority) Order 2012 [draft] be approved.

That the Parliament agrees that Rule 12.3.3A of *Standing Orders* be suspended for the purpose of allowing the Welfare Reform Committee to meet, if necessary, on the afternoon of Wednesday 13 June 2012 to consider the Welfare Reform (Further Provision) (Scotland) Bill at stage 2.

That the Parliament agrees that, for the purpose of allowing the Freedom of Information (Amendment) (Scotland) Bill to be referred to the Finance Committee as lead committee, Rule 6.6.1(c) be suspended and replaced with:

"(c) Budget Bills and the Bill introduced as the Freedom of Information (Amendment) (Scotland) Bill (SP Bill 14, Session 4)"

until the Bill is passed, falls or is withdrawn.—[Bruce Crawford.]

**The Presiding Officer:** The questions on the motions will be put at decision time.



## Decision Time

17:02

**The Presiding Officer (Tricia Marwick):** There are four questions to be put as a result of today's business. The first question is, that motion S4M-03141, in the name of David Thompson, on behalf of the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee, on parliamentary reform and standing orders rule changes, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

**Members:** Yes.

**Margo MacDonald (Lothian) (Ind):** No.

**The Presiding Officer:** The motion is agreed to.

**Margo MacDonald:** I do not really agree.

**The Presiding Officer:** I am assured that Mrs MacDonald said no. There will be a division.

### For

Adam, Brian (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)  
 Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)  
 Adamson, Clare (Central Scotland) (SNP)  
 Allan, Dr Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)  
 Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)  
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)  
 Baker, Richard (North East Scotland) (Lab)  
 Beamish, Claudia (South Scotland) (Lab)  
 Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)  
 Biagi, Marco (Edinburgh Central) (SNP)  
 Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)  
 Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)  
 Brodie, Chic (South Scotland) (SNP)  
 Brown, Gavin (Lothian) (Con)  
 Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)  
 Burgess, Margaret (Cunninghame South) (SNP)  
 Campbell, Aileen (Clydesdale) (SNP)  
 Campbell, Roderick (North East Fife) (SNP)  
 Carlaw, Jackson (West Scotland) (Con)  
 Chisholm, Malcolm (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (Lab)  
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)  
 Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)  
 Crawford, Bruce (Stirling) (SNP)  
 Cunningham, Roseanna (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)  
 Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)  
 Don, Nigel (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)  
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow) (SNP)  
 Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)  
 Dugdale, Kezia (Lothian) (Lab)  
 Eadie, Helen (Cowdenbeath) (Lab)  
 Eadie, Jim (Edinburgh Southern) (SNP)  
 Ewing, Annabelle (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP)  
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP)  
 Fabiani, Linda (East Kilbride) (SNP)  
 Fee, Mary (West Scotland) (Lab)  
 Ferguson, Patricia (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (Lab)  
 Fergusson, Alex (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)  
 Findlay, Neil (Lothian) (Lab)  
 Finnie, John (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)  
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee City West) (SNP)  
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)  
 Gibson, Rob (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)  
 Goldie, Annabel (West Scotland) (Con)

