



The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

Official Report

EUROPEAN AND EXTERNAL RELATIONS COMMITTEE

Thursday 12 March 2015

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EUROPEAN AND EXTERNAL RELATIONS COMMITTEE

6th Meeting 2015, Session 4

CONVENER

*Christina McKelvie (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Hanzala Malik (Glasgow) (Lab)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*Roderick Campbell (North East Fife) (SNP)

*Willie Coffey (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)

*Adam Ingram (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)

*Jamie McGrigor (Highlands and Islands) (Con)

*Anne McTaggart (Glasgow) (Lab)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:

Fiona Hyslop (Cabinet Secretary for Culture, Europe and External Affairs)

Colin Imrie (Scottish Government)

Andris Teikmanis (Ambassador of the Republic of Latvia to the United Kingdom)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Katy Orr

LOCATION

The Robert Burns Room (CR1)

Scottish Parliament

European and External Relations Committee

Thursday 12 March 2015

[The Convener opened the meeting at 09:30]

Scottish Government Action Plan on European Engagement

The Convener (Christina McKelvie): Good morning and welcome to the sixth meeting in 2015 of the European and External Relations Committee. I make the usual request that mobile phones be switched off, please.

We have a tight timescale this morning, with two evidence sessions. Agenda item 1 is the Scottish Government's European Union action plan on engagement and its priorities. I welcome back to the committee the Cabinet Secretary for Culture, Europe and External Affairs, Fiona Hyslop, and her trusty hand, Colin Imrie, who is a deputy director and head of Europe and United Kingdom relations at the Scottish Government. Cabinet secretary—I believe that you have some opening remarks.

Fiona Hyslop (Cabinet Secretary for Culture, Europe and External Affairs): Thank you very much for the invitation convener, and good morning.

Much has happened since I was last in front of the committee. We have a new European Commission in place and, encouragingly, we have the first vice-president in charge of delivering better regulation, which is a key issue that we have argued for in our proposals for revitalising and refining the European Union. The Commission has also issued its work programme for 2015, on which Humza Yousaf wrote to you earlier this year. The programme is aimed at taking forward the EU 2020 agenda in the pursuit of smart, sustainable and inclusive economic growth. That agenda fits well with our programme for government and with "Scotland's Economic Strategy", which was published last week.

We have also committed to making substantial revisions to our "Action Plan on European Engagement", which was first published in 2009. I am grateful to members for meeting Humza Yousaf to feed in their thoughts on what the plan needs to cover. We aim to launch the plan on a digital platform at the end of the month.

Later today, the First Minister and I will meet the Latvian ambassador. The Scottish Government

and Latvian Government also hosted a market awareness seminar in Edinburgh to explore the opportunities to deepen trade and investment links between our countries. The Latvian EU presidency has three overarching themes: a competitive Europe, a digital Europe and an engaged Europe. I will leave Ambassador Teikmanis to explain the detail of the priorities, but I want to touch on just a few particularly critical issues for Scotland.

A key dossier for Scotland on competitive Europe is the European fund for strategic investment, which is known as the Juncker package. It is a €21 billion loan-guarantee fund that is seeking to leverage a total of €315 billion to kick-start growth through investment in shovel-ready projects across the European Union. The EU has already established a pipeline of projects, and Scotland currently has on that lengthy list four propositions covering renewable grid infrastructure, life sciences, innovation and smart cities. Work is on-going both to develop the proposals further and to understand better how the fund will work in practice.

The general approach to the investment plan for Europe was agreed at the economic and financial affairs council on Tuesday, and we are hoping that the European Council will agree the package in March this year, with the European Parliament signing it off in June.

Following representations by Humza Yousaf at the joint ministerial committee on Europe last week, the UK Government has now set up a cross-government working group to help to ensure that Scotland can benefit from the funding package.

On digital Europe, Scotland has ambitious goals to deliver world-class digital infrastructure, which will require hybrids of fixed-fibre and mobile networks across Scotland. Meeting that aim will require continuing reform of the EU telecommunications market, including the abolition of roaming charges. It will also require EU funding and state-aid frameworks to be responsive and flexible enough to support investment in digital infrastructure that will enable all areas of Scotland to participate fully in the digital Europe.

On the third theme—an engaged Europe—I know that the committee and many members of the public have taken a keen interest in the transatlantic trade and investment partnership negotiations. I welcome the steps the Commission has taken to be more transparent on TTIP and I hope that it will go as far as possible to communicate and engage with citizens across Europe on the negotiations.

Whatever the economic opportunities and challenges of TTIP for Scotland, it is essential that our and the public's concern about the impact of

TTIP on the national health service be addressed. As you know, we have been pressing the UK Government and the European Commission on that point. We believe that the best ways to address our concerns and those of the public are, first, to have in the agreement an explicit exemption for the NHS and, secondly, to have absolute clarity that, although the UK is the member state, any decisions that it takes in the context of TTIP—such as opening up the NHS in England to more private providers—should in no way interfere with the Scottish Government's and Scottish Parliament's devolved responsibilities. I look forward to the outcome of the committee's TTIP inquiry.

The Scottish Government looks forward to engaging with Latvia for the remainder of its presidency. However, our overarching EU priority will be to make a credible and proactive case for Scotland and the UK remaining in the EU. I hope that the committee and Parliament might also play a role in that. I have been heartened to see other Governments in the EU being willing to make this case. The commitment of the Irish Government in particular has been consistent—a commitment that it underlined again during my trip to Dublin last month.

Since we had the referendum debate, we have seen a substantially higher level of support for EU membership in Scotland than in the rest of the UK. A recent Chatham house report found that support in Scotland for remaining in the EU is now a remarkable 19 points higher than it was two years ago.

That strong support for membership is why the Scottish Government believes that, for the UK to leave the EU, it should require not just a majority across the whole UK, but a majority in each constituent part of the UK: England, Wales, Northern Ireland and Scotland—a double majority. I would welcome Parliament's support for that proposal.

The Scottish Government has a clear view of the benefits of our EU membership. In particular, the economic value of Scotland's EU membership is clear; it places Scotland in the world's largest economy and trading area, making us capable of competing with advanced economies all around the globe. We have unimpeded access to 500 million consumers; Europe is a vital export market for Scottish firms and accounted for almost half Scotland's international exports in 2013. It is worth repeating that that is worth £12.9 billion each year.

We welcome the social, cultural and economic benefits that migration from the EU delivers to Scotland's communities. The right to freedom of movement is also of huge benefit to Scots who move to live, study and work elsewhere in the EU.

The best way to tell the positive story of EU membership is to tell the individual stories of people, business and sector benefits. That is what the Scottish Government intends to do. I would welcome the committee's support for that endeavour.

The Convener: Thank you, cabinet secretary, for your very comprehensive overarching view of the work that the Government is doing.

