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Tuesday 31 October 2017

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Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

SP SGTHC

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[The Presiding Officer opened the meeting at 14:00]

Time for Reflection

The Presiding Officer (Ken Macintosh): Good afternoon. Our first item of business today is time for reflection. Our time for reflection leader is the Rev Eileen Ross, minister of Linwood parish church in Linwood in Renfrewshire.

The Rev Eileen Ross (Linwood Parish Church, Renfrewshire): Thank you, Presiding Officer, for the invitation to come here today.

When you come through the door at Linwood parish church, the first thing that you see is a welcome mat, which reads:

"Welcome to Linwood Parish Church".

Our church is a small congregation of mainly older people, but more than 80 people gather every Sunday. A small weekly prayer group prays for wide-ranging issues, by request from all over the world, and for particular needs. A weekly cafe and a monthly table-top sale offer a place to meet and to make friends while providing a service to the community. Church activities and the involvement of individual members support local, national and international efforts to help families, young people, adults and older adults. I could of course tell you much more, and it is inevitable that much more could always be done.

Linwood church, like many others, continues to face challenges. In recent years, the town of Linwood has seen regeneration of schools, housing, sports facilities and shopping facilities. Many people, including people of faith, have formed community groups, and countless volunteer hours are given to see good things happen for Linwood and its people. What motivates them? Unexpectedly, while I was thinking about what to say today, I found some words of Alastair McIntosh, a Scottish writer, broadcaster and activist on social, environmental and spiritual issues. He said that spirituality is "the bedrock of community" and that

"Behind many community activists is a strong if silent spirituality."

Do you recognise that in your constituency or where you live or work? Do you think that spirituality makes a difference, and if so, how?

Belief in and a desire for the regeneration of our Christian spirituality led Linwood parish church in 2015 to join the Church of Scotland's path of

renewal pilot scheme, which aims to help churches reflect and consider new approaches to church life. For me, the emerging pattern resonates strongly with Raymond Fung's short book "The Isaiah Vision". In the prophet's vision of community restored, young and old find fulfilment and live out their days in fullness of life. People do not labour in vain but enjoy the fruits of their labour. It is a vision that encompasses babies, children and young people, people of working age and older people—a vision that surely we can all share. Living together in common humanity—a vision that is underpinned by a "strong if silent spirituality". I wonder whether you see spirituality as the bedrock of the communities in your constituency or where you live or work. I wonder whether you think that it makes a difference and, if so, how.

Topical Question Time

14:04

Sexual Harassment

1. **Sandra White (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government what action it is taking to deal with sexual harassment. (S5T-00734)

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (John Swinney): I would like to explain first of all why I am answering this question, when normally it would fall to the Cabinet Secretary for Communities, Social Security and Equalities, Angela Constance. The Government wants to make it clear that it is the conduct and behaviour of men that need to change if we are to end the sexual harassment and abuse of women, whether in their workplace, their social life or their home. Therefore, as the most senior male minister in the Scottish Government, I wanted to answer this question and to make it clear that it is up to men to make those changes, and that men must examine their own behaviour.

Sexual harassment or abuse in the workplace, or anywhere else, is completely unacceptable and must stop, just as the underlying attitudes and inequalities that perpetuate it must also stop. What is more, our own institution is not immune from this issue, and I want to take this opportunity to encourage anyone who has experienced any form of harassment to report it.

Yesterday, the First Minister wrote to you, Presiding Officer, seeking to work across all parties to ensure that this Parliament is doing everything that it can to make the Parliament, as a workplace, a place where there is zero tolerance of such behaviour. I therefore welcome the meeting with party leaders that is taking place later today to discuss what more we can all do to tackle those behaviours and attitudes within the Parliament. No one—staff or member of the Scottish Parliament, woman or man—should ever have to put up with harassment or abuse. I am sure that the Parliament and all parties are united around the importance of making sexual harassment a thing of the past, and that we will work together to achieve that.

Sandra White: I thank the Deputy First Minister for his reply and I especially welcome the tone and the stance that he has taken. A lot has to be learned throughout society, not just in this Parliament. I take on board what the Deputy First Minister has said about a meeting taking place, and I thank him for that information. What further discussions will be held across all the political

parties at Holyrood to ensure that there are rigorous measures in place that are consistent across Scottish politics, to ensure a zero tolerance approach to such behaviour?

