OFFICIAL REPORT
AITHISG OIFIGEIL

Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee

Wednesday 8 May 2024

Session 6

The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

Wednesday 8 May 2024

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CITIZEN PARTICIPATION AND PUBLIC PETITIONS COMMITTEE
8th Meeting 2024, Session 6

CONVENER

*Jackson Carlaw (Eastwood) (Con)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*David Torrance (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*Foysol Choudhury (Lothian) (Lab)
*Fergus Ewing (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP)
*Maurice Golden (North East Scotland) (Con)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:

Edward Mountain (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
Alex Salmond

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Jyoti Chandola

LOCATION

The Alexander Fleming Room (CR3)

Scottish Parliament

Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee

Wednesday 8 May 2024

[The Convener opened the meeting at 09:30]

Decision on Taking Business in Private

The Convener (Jackson Carlaw): Good morning, and welcome to the eighth meeting in 2024 of the Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee. Our first item of business is a decision on considering in private later the evidence that we hear this morning. Do we agree to take that business in private?

Members *indicated agreement.*

A9 Dualling Project

09:30

The Convener: Our principal item of business is the continuation of our inquiry into the A9 dualling project, on the back of the petition that was lodged by Laura Hansler, who I see joins us in the public gallery for this morning's evidence. This meeting follows on from evidence that we have heard along the way from representatives of the Civil Engineering Contractors Association; current and former senior leaders at Transport Scotland; and Màiri McAllan MSP, who was transport secretary when she gave evidence, before Fiona Hyslop resumed her responsibility in that direction.

We are joined this morning by Edward Mountain, who is here as a reporter for the Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee in relation to the inquiry. Thank you, Edward, for joining us again. Edward is moving amendments to a bill at stage 2 elsewhere this morning, so if he gets a jab from a knitting needle to tell him that his amendment is about to be called, he will have to leave our proceedings.

Those of you who have been following the progress of the inquiry will know that we are primarily focused on what action needs to be taken to get the project back on track. That is what the petitioner and all those who are interested in the A9 project are looking for us to achieve. Along the way, we have heard evidence about the major capital infrastructure projects that are likely to unfold over the next five years and decade. The access to, and ability to capitalise on, those projects would be compromised by not having the infrastructure eventually in place.

In this inquiry, we also want to look back to understand why we are where we are, what led to the delays and at what point those delays became apparent.

This week in Parliament has felt like a very retro week, if I can put it that way, with John Swinney re-emerging as the leader of the Scottish National Party and our First Minister; with a retro look back into the affairs of the A9; and with evidence this morning from Alex Salmond, who is the former First Minister of Scotland and whom I am very pleased to welcome. I recall that one former leader revisiting events said that the Mummy had returned; I do not know what epitaph Mr Salmond would wish to offer for his own evidence this morning.

Alex Salmond: Did you say epithet or epitaph?

The Convener: Well, I do not know; I suppose that, arguably, either might be possible. In any event, welcome; I am delighted to have you with

us this morning. We will move straight to questions, if that is okay. When we conclude, if we have not touched on anything that you think might be helpful, we would be pleased to hear it.

Let me start with Alex Neil's evidence. In painting a picture of his meeting with civil servants on the original commitment to the A9, Alex Neil said that one of them kind of looked at him and said that they could be pursuing lots of other projects. Alex Neil replied, saying that the A9 project had one thing that none of those other projects had: "a manifesto commitment". Indeed, it very much was a manifesto commitment of the Scottish National Party as it went into Government.

What was your commitment to the project, Mr Salmond, and your understanding of the credibility of what was being proposed and the Government's ability to achieve it?

Alex Salmond: Thank you very much for your words. Incidentally, I am very encouraged by the retro theme—it means that there is, perhaps, hope for us all. Who knows?

I have spoken with Laura Hansler and, although we will talk a great deal today about manifestos, commitments, infrastructure and capital investment, Laura's petition also concerned the fatalities on the road. I noticed that there was another fatality on Monday night. The total since the road started to be dualled is now approaching 350, over the past 40 years or so. I know that the whole committee would want to note that there are other matters, beyond capital budgets and infrastructure, that you are considering, and rightly so.