In your opening remarks you mentioned the Juncker investment package and you said that the Minister for Europe and International Development, Humza Yousaf, had raised some concerns about that. One of the topics that the committee keeps a watching brief on is horizon 2020. There has been some confusion about whether that funding is being changed or has become less accessible for universities. Do you have any detail to expand on that?

Before I let you answer that question, I want to congratulate the Scottish Government on signing the people's NHS pledge on TTIP on a specific exemption for NHS services in any TTIP agreement. I have been working very closely with people on that, and they have been very glad to see that not only the Scottish Government but many parties across Parliament signed up because they view the NHS as one of our crown jewels that should be protected.

Fiona Hyslop: On that last point, I think that the committee has played an important role; the evidence sessions that you have had on TTIP have been very balanced. They have shone a light on the subject and have helped to provide information and education. However, there are some political concerns and it is important that the committee, Parliament and Government contribute a voice from Scotland on TTIP, so thank you for your contributions.

The Juncker package issue is serious. Our understanding is that horizon 2020 was one of the few budget lines that had a substantial increase. When I represented the Scottish Government in the JMCE we were very insistent that horizon 2020 is important and that the UK Government should push very hard for it in its budget negotiations. We were pleased that the result was that horizon 2020 was in a strong position. In the past, Scottish universities in particular had achieved great results from similar packages.

We understand that the Commission identified horizon 2020 as a source of £2.7 billion that could be reallocated to the EU budget to underpin the European fund for strategic investments—the Juncker package. The concern is that if we lose out on the Juncker package there could be a double whammy. However, that is the negative view; if we take a more positive view, we can see

there is no reason why we cannot take best advantage of the Juncker package.

Compared to the rest of the UK, we have a fairly mature market in that we can generate private investment in addition to public investment in a number of areas—in particular, infrastructure. That probably puts us in a reasonably advantageous position compared to elsewhere, but that cannot be guaranteed, so it is really important that we identify areas on which we can work together.

I have talked about interconnectors: there is a role for our academics in the work that is required to link the islands to the mainland and to facilitate expansion of renewable energy. That whole area is redolent of opportunity. Scotland is also well placed in digital healthcare; we have put together that part of the Baltic-Nordic plan and we have interests with other countries regarding activity in that area.

There is the innovation platform; innovation and internationalisation are key parts of “Scotland’s Economic Strategy”, which we published last week. On smart cities, just yesterday we met the Danish ambassador, and when I was in Copenhagen we discussed liveable cities and how we can exchange knowledge and information about developments on that.

There is undoubtedly a challenge and the situation is worth monitoring closely. The committee might want to keep a close eye on it.

The Convener: We will need to speak to Scotland Europa for that side of the story and then try to put it all together and keep on top of the matter.

Jamie McGrigor (Highlands and Islands) (Con): Good morning, cabinet secretary. The Scottish Government’s “Action Plan on European Engagement” dates back to 2009, when Michael Russell was the minister, so it is probably due to be refreshed. When the Minister for Europe and International Development spoke informally to the committee about the on-going process of refreshing the EU action plan, he suggested that it is too narrowly focused, and some time ago I asked why agriculture is not covered. The common agricultural policy is so important and takes up an enormous part of the budget, and agriculture is enormously important to Scotland, so it seems odd that agriculture is not covered in the plan.

What is the Scottish Government’s main achievement in its EU engagement under the action plan?

Fiona Hyslop: Jamie McGrigor is a long-standing member of the committee, so he will recall that I have provided annual updates on what we have done with the action plan and on wider

areas. Probably the most intense activity and the most regular attendance at councils have been in relation to agriculture, and one of the key areas in the budget negotiations was agriculture.

It is right to refresh the action plan. We will do it in the context of “Scotland’s Economic Strategy”, which we have published. Internationalisation is one of the key areas in the economic strategy, along with innovation and inclusive growth. I am progressing the refresh of the international framework, which we have informed the committee about.

The European action plan is part of a suite of things that will all sit together, as they should do. It also covers how we can take forward the programme for government in relation to prosperity, inclusive growth, tackling inequalities, community empowerment and public services.

09:45

The idea is to ensure that everything is aligned. What probably happened previously—whether it was in relation to individual country plans or to the European action plan—is that things appeared separately as our Government developed them after 2007.

We now have a far more cohesive and joined-up approach, including the web-based approach. I understand that the committee is keen to ensure that some practical help is embedded in the plan. That help can be provided through the web-based approach, which can point people to help.

On the specific question about our achievements under the current EU action plan, marine energy is a key area in which we have proved ourselves and have secured leadership, including in European terms. To give a practical example, that leadership resulted in Scotland securing the chairmanship of one of the workstreams of the ocean energy Europe forum. That is a major achievement. That forum includes a number of member states and others and has been working to recognise marine energy as a strategic technology. Some of the emissions reduction areas are covered as well, so marine energy is an important area.

As regards the vanguard initiative, we have been working with other like-minded sub-states to deliver economic growth through the development of enterprise-driven smart specialisation strategies. We have delivered two expert working groups in Brussels on smart manufacturing and on scoping on advance manufacturing expertise, with which members who work on enterprise will be familiar.

On climate change, particularly after 2011, our meetings with climate change ministers from a

range of countries have usually taken place in the margins of the environment council. It is a very good and practical example of co-ordination with UK ministers—I think that I have mentioned it to the committee before. It is one of the areas where we have a good relationship and we work in a co-ordinated way. We also attended the 19th session of the conference of parties—COP 19—climate change talks in Warsaw in December 2013 as part of the UK delegation and we were given access to European ministers' co-ordination meetings. We hope to target climate change engagement in the run-up to the Paris climate summit in December.

On the national reform programme, Scotland has submitted its own proposals on that in relation to the EU 2020 strategy and has given a mid-term response, which has been important.

As regards deepening EU engagement, we have signed memoranda of understanding with the French—I signed a memorandum and there was another one on education. In relation to the Nordic-Baltic policy statement, we have had far more intensive discussions and connections on the Nordic side.

The other part of engagement is about influence. In other aspects of the committee's work, you have heard from other countries that have been examining how a lot of European policy is about networks, relationships and influence. The Scottish Government has provided to the European Commission and to rotating EU presidencies secondments on climate change, fisheries management and the environment, and Scottish Government staff member has been seconded to the Latvian presidency.

There is more than that going on, but that gives the committee an idea of the main areas that we are involved in, including climate change and marine energy. One of the politically important areas is the Lisbon treaty opt-out on justice issues, in which the committee and Parliament have taken an interest. That has involved a great deal of activity and work because of our justice system; Paul Wheelhouse is at the EU justice and home affairs council as we speak—he is there today and tomorrow.

Jamie McGrigor: Thank you for that. Will the refreshed action plan differ much from the current version?