Grahame, Christine (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)  
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)  
 Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)  
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)  
 Henry, Hugh (Renfrewshire South) (Lab)  
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)  
 Hume, Jim (South Scotland) (LD)  
 Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)  
 Ingram, Adam (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)  
 Johnstone, Alex (North East Scotland) (Con)  
 Johnstone, Alison (Lothian) (Green)  
 Keir, Colin (Edinburgh Western) (SNP)  
 Kelly, James (Rutherglen) (Lab)  
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)  
 Lamont, Johann (Glasgow Pollok) (Lab)  
 Lamont, John (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)  
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)  
 Lyle, Richard (Central Scotland) (SNP)  
 MacAskill, Kenny (Edinburgh Eastern) (SNP)  
 MacDonald, Angus (Falkirk East) (SNP)  
 MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)  
 Macdonald, Lewis (North East Scotland) (Lab)  
 Macintosh, Ken (Eastwood) (Lab)  
 Mackay, Derek (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP)  
 MacKenzie, Mike (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)  
 Malik, Hanzala (Glasgow) (Lab)  
 Marra, Jenny (North East Scotland) (Lab)  
 Martin, Paul (Glasgow Provan) (Lab)  
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP)  
 Maxwell, Stewart (West Scotland) (SNP)  
 McAlpine, Joan (South Scotland) (SNP)  
 McDonald, Mark (North East Scotland) (SNP)  
 McDougall, Margaret (West Scotland) (Lab)  
 McGrigor, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)  
 McInnes, Alison (North East Scotland) (LD)  
 McKelvie, Christina (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP)  
 McLeod, Aileen (South Scotland) (SNP)  
 McLeod, Fiona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)  
 McLetchie, David (Lothian) (Con)  
 McMahon, Michael (Uddingston and Bellshill) (Lab)  
 McMillan, Stuart (West Scotland) (SNP)  
 McNeil, Duncan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (Lab)  
 McTaggart, Anne (Glasgow) (Lab)  
 Milne, Nanette (North East Scotland) (Con)  
 Murray, Elaine (Dumfriesshire) (Lab)  
 Neil, Alex (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)  
 Park, John (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)  
 Paterson, Gil (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)  
 Pearson, Graeme (South Scotland) (Lab)  
 Pentland, John (Motherwell and Wishaw) (Lab)  
 Rennie, Willie (Mid Scotland and Fife) (LD)  
 Robertson, Dennis (Aberdeenshire West) (SNP)  
 Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)  
 Russell, Michael (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)  
 Scanlon, Mary (Highlands and Islands) (Con)  
 Scott, John (Ayr) (Con)  
 Simpson, Dr Richard (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)  
 Smith, Drew (Glasgow) (Lab)  
 Smith, Elaine (Coatbridge and Chryston) (Lab)  
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)  
 Stevenson, Stewart (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)  
 Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)  
 Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)  
 Thompson, Dave (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP)  
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)  
 Urquhart, Jean (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)  
 Watt, Maureen (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)  
 Wheelhouse, Paul (South Scotland) (SNP)

Wilson, John (Central Scotland) (SNP)  
Yousaf, Humza (Glasgow) (SNP)

#### Against

MacDonald, Margo (Lothian) (Ind)

#### Abstentions

Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)

**The Presiding Officer:** The result of the division is: For 113, Against 1, Abstentions 1.

#### *Motion agreed to,*

That the Parliament notes the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee's 2nd Report 2012 (Session 4), *Parliamentary Reform – Standing Order rule changes* (SP Paper 138) and agrees that the changes to Standing Orders set out in Annexe B of the report be made with effect from 20 August 2012.

**The Presiding Officer:** The second question is, that motion S4M-03185, in the name of Bruce Crawford, on approval of a Scottish statutory instrument, be agreed to.

#### *Motion agreed to,*

That the Parliament agrees that the Public Appointments and Public Bodies etc. (Scotland) Act 2003 (Treatment of Office or Body as Specified Authority) Order 2012 [draft] be approved.

**The Presiding Officer:** The third question is, that motion S4M-03186, in the name of Bruce Crawford, on the suspension and variation of the standing orders relating to the Welfare Reform Committee, be agreed to.

#### *Motion agreed to,*

That the Parliament agrees that Rule 12.3.3A of *Standing Orders* be suspended for the purpose of allowing the Welfare Reform Committee to meet, if necessary, on the afternoon of Wednesday 13 June 2012 to consider the Welfare Reform (Further Provision) (Scotland) Bill at stage 2.

**The Presiding Officer:** The fourth question is, that motion S4M-03187, in the name of Bruce Crawford, on the suspension and variation of the standing orders relating to the Finance Committee, be agreed to.

#### *Motion agreed to,*

That the Parliament agrees that, for the purpose of allowing the Freedom of Information (Amendment) (Scotland) Bill to be referred to the Finance Committee as lead committee, Rule 6.6.1(c) be suspended and replaced with:

“(c) Budget Bills and the Bill introduced as the Freedom of Information (Amendment) (Scotland) Bill (SP Bill 14, Session 4)”

until the Bill is passed, falls or is withdrawn.

## Royal Highland Education Trust

### **The Deputy Presiding Officer (Elaine Smith):**

The final item of business is a members' business debate on motion S4M-02575, in the name of Colin Keir, on the Royal Highland Education Trust. The debate will be concluded without any question being put.