With regard to manifesto commitments in 2007, I saw some civil servants, who appeared before your committee, refer to aspirational commitments. That was probably true of 2007, because the commitment in that manifesto was that the A9 should be dualled, and that was set in the context of road safety. However, no timetable was given for it, and there was no exact formulation in the manifesto.

That really started to change in our Cabinet meeting in Inverness town house in August 2008. I was replicating a United Kingdom Cabinet meeting that Lloyd George held in Inverness town house in August 1921, at which—as you might be interested to know—the Cabinet agreed to the Irish Free State. We were not able to agree to a free state in 2008, but we were able to agree that we should publicly state our commitment to the dualling of the A9.

That was brought into flesh in the 2011 manifesto, which gave an exact commitment to dualling the A9 between Perth and Inverness. Of course, later that year, the infrastructure plan came forward, led by Alex Neil. I read Alex Neil's evidence to the committee, and it would perhaps help the committee if I said that I endorse every word of that evidence. I should say that it was not the only manifesto commitment on infrastructure, but it was the largest project in the infrastructure plan, if taken as a whole. As the committee knows and will have heard in evidence, the project was divided into 11 more digestible parts.

There is no doubt that the Cabinet, my Government, the manifesto and the infrastructure plan committed to dualling the A9 between Perth and Inverness by 2025, which was the timescale that was introduced in 2011.

The Convener: We will come back to two things that you touched on. One is the proposal in relation to a national memorial, because I realise that, in your lifetime of politics, we have seen memorials to the Piper Alpha disaster and the Lockerbie tragedy. It would be interesting to touch on what might be appropriate—or otherwise—in relation to the loss of life. That is one of the imperatives that drives forward the interest of the committee, and, in fact, it was the original raison d'être for the commitment.

The manifesto commitment from the Scottish National Party at the time did not make particular reference to economic wellbeing or the benefit of potential expansion in the north-east of Scotland. It made particular reference to the fact that dualling could lead to a significant reduction in the loss of life on the route. Was that not a prime motivator in the underpinning of the commitment?

Alex Salmond: Yes—it was, and you are quite right that the 2007 manifesto couched things in those terms. Obviously, by the time that we got to the infrastructure plan, Alex Neil was developing a network of infrastructure and connectivity between the population centres and cities of Scotland and was looking closely at the economic benefits. However, the original commitment was certainly couched in terms of road safety.

If I remember correctly—as the committee will know, because of the evidence that you have received—the generally accepted formulation is that dualling makes a road about two thirds safer than a non-dualled road. Of course, people such as Laura Hansler have much more expertise in that than any of us do, but I have always thought that the A9, because it has dualled and non-dualled parts, is particularly dangerous in that respect. When you are driving at night on the A9, you expect to be on a dualled part of the road, even when you are not. I am sure that those of us who have driven or been driven on that road have all had experiences of that. Just over a year ago, I was in a taxi, provided by the BBC, going from Fort William back to Aberdeen. The experienced taxi driver mistook the part of the road that he was

on and thought that he was on a dual carriageway when he was not. It was late at night, and that can happen even to the most experienced driver.

The Convener: I can empathise with that—I have had a similar experience. I do not think that there can be many people who have travelled on that road and have not, from a distance, seen a manoeuvre on the road and thought, "Crikey!", because the driver was running a risk in what they were trying to achieve. We understand how people can lose sight of how fast things are moving on some sections of that road and think that they have more capacity to move than they do.

The other thing that you touched on, which we will come back to, was the fact that the dualling was just one of the infrastructure projects that the Government was looking at. I know that because I was the convener of the ad hoc committee that was set up to look into the Queensferry crossing route and the way in which the Parliament engaged with the planning of that process. We had some interesting exchanges with the Government about whether there might be more oversight of the project and whether parliamentary oversight helped to generate and sustain momentum. I will perhaps come back to that later, as well.

During the pre-planning phase in the initial period, to what extent did you leave that work to Alex Neil and other ministers? To what extent did it continue to be something around which the Government was having a more general discussion and which you, as First Minister, might have been involved in or apprised of?