Fiona Hyslop: Your criticism was about whether the plan allows enough flexibility to change when other priorities emerge, because it was not that we were not working on agriculture: we were, absolutely. I have given examples of a range of areas that we have been working on. The refreshed plan will align better with Scotland's economic strategy, which was launched last week,

and with the international framework that we hope will be launched towards the end of the month.

We will look more at Scotland's place in Europe and at our strategic priorities. We will probably also look more at the influencing and engaging aspects, which the committee has heard about in evidence on Scotland's international engagement and partnerships within the EU.

Our focus will not necessarily be on portfolio subjects but on how we approach things. Investing in our people and infrastructure is clearly in the skills, training, and youth employment area, for example, but we also discussed the Juncker package in relation to infrastructure.

In terms of fostering a culture of innovation, we are pursuing the horizon 2020 funds in a wide variety of areas, including marine issues, climate change and agriculture.

Thirdly, promoting inclusive growth and creating opportunity must involve a political realignment in Europe to ensure that people focus on jobs and recovery and on what makes a difference to people's lives. That agenda is starting to be articulated better under this Commission than it has previously been.

Jamie McGrigor: Can you give any examples of how the Scottish Government's Brussels office interacts with the European institutions? How much does it cost to run?

Fiona Hyslop: There is continual and regular interaction, particularly with permanent representatives of the various countries—in relation to the Latvian presidency, we hosted a cultural event last week that the majority of the Latvian permanent representatives attended—and on a range of issues. When I have visited Brussels, the office has engaged with the Commission and I have met commissioners in that way. When the new Commission was established, cabinet secretaries wrote to all the commissioners on a portfolio basis, and there was a good follow-up from that by the commissioners. There will be a number of meetings between our cabinet secretaries and ministers and European commissioners as the Commission develops, as well as with other institutions and other countries that have representatives in Brussels.

We host events. Margaret Burgess spoke at an international event on tenants and tenants' rights. That event was established by European institutions and we participated in it. Sometimes we lead and sometimes we engage in areas on which others are leading. The role of the Brussels office is absolutely about facilitation, but it is also about engagement with the Scottish Government back home to maximise the involvement of the portfolio areas, so that all the areas of

Government—education, justice, enterprise or whatever—can access the institutions in Brussels.

The office costs just over £1 million in total. Its work is vital. Interestingly, we have provided advice to other countries and Administrations that are looking to set up similar offices in Brussels. It is really important to be there.

Does Colin Imrie want to say anything on the subject?

Colin Imrie (Scottish Government): The office is formally part of the UK representation, so it has a close working relationship with the UK and works alongside it in Council working groups and so on to ensure that particular Scottish issues are fully reflected in the UK line. In that context, it also works directly with the institutions.

The cabinet secretary mentioned the marine energy work, which the Brussels office led. Because of its presence on the spot, the office was able to co-ordinate meetings with a member state group of eight.

The office is a great facility, and it works next to Scotland Europa, in the same building. That provides the opportunity for Scottish institutions, businesses and others to work directly with the Government. Further, it is—helpfully—in the centre of things, as it looks across the square at the main Commission building, the Berlaymont. That is a good way to get access.

Fiona Hyslop: I believe that the committee has visited the Brussels office. Is that correct?

The Convener: Yes.

Jamie McGrigor: Does the Scottish Government's European Union engagement dovetail with the UK's engagement in Brussels, particularly since the referendum?

Fiona Hyslop: I think that our outlook on Europe is a bit more positive, although we recognise the importance of reform. Our position dovetails with that of the UK. Of course, as the member knows, the proposal for an in/out referendum is from not the current UK Government but the leader of the Conservative Party, and it is part of the set of proposals that he will implement should he be re-elected. The fact that it is not part of the UK Government's official policy allows us more latitude to express our views, which I have done in giving our more positive view about our continuing membership of the EU.

I reassure the member that, as I have said repeatedly, there is probably more co-ordination and co-operation than he would necessarily know about, which makes more sense. In the media, we tend to hear about disagreements. There are disagreements on occasion, but there is co-

ordination around the environment council in particular. We have a strong reputation, which means that we can talk to other environment ministers across Europe. When we are dealing with influencing a volume of people, doing that on a co-ordinated basis with the UK is important.

I am absolutely clear that we need to maximise what we can get from the Juncker package. Humza Yousaf will take forward work with the joint ministerial committee on Europe. We have made it clear that we can work in co-ordination with the UK to maximise our impact.

It is unfortunate that the UK is becoming increasingly distant and detached. That is the message that I consistently get from Europe. The UK's influence is therefore less. We have to ensure that we continue to be positive in our engagement, that we have something to offer and that we are a constructive voice.

Anne McTaggart (Glasgow) (Lab): Good morning, cabinet secretary. Can you provide an example of how the Scottish Government's Brussels office monitors policy developments that are relevant to Scotland?

Fiona Hyslop: That is done continually and regularly. Such work is the vast majority of what the office does, but we try to ensure that it does not all have to be done in the Brussels office. A lot of the monitoring of developments should happen in each Government department, whether in education or other areas.

The challenge is the volume of material on the majority of developments, so prioritising is important. That is why having our own action plan and focus helps to direct people to what to do and what to spend more time on.

There are areas that we have to focus on because we have to comply. We have a good record. Over recent years, we have developed a monitoring mechanism for the implementation of regulations. However, areas such as agriculture are extensive, as are justice and home affairs areas, particularly with the recent opt-outs. It is critical that we are on top of what is there.

That is what is done. Does Colin Imrie want to offer anything else?

Colin Imrie: We have a representative from Marine Scotland in the Brussels office, given the strong fisheries interest. He leads our engagement and supports ministers when they are at council meetings.

One of our senior officers focuses very much on the agriculture and environment portfolios, given their importance to Scotland and the fact that those decisions have to be implemented and cover most of our agriculture and environmental policy. We also have a strong focus on the

investment and innovation agenda, alongside justice and home affairs.

We have a team in Brussels that acts to some extent as the eyes and ears of the teams back at home. It can operate effectively only if it can link to ministers and officials in the departments in Edinburgh and Glasgow.

Fiona Hyslop: There is regular movement. Ministers are regularly in Brussels. Part of my role, with Humza Yousaf, is to encourage all ministers to go to Brussels, attend as many councils as they can and engage as fully as they can. Obviously, parliamentary business here requires them to vote and so on, so sometimes they cannot attend.

On the co-operation that Jamie McGrigor talked about, I was pleased that, when Angela Constance was the Minister for Youth Employment, she led for the UK at one of the councils. People are interested in our youth employment work; we are one of the Administrations that focus on that. That is in keeping with some of the developments that are taking place, and it is another area in which we can help to lead in co-operation, influence other countries and learn more, which is important.

Adam Ingram (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP): Good morning, cabinet secretary. I want to get down to some of the nitty-gritty questions on jobs and economic growth. You mentioned the support for the European Union in Scotland. I suggest that that support is based largely on the economic benefits of membership of the EU, as opposed to the political debates that are happening elsewhere.