#### *Motion debated,*

That the Parliament welcomes the Royal Highland Education Trust's work to promote Scotland's rural and agricultural environment, farming and countryside activities and food education to Scotland's young people; considers that Scotland's urbanisation over recent decades has meant that many children have no direct link with the countryside or experience of environmental issues and that this is a gap in young people's education; notes that the Edinburgh-based charity has received funding from the Scottish Government to educate children about the role that food plays in their lives through farm visits, working with local companies and introducing food topics in the school curriculum; considers that food education has an important role to play in improving Scotland's health, helping people to make healthier choices and making them aware of the importance of eating sustainably; further notes that the programme will highlight the career opportunities available to young people in Scotland's food and drink sector, which provides an increasing boost to the Scottish economy, and welcomes the trust's aim to deliver its programme of farm and estate visits for 15,000 young people per year by 2015.

17:06

### **Colin Keir (Edinburgh Western) (SNP):**

Today, the Parliament acknowledges and celebrates the Royal Highland Education Trust's pioneering work and its vision of taking the classroom to the countryside. The trust was set up in 1999 as an education charity of the Royal Highland and Agricultural Society of Scotland, which has its headquarters in my constituency, Edinburgh Western. Its aim is to furnish young people with an enhanced understanding of Scotland's rural environment and the dynamic nature of farming and countryside activities, as well as farming's vital contribution to sustaining and enhancing Scotland's economy and way of life.

Urbanisation in Scotland over recent decades has meant that many children have no direct link with the countryside or experience of environmental issues. The gap in young people's education has been identified by the Scottish Government, which has allocated funding to the trust to educate children about the importance of safeguarding our environment and the role that food plays in their lives. The policy is implemented through farm visits, work with local companies and the introduction of topics about food in the school curriculum. The Scottish Government has pledged £2 million over three years, to help schoolchildren to understand more about food and how it impacts on their health and on the environment.

Food education has a crucial role to play in improving Scotland's health, by helping people to make healthier choices. It also makes people aware of the importance of sustainable agriculture. Educating people at a young age about food and the environment means that people have the facts at their disposal and are in a better position to make informed choices about their future. That is why every pupil in Scotland would benefit from the trust's work. I am delighted that the Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs and the Environment, Richard Lochhead, announced funding for the trust in March.

Through its interaction with pupils, the trust also highlights the extensive career opportunities for young people in Scotland's food and drink sector. The sector is increasingly successful in helping to boost the Scottish economy.

The trust's programme is delivered by approximately 500 volunteers, who are predominantly from farms and farming backgrounds. They facilitate farm visits and provide classroom talks for young people between three and 18 years old. Visits cover a range of topics, including forestry, horticulture and conservation. In the 2010-11 academic year, the trust reached more than 70,000 children and there was a 20 per cent rise in school farm visits in Scotland.

Across the Lothians, the trust organises, on average, 50 farm visits and 150 classroom visits each year. For instance, pupils from Cramond primary school in my constituency were taken to Craigie's farm in March to learn about harvesting vegetables, and many secondary pupils have been given talks by farm staff about the business side of farming, which included information on field-scale production and advice about the job opportunities that are created by the farming sector each year.

The trust's famous fibreglass milking cow, Mabel, has toured primary schools across the country, often as part of schools' health weeks, when pupils learn about the benefits of drinking milk and how it gets from farm gate to plate.

The involvement and active co-operation of farms and partners are crucial in making the farm visits possible. Craigie's farm, which is in my constituency, has been providing schoolchildren with a real farming and agricultural experience. Indeed, it recently offered four allotments to schools in my constituency—Kirkliston primary school, Corstorphine primary school, Queensferry high school and St Augustine's high school—which will give pupils practical training in how to grow their own fruit and vegetables. In the next fortnight, it will host around 240 pupils from schools across Edinburgh, including Davidson's Mains primary school, over four visits. The pupils

will benefit from a full farm tour, which will consist of lessons on fruit production, arable crops and livestock, and they will take part in a nature trail, which will teach them about how farming can work to the benefit of the environment, the significance of planting hedges and field margins, and why they are beneficial. The trust's financial contribution towards the transport costs of farm visits through partners is important, as it allows many schools to take part in the initiative.