Alex Salmond: In the first term of office, it was more of a general discussion. Obviously, when you come into office, there are capital commitments that have been made by your predecessors, so there is only a certain amount of room in the capital budget. There was also the Queensferry crossing. Because of the position that you held, convener, you will certainly remember, although others might not, that the Queensferry crossing was not part of the capital budget when we came into Government in 2007. It was only when difficulties emerged to the extent that they did—when analysis was done on the existing road bridge—that we had to make a decision. Of course, not all of the Parliament was in favour of that decision, and I remember the Greens' objection to it at the time, but a decision had to be made and money had to be found within the capital budget for that very large project. Of course, it was not as large as the full dualling of the A9. We could get three Queensferry crossings for the cost of one full dualling of the A9 but, nonetheless, it was a big capital commitment.

I appointed Alex Neil as the Cabinet Secretary for Infrastructure and Capital Investment precisely to drive forward the commitments that were made in the 2011 manifesto and to bring forward the infrastructure plan. We have both known him for a long time; he has drive, determination and the right attitude to mixing the politics and the practical. He has business experience that, in dealing with infrastructure projects, can be an asset for any minister.

The Convener: I have a final question for you before we move on, and I will come back to some of those other points later on.

In the Government that you led, you represented the north-east and came from a background in economics; John Swinney was the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Sustainable Growth and represented Perthshire and mid-Scotland; and Jim Mather was very much a man who had an understanding of business and economics, as well. That was the economic team that was driving matters forward. I have often wondered whether, when you left office, the Government became more central belt-centric. Do you think that, as we moved forward from your time as First Minister, it became less of a priority to look at infrastructure development from the perspective of the spine of the whole of Scotland?

Alex Salmond: There are still some survivors from that time. I am looking at Mr Ewing, who was in Cabinet, of course, so I would not overemphasise that.

We were a Government coming into office for the first time. The Scottish National Party had a long and honourable tradition of 74 years by the time that we got to 2007, but it had never been in government. I thought it wise, therefore, to take the unusual step of appointing people to their specialisms. Jim Mather, whom you cite, had very substantial experience in business, so he was made Minister for Enterprise, Energy and Tourism. John Swinney had experience in finance, as you know, so he became Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Sustainable Growth.

09:45

I took the unusual step of trying to allocate the portfolios based on people's expertise. I thought that that would be helpful to a Government coming into power for the first time. As we used to say, the Army used to do the reverse—if you were a nuclear physicist, they had you digging latrines. Well, I took the opposite view: that people should stick to their specialisms.

Even more than the point that you make, which I think has some validity, it was about the idea of appointing people to their specialisms. If you were wanting to drive forward infrastructure projects in 2011, I can think of no politician in recent memory who was more adept at doing that than Alex Neil.

The Convener: I will bring in David Torrance next.

First, I listened with interest this morning when you were on "Good Morning Scotland", being asked questions similar to some of those that we are exploring—

Alex Salmond: Actually, they told me that the interview would be all about Mr Swinney's elevation. I asked them beforehand whether it was about this issue. I hope that I did not pre-empt anything, convener.

The Convener: Not at all—in fact, you posed one of the questions that the committee itself is trying to explore. At some point, something happened, and whatever that something was, we have not yet been able to properly get to the bottom of what it was, nor was it made public at a point when it must have been apparent to the people who were aware of what was happening.

We might come back to that, but I will bring in David Torrance now.

David Torrance (Kirkcaldy) (SNP): Good morning, Mr Salmond. As First Minister, would you have expected to have been advised by ministers or officials if the dualling of the A9 was running behind schedule or over budget? Were you advised of that?

Alex Salmond: I would have been advised, first by the minister. I was not so advised because it was not so. I would not just have expected that—I can assure you that I would have been advised.

David Torrance: What did you understand when officials said that the 2025 date for completion was "challenging" and concerns were raised about it?

Alex Salmond: I think that I am right in saying that that phrase is from a ministerial briefing of April 2012; it might have been used elsewhere. If I remember rightly, the actual quote is "challenging but achievable".

I would expect it to be challenging because, taken as a whole, the dualling of the A9 is the biggest construction project in Scottish history—clearly, that is challenging. Also, Mr Neil was setting the pace, so it would be ambitious, but achievable, because—as Mr Neil told you in evidence—he took the precaution of saying to the officials, "What is the best possible date that is achievable?" and coming up with the 2025 date, and indeed with the 2030 date for the A92. The phrase was "challenging but achievable"—I would expect it to be challenging, and I would expect it to be achievable.