In the chamber yesterday, John Swinney indicated that the Scottish Government has a target of growing exports by 50 per cent. How will the refreshed EU action plan push that agenda forward? What will we change to achieve that objective?

10:00

Fiona Hyslop: The alignment with Scotland's economic strategy, which was launched last week, is critical. I have mentioned the focus on innovation and internationalisation.

More than 300,000 jobs in Scotland depend on companies that have the EU as a market. Foreign direct investment is also important.

This is another area for exports. What matters is not just what comes in but what goes out. I have recently had interesting discussions with countries that are thinking of investing here so that they can export from here and use our innovation and technology skills base—we should remember that that is our strength. That goes back to horizon 2020. Innovation is important. People want to

invest here because they can then export elsewhere.

There is interlinking with skills investment and so on. When I was in Dublin, I met GlaxoSmithKline, which has major investments in Irvine and Montrose. It thanked me for introducing two-for-one life sciences apprenticeships when I was the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning. A lot of other factors made the company invest—in recent years, it has invested more than £100 million in its plants in Scotland. It knew that the Government was committed to skills.

Investment in people will help innovation, which comes back to the inclusive growth agenda. That is about how we can improve productivity and output by recognising inclusive growth, which means investing in young people, in women and in other areas. Telling stories of individual companies and individuals can help to argue the case for Europe. That is one example.

Internationalisation is not just about an export focus for the transactional trade aspects. Companies that are exposed to international activity are more likely to be innovative, because they learn from elsewhere. We have had great figures on food and drink—Richard Lochhead is keen on that area—but we can do more. Developing that market, particularly in Europe, will be a big opportunity for us.

Europe is not just about exports. It is about using European investment to help us to grow internationalisation in Scotland for our companies, so that they can export not just to Europe but beyond Europe. That is where we see the linkages.

Adam Ingram: Will we engage in a different fashion to push ahead with those objectives?

Fiona Hyslop: A practical thing that will come out of the economic strategy—I have been involved in the international portfolio—is that we will have a one Scotland partnership across the world. You will see a heavy emphasis on that in our international framework.

There is also international innovation and the idea of innovation investment hubs. Those hubs will allow us better to corral and bring together all the agencies from Scotland that can promote the export agenda.

Those are practical things that are in the economic strategy, which will be a part of the European action plan and will be part of our overarching international framework. There is a key focus on trade and investment.

This is not just about the transactional aspects. Innovation is key and, if we can mobilise our activity on horizon 2020, that will represent added

value for Scotland. We must remember that we need to get small and medium-sized enterprises to export more, too. That will be one of the key tricks for us.

Hanzala Malik (Glasgow) (Lab): Good morning, cabinet secretary. Welcome to our committee on this sunny morning. You have had an opportunity to visit the United States and you plan to visit it again in future—

Fiona Hyslop: I am sorry—can you repeat that?

Hanzala Malik: Of course—the welcome or the question?

Fiona Hyslop: Either.

Hanzala Malik: I again welcome you on this sunny morning.

You have had an opportunity to visit the US and you plan to make further visits there. Given your experience, how flexible do you think that the Scottish Government's EU action plan is in responding to emerging policy issues such as TTIP?

Fiona Hyslop: The action plan can be flexible, and the new version certainly will be. That is why it is critical that we ensure that we have a better focus on relationships, networks, partnerships and engagement. As TTIP was still being developed at the time, it was not in the 2009 action plan, but that has not stopped us responding to it. Similarly, TTIP will not have been among the committee's priorities in previous years, but you have adapted to circumstances as they have arisen.

It is extremely important that we co-ordinate our response across Government. I do that with Cabinet colleagues, and Humza Yousaf brings together ministers with particular interests in European matters—public health, rural affairs or enterprise, for example—to ensure that we are sighted across interests and that, if a political imperative emerges for us to co-ordinate in one area, we can do that a bit more nimbly, which is what I think everyone expects us to do.

Hanzala Malik: The action plan has been amended, but the \$6 million question is whether it will be a working document or whether we will be stuck with it for a period of time. It is clear from experience that Europe—particularly with regard to TTIP—is quite a changing scene. How does the action plan set us up for responding to that? What are the timeframes for responding?

Fiona Hyslop: That is a very important point. The European action plan will form part of our international framework, which in turn will sit within the wider economic strategy. As with the international framework, we want the action plan to be more of a live document. That is why it will be web based and will be updated regularly. Policy

statements might be made, and positions might be taken, on an annual basis. There will be movements in those, but the plan should allow people to align their focus and to be responsive. Whereas previously such a document might have been produced by a minister in a particular year and updated annually, the new action plan will be more of a live document.

The plan will also be far more interactive and will provide the portal that the committee was looking for in its discussions about how people who are interested in European matters can access relevant material. The plan will not be the be-all and end-all—organisations such as Scotland Europa provide an important platform—but we will be able to link it to the relevant areas. As well as being an evolving document, it will be a go-to source for information. We will be able to provide access to comments and speeches that are made and developments that take place. That will be the shape of the plan.

Hanzala Malik: As far as the Government's office in Brussels is concerned, do we have someone who will be responsible for making sure that we actively deliver on the action plan rather than just having it on the web?

Fiona Hyslop: I will pass that over to the person responsible.

Colin Imrie: The answer is that one of the great advantages of where we are compared with where we were is that we now have a clear set of priorities for the next five years. Those priorities were set by the European Council and the Commission last summer. We also have a very clear set of priorities for Scotland, in the new economic strategy. Our aim is to make sure that both sets of priorities are aligned and that we use that as the framework for taking forward the action plan. In fact, the preparation is being done jointly by the teams in Edinburgh and Brussels that support the cabinet secretary. We will endeavour to ensure that it is taken forward actively and that the reports that are done and the updates that are provided reflect the situation as it develops.

Fiona Hyslop: I have strategic responsibility for our European and external affairs activities. At the political level, Humza Yousaf will deal particularly with domestic relations with the UK, whereas I will be involved in more of our bilateral relationships. We will also co-ordinate with colleagues.

As far as the civil service is concerned, Colin Imrie is the deputy director and is responsible for European and UK relations. He spends a considerable amount of time in Brussels and with the Brussels team. I thought that it would be helpful to pass over to him so that you would know where the responsibility lies.

Hanzala Malik: That was very helpful.

Roderick Campbell (North East Fife) (SNP): Good morning, cabinet secretary. I would like to raise a couple of issues. First, I am pleased to hear that Paul Wheelhouse is in Brussels today. Is it possible for the committee to get some feedback on that visit? What is the plan?