The trust does not lack ambition. It aims to deliver its programme for farm and estate visits to 15,000 young people per year by 2015. That would not be possible without the co-operation of its partners and sponsors. Scottish Natural Heritage, for instance, contributes by teaching young people to appreciate the roles and diversity of natural habitats that are encountered on farm and estate visits. Eco-schools development officers focus on enhancing young people's understanding of the relationship between food and the environment.

The trust's work undoubtedly reflects the aims and rationale of the curriculum for excellence. Outdoor education offers many opportunities for interdisciplinary working, and the trust offers in-service courses on farms and estates to encourage teachers to take their classes on visits. It also provides free educational resource materials and encourages school competitions.

It is clear that the trust's work is receiving recognition not only from the Scottish Government and many business organisations across Scotland; countries such as Australia and Italy are taking a keen interest in its development.

I understand that the trust is on the point of liaising with the Scottish Government on how its work can be built on further. I look forward to the outcome of those discussions. I also look forward to this year's Royal Highland Show, which will take place in Inverclyde in a couple of weeks' time. It is expected that around 25,000 children will participate in the children's discovery centre there.

Once again, I commend the trust and its staff, some of whom are in the gallery.

17:13

**Jean Urquhart (Highlands and Islands (SNP)):** I congratulate Colin Keir on bringing the issue, which is particularly relevant and important, forward for debate, and welcome the chance to comment on the educational work that the Royal Highland Education Trust is undertaking to promote the countryside, which is an essential component of Scotland's cultural and economic fabric. As we have heard, the trust provides opportunities for schoolchildren across Scotland to investigate various aspects of countryside life

through activities such as farm visits, school competitions and classroom talks by farmers. It has been stated that more than 15,000 children have been able to experience working farms and estates first-hand. That is a 20 per cent rise on the previous year. I think that we would all not only support the trust's aim of sustaining that level of interaction annually by 2015 but urge it to increase that level.

As always, there are lessons to be learned from the work of our neighbours. My mind is drawn to innovative efforts that are being made in Iceland, where the Alcoa Foundation has funded outdoor schoolrooms in order to make the environment in general a natural part of the curriculum.

Such events and experiences have intrinsic value. They give children in urban settings the opportunity to experience rural life, albeit briefly sometimes. As part of the curriculum for excellence, they give children the opportunity to understand better where the food in their fridges and pantries originates.

As a councillor, I visited Shetland during the Highlands and Islands convention, where I was privileged to hear from schoolchildren who had been introduced to crofting. It was inspirational to hear how enthusiastic they were about a sector that is often viewed as unattractive, largely because people have not experienced the satisfaction and contentment of seeing the benefits of their own work in an area as important as growing one's own food or animal husbandry.

However, the Royal Highland Education Trust does so much more than that. The food and drink sector in Scotland is truly one of our success stories: it had an £11.9 billion annual turnover in 2009, which indicates that we are well on our way to meeting our £12.5 billion target for 2017. My region, which is synonymous with world-class food and drink exports, employs some 25,900 people in that sector. That demonstrates the importance of a thriving agricultural sector to underpin the rural economy of Scotland.

Many more people take part in related activities on a part-time or self-employed basis, and crofting is a popular and long-standing part of Highland life. The inclusion of crofting in any educational materials would be welcome, and would open up even more future business opportunities for our young people. I therefore encourage the trust to work in conjunction with the Crofting Commission to integrate such material into its future programmes.

By showcasing to our young people the opportunities and careers that are afforded by our burgeoning food and drink industry, we not only instil a pride in Scotland's produce but cultivate future generations of farmers, distillers and

brewers to further support us in growing that sector.

The Royal Highland Education Trust's work in this field is to be encouraged. I support Colin Keir's motion.

17:17

**Claudia Beamish (South Scotland) (Lab):** I thank Colin Keir for bringing the debate to the chamber. As the motion states, the Royal Highland Education Trust works

"to promote Scotland's rural and agricultural environment, farming and countryside activities and food education to Scotland's young people".

In the words of farmer—and friend—Jim Warnock, who has been involved with the trust for many years,

"RHET is the fastest growing branch on the tree of learning with 1 in 8 primary school children in contact with farming, either through a classroom talk or a farm visit."

In my view, RHET does a brilliant job—much of it through the dedication of volunteers who offer their services for free. They range from experienced farmers to agricultural students, and the support of the Scottish Government is essential for that work to continue.