John Swinney: This is an issue in which all parties will have a close and strong interest, and it is right that we unite across the chamber to send a strong message that there is no place in Scottish politics, in the Parliament or in our constituency offices for any form of harassment or abuse. As I indicated in my earlier answer to Sandra White, there will be a meeting this afternoon, which the Presiding Officer will convene, involving the party leaders. We welcome that, and I commit the Government to working closely with the Parliament to ensure that all these issues are addressed. From the Government's perspective, we discussed the issue at the Cabinet this morning, and the permanent secretary will be taking forward all measures within the Government to ensure that the same sentiments that I have put on the record here today in the Parliament are taken forward within the Government, where we will challenge our existing approaches and procedures to ensure that all staff are protected from being exposed to sexual harassment in any shape or form.

Sandra White: As has been said, it is not just in political parties that harassment takes place. It is also a criminal offence, and I hope that we can look towards that as well, regardless of where it happens. Does the Deputy First Minister agree that reporting sexual harassment, bullying or misconduct in any workplace can be extremely challenging, particularly for young or vulnerable adults? Can he tell us what we can do—in the Government, in the Parliament and as individuals—to ensure that victims have the confidence to come forward in the knowledge that they will be supported and kept safe?

John Swinney: I do not in any way underestimate the significance or challenge that it poses to individuals to come forward to report any behaviour of this type. It is important that a number of things are done. First, we must ensure that individuals are encouraged to come forward and make their complaints. We must signal—I hope that my response to today's questions helps to do so—that any individual with such concerns should feel able to come forward with those complaints.

Secondly, there has to be a ready, practical and safe space in which complaints can be brought forward, so that individuals can truly feel able to raise their concerns.

Thirdly, there has to be a change of culture, so that, rather than the onus being on individuals to raise complaints or express concerns, individuals are not exposed to circumstances that might give rise to such complaints. That is my point about the

importance of men examining their own behaviour and acting in a fashion that does not give rise to any basis for complaint in the first place, to avoid individuals having to go through the very challenging experience that making a complaint involves.

Sandra White mentioned the possibility of criminal offences being committed. If an individual feels in any sense that a criminal offence has been committed, I encourage that individual to go to the police and to get the support and assistance to which they are absolutely entitled, so that their concerns can be properly addressed.

Annie Wells (Glasgow) (Con): I reiterate my concern about the allegations that have emerged in recent days. Sexual harassment is wrong in any environment.

I am pleased that the Scottish Conservatives established and reinforced staff procedures to ensure that people can raise concerns directly and in confidence. The Scottish Conservatives take the issue extremely seriously, so I am pleased that Ruth Davidson has asked for the procedures to be reviewed.

How will the Scottish Government support women and men who are affected by sexual harassment to come forward? How can we get all organisations, including local authorities, to take sexual harassment seriously?

John Swinney: The member raised an important point about the need for all organisations to take the matter seriously. That is a message that, as I said in my original answer to Sandra White, the Government is taking forward through our own procedures; we very much welcome the Presiding Officer's convening of a meeting this afternoon. Individual local authorities must do likewise.

In the workplace, there are commitments that employers must meet. There must be a combination, in that good procedures must be in place to enable individuals to feel confident about reporting any behaviour about which they are concerned and, equally, we must all take a relentless approach to ensuring that such behaviour does not take place in our society.

There is no place for such behaviour, and individuals should not be exposed to it as part of their daily lives.

Monica Lennon (Central Scotland) (Lab): The media reports about sexism and sexual harassment here at Holyrood are sickening but—unfortunately—not surprising. Our Parliament cannot think itself immune from the worst excesses of the sexist and misogynistic behaviour that women and girls have experienced, inside and outside the workplace, for decades.

The initial response from the Parliament—that it would set up an anonymous phone line—was well intentioned, but the Parliament must go further. Unless we understand how difficult it is for women to come forward with complaints, given their fear that they will not be believed or supported, and unless we recognise that we are talking about a cultural problem, which requires a cultural change, we will never fully resolve the issue.

Notwithstanding that this is a matter for the Parliament, does the Deputy First Minister agree that nothing short of an independent review, informed by women's organisations and trade unions, is required? Does he agree that any such review should consider the procedures for reporting and recording incidents and the culture of the Parliament more generally, given, for example, that the running of the Parliament is currently overseen by all-male groups of MSPs?

John Swinney: Monica Lennon will understand that a number of issues that she raises are properly the responsibility of the Parliament and that it would be inappropriate for me, as a minister, to comment on those points.

It would be a good idea if, in the work that we all take forward in this respect, we work closely with the organisations in Scotland that have served our country extremely well in supporting women to come forward with concerns, whether we are talking about Scottish Women's Aid and Rape Crisis Scotland or organisations such as Engender and Close the Gap. There is a tremendous range of organisations that serve our country extremely well in that respect, and we should all engage closely with them and ensure that we provide all necessary support.