Fiona Hyslop: I am just trying to think of what we normally do. The issues that will be discussed on that visit will be of particular interest to the Justice Committee, but we can discuss with the clerks how we can update this committee. Humza Yousaf will update this committee on last week's meeting of the joint ministerial committee on Europe. Updates tend to be given to the subject committees. This committee has been encouraging all the subject committees to be more proactive on the European agenda, so I would be reluctant to change that and have reports coming back only to this committee, but I will ensure that you get a read-out on that.

Roderick Campbell: I certainly was not suggesting that reports should come back only to this committee—I wear two hats, as I am the European rapporteur on the Justice Committee.

Fiona Hyslop: I am assuming that you get regular updates from ministers on Council activity. Do you request that information as a committee member?

Roderick Campbell: It does not necessarily formally form part of the agenda. Obviously, I do not want to step on anyone's toes, but it seems that both committees are interested in the issue.

Fiona Hyslop: We can certainly look into that and think about how to ensure that feedback is provided meaningfully so that committees are not overloaded with unnecessary information. We must not create a bureaucratic and administrative burden on everyone but concentrate on getting things done. We can look at that, and perhaps get some feedback from the committee.

Having spoken to the European rapporteurs on each of the committees about how things are working in terms their knowledge of what is happening, and bearing in mind that we have a new ministerial team, I suspect that it would not be unreasonable to have a refresh with regard to whether feedback works well, although I caution against too much bureaucracy.

Roderick Campbell: Okay. Given that we will shortly hear from the Latvian ambassador, my second question is about how the priorities for the Latvian presidency of the EU fit with the Scottish Government's agenda. I am particularly interested in the priority for an engaged Europe, which touches on concerns about conflicts on Latvia's doorstep. Do you have any thoughts on that?

Fiona Hyslop: An engaged Europe is critical, and it is part of the proposals for a reformed Europe that we put forward. The priority is to concentrate on ensuring that Europe addresses issues of concern, and jobs and security—whether it is the security of energy supply or the security of countries—are definitely in there.

Countries to the east of Europe obviously have serious concerns about security. When the Lithuanians had the presidency, they concentrated a great deal on European partnerships and on whether Europe was acting, functioning and as engaged as it should have been.

Engagement is a two-way process: it also refers to a country's engagement with its own citizens, which is a key aspect that the Latvians want to pursue. There is a clear focus for European external affairs policy, led by the new EU High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Federica Mogherini, who has been involved in strategic activity. Security is important, particularly at the southern borders.

There is a balance. During the Italian presidency, the ambassador came to the committee and requested that the southern borders were not put to one side in favour of concerns about the east, particularly in relation to Ukraine. That balancing act is very hard, because we should be looking at both areas. I have raised concerns with the UK Government, and said at this committee, that the Mediterranean is becoming the watery graveyard of Europe. We must have long-term strategies to deal with climate change in north Africa and the conflicts that exist there. At the same time, the Latvian presidency will quite rightly and understandably focus on concerns about the eastern borders.

Moving forward, the challenge for Europe is how it can ensure that its European external relations policy addresses everybody's concerns without being too diluted to have a meaningful impact.

10:15

Willie Coffey (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP): Good morning, cabinet secretary.

Two or three weeks ago, the Commission published its digital economy and society index, which highlights performance against indicators for a range of digital services. Europe is making least progress on the indicator for "Integration of digital technology", and the UK is in the lower half of the performance table for various types of services, such as online and cross-border selling.

What is your response to the news that we see in the press that the UK Government and other European Governments have decided to backtrack on their commitment to abolish roaming

charges, pushing that back for another three years to 2018? In my view, that does nothing to assist consumers or help with the integration of digital services—it just makes matters worse. What is your view on that, and what influence could the Scottish Government bring to bear with the UK on the matter?

Fiona Hyslop: We should bear in mind our concentration on exporting using digital technology, not just within Europe but globally. The global market is developing in that respect—that is part of the innovation and internationalisation agenda that I spoke about. It is disappointing, therefore, that the UK is not moving in that direction, because we are an exporting nation and it is in our interests to promote growth internationally through innovative practices.

The clear focus on a digital Europe among the Latvian presidency's priorities—which the committee can discuss with the ambassador in its next session—will be really important and could make a clear and distinct difference in driving forward the digital agenda. There are different issues, such as digitising the public sector, safety and security, and the EU's digital single-market strategy, which—as you have set out—is very important.

Recent presidencies have shown an understanding of the clear need for such a strategy, but I think that the Latvians will be able to offer a great deal of leadership on the digital agenda, and I hope that they can communicate its importance to the UK. It is also part of our responsibility as ministers, both in the European portfolio and in Keith Brown's infrastructure portfolio, to influence the UK to move towards a positive agenda.

I hope that when we come out of the Westminster election, we might be in a more enlightened position with regard to the digital market as a result of a new incoming UK Government. Digital connectivity and infrastructure are critical. It is not just a matter of self-interest for Scotland but a crucial matter for Europe, because we will be competing not on low-value products but on high-value products.

I have a keen interest in the creative industries, and I know that Scotland has a lot to offer in that regard, but unless we have a better digital framework, we will be impeded in developing that as a growth area.

Willie Coffey: Has the UK Government consulted the Scottish Government on that crucial matter? It has been of interest to this committee in particular for a number of years.

Fiona Hyslop: Digital infrastructure is probably best dealt with at portfolio level by the relevant cabinet secretary, who is Keith Brown.

The Convener: Our questions this morning have been exhausted. The evidence session was condensed and intense, but it was extremely helpful. On behalf of the committee, I thank you for coming along, and we look forward to engaging with the Scottish Government's European engagement strategy in the future.

I will suspend the meeting briefly to allow for a change of witnesses.

10:18

Meeting suspended.

10:20

On resuming—

Presidency of the Council of the European Union (Priorities)

The Convener: We move to item 2, and I welcome His Excellency Andris Teikmanis, who is the Republic of Latvia's ambassador to the United Kingdom; Solveiga Silkalna, the deputy head of mission in the embassy of Latvia; and our very own John McGregor, the honorary consul of Latvia in Scotland. We are delighted to have you here. We thank you very much for the wonderful reception that you provided for us last night. The music was fantastic, especially the last piece. I see that people went mad raving about it on Twitter.

Ambassador, I understand that you have an opening statement to make.

Andris Teikmanis (Ambassador of the Republic of Latvia to the United Kingdom):

First, allow me to thank you for inviting me to your committee meeting and allowing me to share our priorities for the Latvian presidency of the Council of the European Union.

It is a great challenge for Latvia. This is—11 years after joining the EU—our first presidency. A number of member states have great experience in conducting presidencies. Indeed, some of them have done so six or nine times. However, the timing of presidencies has changed, and member states will take on the role only every 14 or 15 years, so it presents a particular challenge.