The motion highlights the lack of a link between urban children and our countryside. Perhaps surprisingly, many children who live in villages have no direct experience of farms, either. They do not know how farms work and how food is produced, nor do they understand the sequence from farm to plate—or, as Colin Keir said, "from ... gate to plate."

As a primary teacher, I was involved in a number of RHET initiatives, and a visit to Feufield Ltd's smallholding in Clydesdale—which is part of the RHET scheme—with a rural primary school highlighted those valuable connections. We picked plums, washed and measured them, then boiled them with sugar and water. While they cooled, we were sent off to hold baby ducklings and play the game of distinguishing between different breeds of chicken and matching them with the right colour of eggs. Having—of course—washed our hands, we designed our own labels, put the jam in jars, then took it home to share with our families. The children made a recipe book that included ingredients that could either be bought at a farm or grown by them. It was all about food preparation and cooking, rather than about fast food.

In these days in which we question consumerism, the opportunities to connect with where our food comes from can inspire people to buy more local and, one hopes, more affordable food. Its accessibility from cities, however, is another question for another time.

I have seen the enthusiasm with which pupils begin to grow their own vegetables and herbs—whether it is tomatoes in a greenhouse or basil in a window box—and how they connect with the older generation in sharing that experience.

As part of the same project through RHET, the children invited a young agriculture student to come to the classroom to talk to them and to answer questions about training to be a farmer and what it is like to juggle planning rotation, getting up early to milk and—yes—being computer savvy in order to fill in the common agricultural policy forms. That brought the industry alive in a realistic way and inspired one or two young people of both genders to consider a farming future.

There was also a visit to Sandilands farm in Clydesdale, where pupils were welcomed by the Warnock family. Jim Warnock has said:

“We tick all the boxes on curriculum for excellence and outdoor learning and are aiming for 1 in 4 schoolchildren benefiting from our countryside activities by 2020.”

All visits are risk assessed, but it seems to me to be unnecessary that that should have to be redone by busy teachers—as was the case for my visit—when a risk assessment has already been done through RHET.

Jim Warnock has welcomed many farm visits. He tells me that children fire questions at him on numerous aspects of food production. I will give some examples of the questions that they ask: “If a white cow gives white milk, does a black cow give black milk?” “Why do sheep only have teeth on their bottom jaw?” “Where are the keys to your quad bike?” “Does your collie dog count sheep to help it sleep at night?”

As the motion highlights, the farm visits also allow children to become aware of the opportunity to walk in the countryside, and to become aware of the footpath and access codes, which enable children and their families to share safely the experience of going out and about in the countryside. RHET helps children, their families and the wider community to connect, or to reconnect, with farms and rural life, and it reminds us of the joys of fresh air and fresh food. I heartily commend its work and ask the Scottish Government to continue to support it.

17:21

**Aileen McLeod (South Scotland) (SNP):** I, too, congratulate Colin Keir on highlighting all the fantastic work that the Royal Highland Education Trust does, and on securing the debate.

In March, I witnessed the trust’s work at first hand, when I accompanied some pupils from local primary schools from across Dumfries and Galloway, who were on an educational visit with

the trust, to learn more about local farming and food production. I was delighted to see the engaging way that the trust has developed of teaching young people about sustainability, about where their food comes from and about the journey that it goes on. From farm to fork is the idea behind the food and farming event that I took part in, and the primary school pupils lapped up their day at Wallet Marts Castle Douglas Ltd’s auction market. At the end of the day, they even got to take part in a mock livestock auction, and they made a fine troop of auctioneers.

The development of innovative ways of teaching our young people about rural life, the importance of knowing where their food comes from, and the processes that are involved is key to ensuring that, in the future, the food and drink industry is sufficiently sustainable, and not just in rural Scotland but in the country as a whole. The way in which RHET is doing that is exemplary, and I know that a number of schools around the country are keen to implement similar teaching practices.

I also know that the trust is working hard in all areas of Scotland and that, in Dumfries and Galloway alone, it managed 37 farm visits and 159 classroom speakers in the most recent academic year. Dumfries and Galloway obviously has a close and important link with its rural community, and never has that link been stronger than it has been this year.