Monica Lennon raises a wider cultural point, which I accept. I am here to answer questions and to make that point very clearly to Parliament. It is important that attitudes change within our society so that many aspects of life in our country change for the better as a consequence.

We can take hope from where practice has changed. On the issue of domestic violence, for example, more and more women are prepared to come forward, with the proper support, to report their experiences. The justice system has been changed dramatically in recent years to ensure that those issues are taken much more seriously and are acted on in every respect. As a consequence, individuals who have had a bad experience in our society—one that they should never have had—are able to secure the justice to which they are entitled. We must learn from some of the lessons of that experience in taking forward the issues that we are addressing here.

Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green): I thank the Deputy First Minister for his comments so far and

echo much of what has been said. The problem is deeply ingrained in our society and multiple solutions will be needed—both short-term measures and longer-term approaches—to assist the culture change in our society to which the Deputy First Minister has referred.

Does the Deputy First Minister agree that one of the most important things that we can achieve through that longer-term cultural change is ensuring that every child in every school receives the highest standard of sexual relationships education, including a thorough and comprehensive approach to discussing consent and bodily autonomy appropriately at every age? Is that not one of the most important things that we can do to positively influence the behaviour and attitudes of boys and young men as well as ensure that no child grows up under the expectation that abusive, harassing or entitled behaviour is a normal part of life that they should just put up with?

John Swinney: I agree with Patrick Harvie about the importance of education around the question of consent. It is a fundamental right of every individual to be equipped with an understanding of their rights in that respect. The work that the Government is taking forward on relationship education is being significantly strengthened by the dialogue that we are having with the Equalities and Human Rights Committee, which is convened by my colleague Christina McKelvie and which has had some very valuable input into the Government's thinking on the issue. We will produce further publications in that respect.

On the fundamental point, I agree with Mr Harvie on the importance of every individual having a deep understanding of the question of consent and—more important—on the need for the question of consent to be respected fully within our society.

Liam McArthur (Orkney Islands) (LD): Like Patrick Harvie, I acknowledge the complex nature of addressing the problem that is under discussion. I also welcome the cross-party agreement that we need new steps to make the complaints process clear and fair. We must ensure that those who work in this building—wherever they are based—know unequivocally that they will be respected and kept safe.

Does the Deputy First Minister agree that harassment is worst when there are big discrepancies of power? MSPs' staff have the right to complain about MSPs to party business managers or directly to the Commissioner for Ethical Standards in Public Life in Scotland. However, staff told me this morning that the route to the commissioner is not clearly set out in the code of conduct, in the standards legislation or in

contracts of employment. Given that contacting party business managers—one of whom is a Government minister—may be a daunting prospect for staff, will the Scottish Government support steps to make it clear that MSPs' staff can and should approach the Commissioner for Ethical Standards in Public Life in Scotland directly when appropriate and necessary?

John Swinney: Mr McArthur makes a fair point. I am sure that the parliamentary authorities will consider that issue as part of the work that is taken forward to address these questions.

The issue that Mr McArthur raises is relevant to, frankly, every organisation. If the process of raising a complaint feels more daunting to an individual than could be imagined, we must properly address the issues and make it practical and tangible for individuals to make complaints. In the work that the permanent secretary will take forward on behalf of the Scottish Government, we will look to Leslie Evans to ensure that the steps and approaches that we have in place properly take account of the sentiments that Mr McArthur has expressed.

The Presiding Officer (Ken Macintosh): I apologise to the three other members who wanted to ask supplementary questions, as there is not enough time for them to do so.

School Staff (Violence and Abuse)

2. Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government what its response is to reports that violent attacks and abuse towards staff in schools have risen by a third in three years. (S5T-00732)

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (John Swinney): It is not acceptable for anyone who works in our schools to be assaulted verbally or physically. Classroom assistants and support staff often work with children and young people with the most complex and challenging support needs, and it is important to recognise that the vast majority of pupils are well behaved and respectful.

While local authorities are responsible for ensuring that school environments are safe for everyone, we remain committed to working with our partners to continue to improve relationships and behaviour in schools.

Daniel Johnson: I thank the Deputy First Minister for that answer. In my view, everyone has the right to safety and security at work, but the figures reveal that thousands of support staff and, indeed, teachers regularly face attacks. What support will the Government give teachers and support staff and what action will it take to prevent and reduce such attacks in the future?