As a small country, we want to make our presidency efficient and useful, which very much reflects the needs of the time. That was our assumption when we chose the major objectives and priorities of our presidency. The most important task is to overcome fully the financial and economic crisis. We consider that we can do that and be more competitive. Therefore, we have chosen three major areas on which to concentrate our efforts: a competitive Europe, a digital Europe and an engaged Europe.

A competitive Europe means creating jobs and returning to economic growth. We see that there are several instruments that could be helpful to implement that programme. First is the Commission's plan for investment—the Juncker plan—through which €315 billion is to be devoted to an investment package for big and small and medium-sized companies.

We have advanced quite well in that direction. We hope that, by the end of our presidency, we will be able to launch the plan fully. This week, the economic and financial affairs council endorsed a

strategic investment fund. The Commission has also published a green paper on capital market union. We see that instrument as another good tool to get access to investment for any companies, including SMEs.

We very much hope that those instruments will be a good boost for the recovery of the European economy, getting back to growth and creating jobs.

We care very much about the social dimension. That comes from our Latvian experience from the time when we had to overcome a financial and economic crisis. One of the key factors was maintaining good dialogue with social partners. Therefore, we are very much engaged in keeping social dialogue in a three-part summit with employers and trade unions.

We are working on the implementation of the banking union and all its mechanisms. No particular new approaches are envisaged, but we want to launch the newly created structures and check that they are functioning properly.

An efficient energy policy is one of the key elements of a competitive Europe. We are determined to move on with the creation of the energy union. Again, we have advanced quite well. A high-level conference took place in Riga at the beginning of February in which the energy union was discussed, and our energy union strategy has been endorsed by the transport, telecommunications and energy council. We expect that, in March, the European Council will give its green light to energy union and that, in the June Council, the next legislative act will be adopted to implement it.

We see energy union as crucial in our time. It is not only part of the European economy; it is part of European security. In our vision, we see energy union based on five major principles: the principles of solidarity and an interconnected energy market, efficient common energy diplomacy, competitive energy independence, diversification of sources and of delivery, and good governance across energy policy.

In the Baltic Sea region, we have quite good experience of how good and efficient governance of all those principles is being created. Countries around the Baltic Sea are doing much to interconnect different kinds of energy sources. Gas pipelines cross the countries around the Baltic with the ultimate goal of creating a common gas grid around it. There are electricity cables from Estonia to Finland, from Lithuania to Sweden, from Lithuania to Poland, and from Latvia to Estonia. That gives an efficient tool to change when necessary the flows of energy such as electricity and to differentiate sources. A common Baltic energy stock exchange gives an opportunity

to buy electricity in one exchange not knowing who produces it. That gives a real alternative and real competition between energy companies.

We see that we and the United Kingdom are like-minded on matters of development, strengthening the single market and all the regulatory framework of the single market. That will be one of the permanent issues of the competitiveness council. We are determined to make the single market a more efficient and affordable tool to strengthen competition among companies in the European Union.

10:30

A digital Europe is one of the key elements of competitiveness. Our digital philosophy is based on the assumption that digital solutions should be found by default. That means that we look for digital solutions to cope with new challenges and for digital opportunities. That approach gives Europe enormous opportunities for trade, movement of goods and services.

At the same time, we are thinking about issues such as data protection, the security of information systems, the accessibility of the web and, of course, education on security among youngsters in particular. We will discuss all those issues during the digital assembly that will take place in Riga on 17 and 18 June.

There are a number of challenging issues on the agenda. I will mention a few of them.

The telecommunications package is quite a difficult item because, across Europe, there is a great number of different actors and stakeholders—companies and states—who have different interests and, perhaps, a different level of development in telecommunications. The discussions are not going easily, but we want to push them ahead to get some affordable compromise on roaming and telecommunication tariffs. We hope that we will make as much progress as possible and not leave too much to our trio partner Luxembourg.

The digital single market is also a crucial point on the agenda. It is in our interests to develop the digital single market as much as possible bearing in mind the fact that it should safeguard the quality of services at a reasonable cost for customers.

We are advancing the network and information security directive, which is crucial for the further development of the digital market in Europe and the protection of consumers. We are also working on personal data protection, an interoperability solution for European public administration and more implementation of e-government, e-governance and e-services offered by Governments.

The agenda is vast and we are happy to share our experience. In Latvia, digital services and digital government solutions are used very much and many consider the opportunity to use free wi-fi across the country to be part of their daily human rights.

I will speak about two major points on moving towards a connected Europe. One concerns trade issues. We are concentrating on advancing free trade negotiations, starting with TTIP. There are a lot of discussions around TTIP. Those discussions are everywhere—they are in the press and other media and among politicians. Many questions arise from the TTIP negotiations on issues such as genetically modified organisms, the transparency of the negotiation process and whether TTIP might affect health services.

The presidency is not involved directly in TTIP negotiations—the European Commission has the mandate. The Commission is conducting the negotiations quite actively. There have been eight negotiation rounds and two more rounds are envisaged during the Latvian presidency. We are trying to push the whole negotiation process ahead. We are representing the EU position at different global trade conferences. We are also working on increasing the transparency of the negotiations.

We should keep in mind that transparency cannot be one sided. Furthermore, we are not interested in weakening the negotiating team's positions. However, there was a high public demand to see more information about the potential impact on health services, for example. Questions were put and answers were given on health services. When Commissioner Malmström recently visited London, she explicitly said that health services are not part of the TTIP negotiating mandate.

We are pushing ahead other free trade agreements on the EU agenda, such as the comprehensive economic and trade agreement—CETA—with Canada. That has been approved, but it needs to be implemented. We are pushing the Parliament's process for approving the agreement. We are pushing ahead the EU FTA with Vietnam, too.

The mandate for those negotiations is huge, the points are many and the agenda is vast. The negotiators must think about what is a reasonable compromise, but winning negotiations should not be at any cost. In the end, the Commission will do its job properly and in the interests of member states and Europeans.

Another important area of our connected Europe programme is the development of the European neighbourhood policy to the south and east. We have more knowledge and experience of the east,

and we are concentrating our efforts on developing the European Union's eastern partnership policy. We are planning to host a summit in Riga on 21 and 22 May. We hope that there will be good and high-level participation.

It is not an easy time to convene a summit, but previous experience shows that, although every member state that holds the presidency plans its own agenda, it must also be prepared for challenges coming from unplanned regions and topics.

We have not particularly envisaged in our agenda the funding solution for Greek issues; neither have we particularly planned something in the response to the crisis in Ukraine, but we are facing it and we should respond to those challenges.

We see that European partnership policy, since its launch in 2007, has become more individual. At that time, all six countries were standing on the same line, but now, after eight years, we see that there are front runners and there are countries that are still a little hesitant about going more deeply into the relationship with the European Union. That is quite normal, but instead of wishing for those countries to approach more closely or to take on European standards and values, they have to decide for themselves, and that may not be an easy political decision for them.