David Torrance: Were you ever advised by any officials that that date could not be met?

Alex Salmond: No, I was not.

David Torrance: Thank you. I have no further questions.

Fergus Ewing (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP): Good morning. In the evidence that we took from Alex Neil last October, which you mentioned that you have read, he said that money was not the problem. In fact, he said that there was an assessment of the budget and that

"£14.7 billion of capital was not allocated to any project ... between 2015 and 2030."—[*Official Report*, *Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee*, 4 October 2023; c 13.]

We are trying to find out why the target of 2025 for dualling the A9 was not achieved. Was it lack of money, lack of political will or lack of the right companies willing to do the work, or was it a combination of all those things? As the convener said, I do not think that we really feel that we have quite got to the bottom of that yet, although we have had a lot of useful evidence.

You described the Cabinet meeting that took place in Inverness. Will you talk us through who was involved and how the decision was made that the A9 would be given priority, and that the funding was available? Which people in the Cabinet were involved? Are you able to say, without breaching any rules of protocol, if there were any doubting voices from any of your cabinet secretaries, who urged caution, or not? It would be helpful to get the background to understand how you and your Cabinet saw the funding issue at that time.

Alex Salmond: I cannot remember specifically. There were plenty of Cabinet voices urging caution right through my term as First Minister. They were quite good at that.

I will set out the context of the 2008 Cabinet meeting in Inverness town house. I have talked a bit about the historical flourish. That was deliberate, of course. There is also a serious point, which is that I introduced the initiative of taking the Cabinet around the country. We did that in the summer mainly, although not always. In the Highlands, to my memory, we went to Inverness, Aviemore, Nairn and Dornoch, where, if I remember right, the *Daily Record* photographed me playing golf and put it on the front page. I was delighted with the publicity; it was an excellent swing. We also went to Shetland, Orkney and, in the Western Isles, Stornoway.

During my term as First Minister, the Cabinet met in all those places. You can hold a Cabinet meeting anywhere; these days, you could even hold it online if you wanted to. The reason for meeting in those places was to expose the Cabinet to the local populations and their priorities, and the public meetings that were attendant on our Cabinet meetings were incredibly well

attended and very vigorous. I thought that it would help the Cabinet if they tasted the public from all parts of Scotland.

What happened in the Highlands also happened in the central belt, the Borders, the south-west and the north-east. We met in Fraserburgh once, I remember. That was deliberate. When a member represents a constituency, they can, for understandable and very good reasons, have a constituency-focused view on the political world. The approach helped the Cabinet to understand the whole country.

The point and relevance is this: we were embarking on an infrastructure plan that involved substantial—huge—projects—for every part of Scotland. Those were mostly in the public sector, but some were in the private sector. There was the Borders railway, the M8 completion and the M74 completion, for example. The M74 had been waiting to be completed for many decades. The guy who showed me how to operate a digger was teaching apprentices. He was 60-something at that stage, and he said that his first job had been as an apprentice during the first stages of the M74. There was also the M80 completion. A lot of those infrastructure projects in central Scotland were part of our commitment to the Commonwealth games, because we had to have the road infrastructure ready. There was the Queensferry crossing, which was a huge undertaking. There was the Aberdeen western peripheral route, which is close to my heart, as you will understand. If you take the private sector, the new ferry terminal in Loch Ryan is a good example of a big geographical capital project.

Every part of Scotland was getting a project that was much needed, much wanted and long awaited. In my view, there had to be one for the Highlands, so the purpose of the Inverness town house Cabinet meeting was to say that this was a Cabinet and a Government for all Scotland and it was a Government for the Highlands. The A9 dualling was not the only thing that we announced for the Highlands. The University of the Highlands and Islands was another initiative that was announced in that fashion.

To me, the infrastructure budget was about economics. It was about what the most important thing was. It was also a demonstration to the whole country that the Cabinet and the Government were operating for the whole country—not for parts of it, but for the whole country. That applies to rural Scotland, in particular, because, if you merely address infrastructure projects on the rate of return or on a cost-benefit analysis, or by looking at the amount of traffic, peripheral rural projects will always be discriminated against. Of course, the A9 is not a rural project; it is a hugely important project for the Highlands, but it connects the Highlands to central Scotland.