The fact that Dumfries and Galloway holds the presidency of the Royal Highland Show in 2012 means that it has a fantastic opportunity to showcase what the region has to offer the country from its food larder. Last year, nearly 25,500 children from around Scotland visited the Royal Highland Show through the RHET children’s discovery centre, as Colin Keir mentioned. I am sure that the children who visit it this year will be impressed by the whole show, including Dumfries and Galloway’s contribution to it. Interestingly, information from the trust about this year’s discovery centre says that it offers

“a range of fun, interactive and hands-on activities for children of all ages”.

I certainly look forward to trying it out for myself when I am there the week after next.

I will cite some more astounding figures on the trust’s work. In the 2010-11 academic year, it reached more than 70,000 children and it achieved a 20 per cent rise in the number of school farm visits across Scotland. That is a key indicator that schools are recognising the importance of rural communities in our society and are embracing the opportunities that are afforded them through the trust.

Much has been put on the record about the importance to the economy, both local and

national, of the agriculture and food and drink industries in Scotland. Scotland Food and Drink states that its mission is to grow the food and drink industry to £12.5 billion by 2017, and that its vision is to build Scotland's international reputation

“as ‘A Land of Food and Drink’”.

To achieve that ambitious but extremely achievable goal, education is vital. As the trust would say, that education needs to be provided to children of all ages.

The possibilities for the future of food and drink in Scotland—and in Dumfries and Galloway, in particular—are exciting. Just this morning, we heard about a £1 billion investment by Diageo that will benefit many rural communities, and we can look forward to investment on a similar scale for the food industry. As the providers, suppliers and growers of some of the best produce in the world, we should encourage our young people to take pride in what their country has to offer in the sector.

I support Colin Keir's motion, and I congratulate the Royal Highland Education Trust on all the work that it is doing to enthuse, educate and inform people about rural Scotland. I also look forward to future visits with it in Dumfries and Galloway.

17:25

**Alex Fergusson (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con):** I warmly congratulate Colin Keir on his motion, which encapsulates the very essence of members' business debates, and I am delighted to be taking part in the debate this evening. I am greatly indebted to Colin Keir for successfully prevailing on his party whips to bring forward the debate by two weeks from its original slot, because I would not have been able to take part in it on 20 June, and it is a debate in which I very much wanted to take part. I am not, of course, suggesting that that is the only reason why Colin managed to get the date changed.

For most of the past century, no school year was complete without a visit to a farm. For urban and rural pupils alike, the farm outing was an essential part of the education process, providing a tremendous hands-on opportunity to discover more about where our food comes from and what goes into its production. Then, for a variety of reasons, such visits ceased to be a regular part of the curriculum. The advent of television, health and safety restrictions, E coli, fast food, ready meals and host of other factors conspired to bring to an end the hands-on experiences that had forged such a strong link between town and country. That link was broken: I am sure that no member will argue that it does not need to be restored.

The link's restoration was clearly the aim of the people who decided to establish in 1999 the Royal Highland Education Trust as the educational charity of the Royal Highland and Agricultural Society of Scotland. I have the great honour of serving that society as its president for the year 2011-12 and, as such, will be heading up the president's initiative at the show to highlight the very best of Dumfries and Galloway.

As Colin Keir vividly highlighted, RHET has enjoyed a phenomenal first decade of achievement through its programmes of farm visits for schools, classroom appearances by volunteer farmers, the provision of free educational resources for schools, outdoor education events across Scotland, and a range of other initiatives and projects. Not least of those is the schools education programme for visiting schools that is run during the Royal Highland Show, and the truly amazing children's discovery centre at Ingliston. If I might be forgiven, I will make a quick plug and encourage every MSP and researcher who goes to this year's show to make sure that they visit the discovery centre before they leave. They will not regret doing so.

As other members have said, RHET's work could not be done without the input of the army of volunteer farmers who participate. It is also right to acknowledge the incredible job that is done by the small but utterly dedicated and committed team of local co-ordinators, without whom RHET would simply not exist. Indeed, in the past year or so of my involvement, I have learned that the paid infrastructure of RHET is absolutely minute when compared with the results that it has achieved. That is largely due to the work of Alison Motion, RHET's project manager, and her team at Ingliston, along with the co-ordinators. I am delighted that Colin Keir was able to confirm what I could not with my failing eyesight, which is that Alison and some of the RHET team are with us in the gallery tonight. I was not too sure until Colin Keir said so.