We see now how three countries are advancing. Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova have advanced in matters of association agreements and mobility agreements and in implementing programmes and the rule of law. There are countries such as Azerbaijan, Moldova and Armenia that have a more flexible agenda, but we want each country to shape its own tailor-made policies. During the summit in Riga, we want to establish a new set of guidelines for how to move ahead in the future in relations with those countries.

We also want to review our European central Asia strategy. That is a region that is playing quite a crucial role for Europe, not only as a part of common energy policy—we should not lose sight of the fact that it is a region where substantial energy resources are located—but also as an important region for Asian security policy, bearing in mind what is going on in Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iraq. Those countries are concerned about all those processes, and we should work together with them.

We have concentrated on three major directions in co-operation with those countries: sustainable development to strengthen the rule of law and a market economy; border security; and education. We think that those three directions could be beneficial and useful for those countries, as well

as being beneficial for the interests of the European Union.

All the neighbourhood policies have quite a particular security dimension. We have seen how the security situation in Europe has changed during the past year alone, and we should respond to those challenges and changes, so we envisage that during our presidency, at the June summit and European Council meeting, we will review the crucial documents on reshaping European security strategy. Of course, we will work together with the European External Action Service, which will prepare the revised strategy, but it is essential to give a proper response on the new security challenge and the existing security architecture, as the security order in Europe has changed, whether we like it or not.

We have to find a proper response and increase European security. We know that European security is very much based on strong transatlantic links. That should be taken into account, but there are new challenges these days. Russia has stepped out of the CFE treaty—the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe—which is not a good sign.

10:45

Europe needs a proper response and to find appropriate finances for defence issues. The relationship between countries 20 years ago was such that conditions were nice and kind. European politicians used to find the best solutions through diplomatic means, negotiations and finding compromises. We should not neglect the current situation. We should assess it and not forget about proper financing of defence policies.

I could tell you much more about climate policy, enlargement and migration issues, which are all on the agenda of the Latvian presidency, but I will try to save you time. I am happy to respond to questions. Thank you for listening to me.

The Convener: Thank you, ambassador. That introduction was extremely comprehensive and covered every topic that the committee has looked at.

Willie Coffey: Good morning, ambassador. I would like to ask you a question on the digital single market, which I was asking our cabinet secretary about when you joined the meeting. The European Commission has just published its digital economy and society index, which shows us that the integration of digital services has the poorest performance of a range of areas in the digital economy in Europe. How, then, can you explain the decision of European Governments to delay the abolition of data roaming charges for another three years? Does that not give the wrong

message to European consumers about our intention to create a digital single market?

Andris Teikmanis: I would not call it a delay. We should acknowledge that the negotiations are not moving very fast. As I mentioned, there are a number of stakeholders. We should take into account the interests of companies, which should not have losses in offering telecommunications services. At the same time, though, a number of years ago the European Commission started to limit roaming charges. You may remember that, 10 years ago, the charges were enormous. If you were travelling outside your own country, you were faced with roaming charges five or 10 times higher than you would pay in your own country.

The goal now is to align roaming charges with national charges. To achieve that, a good compromise should be found. A number of issues for companies in different member countries should be taken into account. I do not think that the Commission is somehow delaying the whole process. There are too many actors around the issue, and therefore the negotiation process is not as quick as we might wish it to be.

For us as a presidency, it is more important to achieve a good compromise—not to force one or other issue but to get some agreement across the 28. Therefore, I would not say that the process is delayed; it is simply that the process is quite complicated because many actors and many stakeholders are taking part.

Willie Coffey: My understanding is that roaming charges were supposed to be abolished by the end of this year. During your country's presidency, will you continue to press for that to happen at the earliest opportunity so that consumers in Europe can get a better deal and so that Europe can move towards a truly integrated digital market, which I am sure we all support?

Andris Teikmanis: We really need to find a compromise. Our goal is that transactions between service providers and service consumers are safe and secure. It is quite essential to take into account the security aspect, including the security of personal data, when we discuss the package, as well as how we can fight cyber criminals—there are more than a few of them around. There are a number of different aspects to consider. It is essential to consider the interests both of consumers and of service providers. We are trying to find the most appropriate solution.

Willie Coffey: Thank you.

Jamie McGrigor: Good morning, ambassador. In your very articulate talk, you have answered most of the questions that I was going to ask, but I am pleased to see that you will be hosting the eastern partnership summit in Riga. In relation to recent developments in Ukraine and your worries

about security, what part do you see the eastern partnership playing?

Andris Teikmanis: The EU started its neighbourhood policy in the late 1990s and it was oriented more towards the southern region; afterwards, the focus moved towards the eastern region. The ultimate goal of the neighbourhood policy was economic development, followed by security. Bearing in mind that quite legitimate approach, democratic countries with responsible Governments and with common market rules were considered to be more stable, more predictable and more reliable neighbours for EU member countries.

At the same time, it is the sovereign decision of any European state whether or not to choose such an option. The eastern partnership policy is a very good example of how the EU conducts policy based on free choice. There are front-runners—three countries that have declared that they want to align with European standards and European values. Of course, if the EU considers itself to be a union of values, it should defend and endorse those values if other countries want to align with them. Equally, if countries such as Armenia, Azerbaijan or Belarus are still hesitating and considering different options on how to shape their foreign policy, it is at their discretion to choose an option. The EU will not impose an option on them; it will not make them accept one single model.

One size does not fit all. The partnership policy is the best example that it is not the case. In general, I think that a democratic Ukraine, based on the rule of law, strong democratic institutions, a market economy and rules that are observed on both sides of its border with Poland, for example, is in the general interests of the European Union and Ukraine. However, again, the issue is a sovereign decision for Ukrainians. A year ago, they made their desperate attempt and decision to turn to these European values and come closer to them, and the European Union is obliged to provide as much assistance as possible to them.

So far, there is a philosophy of partnership. There is a bilateral partnership in a common frame between the EU and any of those countries. It is not directed towards any other country. Russia sometimes claims that it is directed against it, but it is not. It is up to the EU to shape its own foreign policy. The EU should not ask Russia or America how to develop its relations with Morocco, Ukraine or Egypt. It is a matter of discretion for the EU. Russia does not ask the EU when it implements projects relating to Eurasian economic union, although that concerns the interests of the EU. That is a matter for the discretion of Russia.

We should honour the sovereign decisions of states. That is what the EU is doing.

Jamie McGrigor: I am delighted that, alongside having a strong financial sector, you want to promote growth and jobs. You think that TTIP might be a way of kick-starting a spark to lift the stagnation in the eurozone, which would make the eurozone and European values more attractive. On that point, I am delighted to see that Latvia would like to simplify the common agricultural policy. Do you have any views on how that might be done?