The purpose of that Cabinet meeting was to drive to the whole Cabinet the fact that these were ventures that we should embark on together, defend together and push and prioritise together.

On Fergus Ewing's question about whether all Cabinet members were signed up, yes, they were. They were all at the meeting. We were speaking as one. I know that every one of us believed that what we were saying was going to be implemented. Obviously, the dualling had to be implemented in time, because of the other infrastructure projects, such as the Queensferry crossing, that we were engaged in. That is what happened in the 2011 manifesto and then, of course, in the infrastructure plan, through which Alex Neil brought it all forward for the whole country and made it a firm commitment with a firm timescale.

Fergus Ewing: You mentioned that you had to implement pre-existing commitments from the previous Administration, such as, I think, the trams in Edinburgh. Therefore, in your early years from 2007, the capital budget was substantially committed in advance to see through what had been either started or committed to. Is that right?

Alex Salmond: Yes, and the Parliament voted for that, of course. If I remember right, as a minority Government, our first defeat—certainly our first defeat of substance—in the chamber was on the Edinburgh trams project.

The Convener: Just out of interest, what do you think of the trams now that we have them?

Alex Salmond: For almost everybody who has gone through a tram project in an older city, there will be a difference between the process of doing it and its eventual completion. Everybody likes them once they are completed, but the question is whether that was the best way to ensure connectivity over that period. You will still find many people—particularly shopkeepers—in key parts of Edinburgh who will say that it would have been really nice for their business if their business had survived to see the trams completed.

I was not against the trams—I mean, nobody is against them; at least, I do not think that they are—but I had practical doubts about them, based on my family experience. My grandfather was the town plumber in Linlithgow, and, as a young lad, I used to toddle about with his tools. What I remember more than anything else was that nothing was where it should be. I remember the new plumbers coming to see my grandfather to say, "Look, where are the drains? We've dug up the road and they're no there," and my granda saying, "Yeah, we moved them in 1936—they're 50 yards down the road."

The point is that Linlithgow is an ancient medieval town, and Edinburgh is an ancient medieval city, albeit an early modern city in the new town. Therefore, I was absolutely convinced that, as soon as they started digging up Edinburgh, the gas pipes and so on would not be where they should be. To some extent at least, if you look at the inquiry, that was a relevant factor—perhaps not the only relevant factor—in the problems that the tram enterprise had.

The Convener: Sorry, Mr Ewing, for the digression, but it was an interesting one, since you were involved.

Fergus Ewing: Indeed. Getting back to the A9, I note that Alex Neil said that around £15 billion of capital was not allocated—that was estimated in an exercise that was carried out in 2011, I think—and that the figure for dualling both the A9 and A96 was estimated at £6 billion. It was clearly affordable within the £15 billion figure.

Alex Salmond: Alex Neil was comforted by the fact that, although the dualling was a huge undertaking, the cost would be 40 per cent of the available—that is, the free, non-allocated—capital budget at that time, which is the figure that he gave in his evidence.

If we consider just the A9, let us take the figure of £3 billion; I think that it would have been less than that if the timetable had been adhered to, but it will certainly be more than that now, so let us just take £3 billion as the average. That is a huge figure—it is almost four Queensferry crossings or Aberdeen western peripheral routes—but it is only half of the capital budget in a single year, because, as I remember it, the capital budget of the Scottish Government is almost £6 billion.

When you put it in that context, although £3 billion is an enormous commitment, it is still affordable because it is part of the available capital budget, as Alex Neil explained. When you put it into the context of the annual capital budget, you can see that, even with a sum of that size, if you decide to do it, you should be able to do it.

Furthermore, it was a commitment over 15 years, not a commitment for a single year. When the project is divided into 11 sections, although the sections obviously differ in size, scale and expense, it is about £300 million per section, on average. Again, that is a mighty sum, but it is not that different from the M80 commitment or the commitments for the M8 or M74 completions. Therefore, there is no question but that it was affordable at that stage, and it was set forward as—what was the phrase?—"challenging but achievable".

10:00

Fergus Ewing: In 2011, the estimated cost of both the Highland roads projects together was £6 billion, out of £14 billion or £15 billion of capital, so it looks as if the availability of capital was not the issue at that point.