It is through their drive and inventiveness that we are faced with wonderful projects such as the recent tractor tour of Dumfries and Galloway that visited all 103 primary schools across the region, and the presence of various projects such as Daisy, who must be Mabel's cousin. Daisy is a hollow plastic cow who can be hand-milked—I know because I have done it myself—to demonstrate that milk does not begin its journey in a carton. The two-day plough-to-plate events that take place across the country have helped schoolchildren to make the link between wheat and bread, cows and yogurt, and pigs and bacon, and to understand the many other links that exist in our food chain.

RHET does great work. In its words, it

"aims to provide the opportunity for every child in Scotland to learn about food, farming and the countryside, and to create a wider understanding of the environmental, economic and social realities of rural Scotland."

Who could possibly disagree with that?

17:30

**Graeme Dey (Angus South) (SNP):** I, too, commend Colin Keir for this members' business debate, which affords the Parliament the opportunity to recognise the tremendous work of the Royal Highland Education Trust with its 12 countryside initiatives across Scotland, and which allows this member to make an unashamedly parochial speech.

The Angus countryside initiative is one of the longest running in the country and is still developing. In addition to serving the schoolchildren of the county, from playschool and nursery age right through to secondary, it has moved into the city of Dundee. Although the initiative draws its board from throughout Angus, the influence of constituents of mine in driving its work could not be more keenly felt. The trustees of the Angus initiative include Gill Lawrie from Arbirlot; James Black from Backboath; Leela Martin from Letham; Alison Stoddart from Inverarity; Alistair Hodnett from Tealing; and Andy Reid of Kingennie.

All told, about 25 farms across Angus have been risk assessed for hosting visits and 50 farmers are trained to go into schools to talk to kids about food production. That is taking the countryside into the classroom and the class into the countryside. Gill Lawrie and her husband William alone host a dozen or so visits a year to their Newton of Arbirlot farm, which I had the pleasure of visiting last year. A group of primary 1s from the nearby Muirfield primary school is due there a week on Tuesday and it is a matter of regret to me that other demands mean that I am unable to accept the invitation to join them.

I say that not least because I am fearful that the Angus countryside initiative committee might think that I am ducking out of actively supporting its work. I also have an invitation to attend a schools visit that the committee is hosting this Friday prior to the Angus show, in which 90 primary school children will gather in Brechin to hear about various aspects of farming, including dairy, arable and soft fruit production. That field-to-plate type event, which will utilise various of the show's marquees as they are being prepared for the weekend, was the brainchild of a couple of groups of young farmer volunteers. The ACI committee, along with Angus Council's education department, seized upon it. I wish the committee every success with that. Unfortunately, along with many members, I will be in Edinburgh attending the

business in the Parliament conference, which it should be said will spare me the usual soaking that one gets in Brechin during the Angus show weekend, although that pleasure still awaits on Saturday. However, I promise to get along to an event in future because, as an Angus MSP, I am entirely behind the terrific work that the Angus countryside initiative does on the ground in our county.

I thank Colin Keir for securing the debate. I encourage all members who attend the Royal Highland Show to drop in on RHET's stand, which I am told is located a couple of avenues behind the National Farmers Union Scotland stand, so that we can see for ourselves the work that the organisation is doing. However, I am advised that Thursday and Friday are perhaps best avoided, as that is when the majority of the 25,000 schoolchildren who are expected to visit will attend, so it might be rather congested.

17:33

**The Minister for Environment and Climate Change (Stewart Stevenson):** Several members have welcomed the debate. On behalf of the Scottish Government I, too, thank Colin Keir for the motion, as it is right that we take time to highlight and celebrate the contribution of the Royal Highland Education Trust to teaching Scottish schoolchildren about the issues surrounding food, farming and the countryside. The charity provides a crucial link between urban and rural communities and is making great strides in helping to promote a better understanding of our way of life and of how to enjoy the countryside responsibly.

**Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP):** In my teaching days, a pupil asked me whether hens laid eggs hard and with a little stamp on them. I will ask the minister a question to which I do not know the answer: does the hen lay eggs that are soft and then harden? I am thinking of the hen.