Andris Teikmanis: The common agricultural policy demands quite a sensitive discussion across all 28 member states. We have not envisaged a substantial shift in the common agricultural policy during our presidency. The financial framework and the basic principles of financing the CAP were set two years ago. We consider that we need to discuss reducing the administrative burden and red tape associated with the implementation of the CAP. We envisage a discussion in the agriculture council in March and we hope that that discussion will be continued in May. We are not about to change agreed decisions on the CAP or on its reform. However, we want to make the CAP more efficient.

We have invited all the member states to present their proposals for the areas in which the administrative burden on farmers could be reduced. We look forward to advancing that discussion to make farmers' lives easier and not burden them with too many reports, papers and other administrative burdens.

11:00

Jamie McGrigor: Can I carry on?

The Convener: I have two other members waiting, Jamie.

Jamie McGrigor: I will ask one very small question, then.

Ambassador, you mentioned that one of the issues with TTIP is worries about food safety legislation. You also mentioned advancing legislation on food safety, particularly on novel foods. Is it a problem that the US does not appear to have such strong safety precautions on food as Europe?

Andris Teikmanis: The Commission negotiating team knows that food safety is a very sensitive issue across all the European Union member countries, so it is paying particular attention to it. It is also taking into account the fact that, in European Union member countries, the attitude towards genetically modified products is quite negative. There are also production safety issues—the contamination of soil and the environment—that affect food safety and food quality. Those issues are taken into account too.

During our presidency, we envisage that there will be a discussion about food safety and genetically modified products in the agriculture council in April, so we think that ministers will come to a proper position that defends the interests of all the member countries.

The Convener: We are quickly running out of time.

Roderick Campbell: Good morning, ambassador. In the justice and home affairs section of the helpful submission that Scotland Europa prepared on your presidency, there is reference to

"The creation of a bill of new psychoactive substances (legal highs)",

which is a subject that the Parliament has shown interest in. Are you able to help us with any more information on that?

Andris Teikmanis: I am sorry, but I could not understand the question.

Roderick Campbell: I refer to a Scotland Europa submission on matters that affect justice and home affairs. There is reference to data protection packages and the pursuit of fraud in relation to European financial interests, but there is also a reference to

"The creation of a bill of new psychoactive substances".

Can you help us with that? If not, do not worry; I will move on.

Andris Teikmanis: It is a specific issue and I can reply only rather generally at the moment. The consumption of drugs and the appearance of new types of drugs that are not yet listed but which still represent a high danger for consumers, particularly among young people, is at the top of our agenda.

During our presidency, we will do our utmost to get proper regulations on the health and security of young people in particular. That will raise awareness and knowledge of the consequences of using such dangerous drugs. Maybe I can find and send the committee a more explicit answer in writing. Today I can give only some rather general answers; I am sorry for that.

Roderick Campbell: That is fine.

You referred earlier to trying to get the European Parliament's approval for CETA. The last time that I looked at that—I might be a bit out of date—the European Parliament had had only one plenary session on CETA. Obviously, there is considerable concern over here about TTIP and, in some respects, CETA sets the path on that. Can you help us with any further information about the scrutiny process for CETA at the European level?

Andris Teikmanis: The European Parliament is following the TTIP negotiations closely. We should, of course, take into account the fact that, while the negotiations are being conducted, Parliament cannot make any decision on the negotiation process or on the result because there is no result yet. Of course, the European Parliament will carefully scrutinise TTIP when the negotiations are finished.

During our presidency, we have had a substantive dialogue with the European Parliament on TTIP. We intend to continue with that dialogue, because it is important for the negotiating team to know what the European Parliament thinks about the whole process, including the level of transparency of the negotiating process and the particular interests of the European Parliament on particular topics.

At the same time, we expect that the European Parliament will start with the notification procedures for the Canada agreement. Negotiations are finished, so now the European Parliament has to do its part. In our presidency, we are trying to move the Canada agreement ahead to get Parliament's approval.

Roderick Campbell: I will leave it there, convener.

Adam Ingram: Welcome, ambassador. Like Scotland, Latvia is a relatively small country in Europe but, unlike Scotland, you are a member state of the European Union in your own right. As I understand it, this is Latvia's first term in the EU presidency. What impact has that had in Latvia? What impact has it had on your international relationships?

Andris Teikmanis: That is really a philosophical question and I thank you for it. For a small country like Latvia, membership of the European Union brings enormous opportunities to increase its global influence through the structure of the European Union and the mechanisms of the relationships between EU and other countries and regions of the world. Latvia, as a small country, is therefore gaining in importance in the world.

Assuming the challenges of the presidency is something particular. It brings more knowledge about our country to the world. We should recognise that people in most countries of the globe probably do not wake up in the morning with the thought, "What's going on in Latvia?" Many of them do not know where Latvia is. There is an excellent, enormous opportunity to bring knowledge about Latvia to people.

Next Sunday, I am going to Australia and New Zealand with a particular presidency programme to take information about Latvia to Australians and New Zealanders. We can use the presidency to increase knowledge about my country, and we are

happy about that. That costs quite a lot, of course. Any presidency costs millions, and it costs a lot of engagement and work, but Latvians are not afraid of work. They are happy to work hard.

There is an enormous opportunity for a small country to be more visible on a global scale. We should somehow put aside our strictly national interests and work on achieving compromise among all 28 member countries. A country's achievement of an appropriate compromise among all the member countries and not so much how it advanced its own proper interests is a sign of a successful presidency. If a country advanced its own proper interests, that would not be the best presidency. We are trying to do our best in promoting the interests of the whole European Union, and those common interests are very much in line with our national interests. Therefore, we are also working for our national sake in aiming for a successful presidency.

The first presidency for Latvia is a real challenge for us, but I think that we can cope with it. Latvians are quite pragmatic. We are more to the north and are used to not very favourable natural conditions. We know that we should fight for ourselves permanently and be strong, and that helps us in conducting the presidency.

Adam Ingram: Thank you very much. We wish you every success.

Andris Teikmanis: Thank you.

The Convener: That concludes our time with you, ambassador. On behalf of the committee, I thank you very much for a comprehensive insight into Latvia's presidency, the work that has already been done and the work that is in the pipeline. As Adam Ingram said, we wish you every success in that.

You are welcome to stay with us until we conclude a final piece of business in public. There can be a formal introduction to the committee afterwards.

“Brussels Bulletin”

11:13

The Convener: Agenda item 3 is the “Brussels Bulletin”. Given that we have used up all our time, I suggest that, if there are any questions, queries or clarifications on the “Brussels Bulletin”, members should direct those to the clerks, and that we should forward the “Brussels Bulletin” to the relevant committees. Do members agree?

Members *indicated agreement.*

The Convener: We will continue in private; I remind members that we have a committee report to conclude. I thank everyone for coming along.

11:14

Meeting continued in private until 11:22.

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e-format first available
ISBN 978-1-78568-132-5

Revised e-format available
ISBN 978-1-78568-148-6