**Stewart Stevenson:** One party trick is to boil one egg and not another, put the two on a desk, get them both spinning and then put one's hands on both of them to stop them spinning. When the hands are lifted off, the soft egg—the one that has not been cooked—will restart spinning and the other will not. As the teacher has taught me something, I hope that I have taught her something.

I absolutely agree with what Colin Keir said about healthier choices for the young and about careers in food and drink. The food and drink sector is important to our economy and appropriate choices about food and drink are important to people's health throughout their lives.

I am sure that RHET is contributing to people making healthier choices.

As someone who was brought up in a rural community, I find myself doing things that seem to astonish my officials when I am out and about, such as, on a visit to a farm, picking a bit of clover and just sticking it in my mouth to get that wonderful, sweet flavour. They look at me in horror—"What are you doing, minister?" That is the sort of thing that we country dwellers do naturally. It reconnects us to nature.

My earliest recollection of a farm is from around the age of three, when I was sitting on a wall somewhere near Wick, having been asked to count the sheep coming through the dip. I suspect that my counting was somewhat inaccurate, but it probably introduced me to an important concept for use in the urban setting.

I am disappointed to say that, this year, I will not be at the Highland show, as I am taking part in the Rio+20 conference and I will not be back in time.

We heard some interesting revelations. Jean Urquhart talked about the Alcoa Foundation in Iceland funding outdoor school rooms. That sounds interesting. If we can just get the weather management under control, that would be absolutely excellent.

Claudia Beamish introduced quite an important side reference in her remarks when she talked about children washing their hands. It is helpful for children to learn that, when they go to the farm, it is perfectly safe, as long as they take care of themselves and make sure that they do not transfer the wrong things from their hands to their stomach. That is part of the learning process that is applicable in quite a wide range of areas. She spoke warmly of the contributions of Jim Warnock, a farmer in her region, to the education of children who visit his farm.

**Alex Fergusson:** I was similarly delighted to hear Jim Warnock's name mentioned. I am sure that the minister will join me in applauding the fact that today, at Scotsheep 2012 at Dumfries house, he received an award in recognition of his contribution to the sheep sector.

**Stewart Stevenson:** I am delighted to hear that. The cabinet secretary was speaking at Scotsheep this morning. I do not know whether he was the one who made the award, but I am always delighted to hear of achievement in our rural sector.

Aileen McLeod talked interestingly about the next generation of auctioneers. Perhaps if they fail at auctioneering they can come and be politicians instead.

Alex Fergusson was one of the members who referred to Alison Motion, who is in the public

gallery. She has been the key person in the co-ordination of much of the activity. Alex Fergusson also talked about milk. That took me back to when we used to go camping in rural areas. In those days, I used to be sent down with the milk jug, which would be filled directly from the cow and would be in the cup within 10 or 15 minutes. That is the kind of thing that today's children just do not realise, but people such as I do.

Graeme Dey came up with the best phrase of the debate: classroom into the countryside; countryside into the classroom. If that does not capture the essence of what the trust is trying to do, nothing else will.

**Maureen Watt (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP):** Does the minister recognise that RHET has an important role to play with regard to promoting a safer Scotland and the fewer knives, better lives agenda, as people such as gamekeepers can show young people that knives are used only for work and gralloching deer rather than taking to Kirkcaldy or Glenrothes, as one pointed out on a children's visit that I attended?

**Stewart Stevenson:** That is perfectly correct, and demonstrates the breadth of experience that can be crammed into often quite short visits in order to show that the countryside is a real part of their life, even if they spend comparatively little time in it. Reference has been made to the curriculum for excellence and the role that what we are talking about can play in it.

The debate has been wide ranging and it has picked up on the interests of many people. Although the motion refers to it, I have not heard directly in the debate about the support that there is from a number of companies for the initiative. I welcome the fact that they are putting a bit back. It is proper that companies such as Tesco, and others like it, which sell the products that come from the country, are making contributions to the initiative, and I welcome the fact that they have done so.

Whether it is through farm visits or through working with local companies, embedding food topics in the curriculum, food education and education about the countryside are key to helping young folk understand the role that food plays in their lives. All the encouragement that we can give and that the trust gives is to be welcomed.

I again recognise the fantastic work that the trust is doing and its success in delivering a programme of farm and estate visits for 15,000 young people per year by 2015. Let us all join in wishing it all the best for its future success.

*Meeting closed at 17:41.*



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