Possibly a more difficult question is whether enough was done in the three years between 2011 and the end of your time as First Minister, in 2014, to advance the project. What would you say to those who might say that more could have been done during that period? Would there be any merit in such a claim?

Alex Salmond: No, I do not think that there would be. First, two of the 11 sections were signed off and embarked on. The construction phase had not started, but those sections were signed off during that period. Also, as you know, an enormous amount of preparation has to be done for a road project—land purchase, for instance—and, as you will know, convener, from serving on the ad hoc committee that supervised the Queensferry crossing, there are all sorts of legal hurdles and other things that must be done. The preparation was done, and the people to do that were appointed during that period. Everything was on schedule, and the reason why I know that it was on schedule is that Alex Neil would have told me if it was not.

The Cabinet decided on the infrastructure plan towards the end of 2011 and—if I remember correctly—Alex Neil publicly announced the plan in Perth, in mid-2012, which set it out in more detail. Edward Mountain is nodding, so I must be correct.

Fergus Ewing: Finally, you mentioned—well, the convener described—the business team that you had, which was you, Alex Neil, John Swinney and Jim Mather. Did they all remain absolute supporters of the project? Did the finance secretary have any questions or doubts about the affordability or viability of the project during your tenure as First Minister?

Alex Salmond: By nature, John Swinney is cautious about a range of things—and rightly so, as the finance secretary—but he was signed up for it. It was a collective decision in the Cabinet.

There are many reasons why we—and by "we" I should be clear that I mean the SNP, so just relax, David Torrance—did so well in 2011, but if I had to put my finger on the key one, it is that we were able to say, without controversy but with some justice, that we had fulfilled 84 out of our 94 key manifesto commitments, even though we were a minority Government. If we got into that debate with people, then of course they would say, "My goodness, 84 out of 94 as a minority Government—what on earth would they manage to do if they were a majority Government?" It was

a big thing to stick to our manifesto, and every member of my Cabinet knew that, so John Swinney was signed up for it, as were Jim Mather, Alex Neil and I. I feel very strongly about the commitment so blatantly not being kept, but I am sure that John Swinney does as well.

If I remember right, John Swinney ceased to be finance secretary in 2016—is that correct? Yes, because that was when the election happened. It may be that, once he was not finance secretary, other priorities crowded in. However, I am sure that, now that he has been restored to a position of commanding authority over such matters, he will be as anxious to redeem the commitment that we collectively made in 2011 as you or I would. It is a matter of principle, integrity and honour. I am sure that John will seek to redeem it as quickly as possible.

Fergus Ewing: I have one final question. Let us fast forward to 2024 and look at the situation now. As of yesterday, there is a minority Government, with 122 MSPs representing parties that favour the dualling of the A9 and seven MSPs representing a single party that is opposed to dualling the A9. Do you think that that will accelerate the completion of the dualling of the A9? Would that be a realistic and achievable objective, should the new First Minister so determine?

Alex Salmond: Yes.

Fergus Ewing: Thank you.

Foysol Choudhury (Lothian) (Lab): A few of my colleagues have touched on this already. Given the importance of the A9, when you were the First Minister, were there any timelines for your Government, and what priority was the project given? Did any ministers raise concerns that there would be any issues with the project?

Alex Salmond: The answer to the second part of the question is no. I would have known if any minister had had concerns. In particular, I have no doubt whatsoever that the responsible minister Alex Neil would have come to me straightaway. His evidence shows that he did not have any concerns. The briefing that was prepared in April 2012 by officials was given to Mr Neil, not the whole Cabinet. The advice that he was given at the time is that the project was "challenging but achievable". The commitment on the timescale was made to the Parliament in December 2011 as part of the infrastructure plan. In preparation, as Alex Neil indicated in his evidence, he asked his officials what the earliest achievable date was.

The committee has touched on the financial mechanisms that can be used to bring an infrastructure project into being. In 2011, we were very encouraged by the success of the non-profit distributing model, particularly in the school estate. We were looking to expand and introduce that model as a funding mechanism for transport in a way that had not been done before. At that time, NPD was largely, but not exclusively, a school estate matter, and it has been very successful.

Transport Scotland could claim a number of notable successes. I have seen the evidence that was given by the contractors' representative, where he said: "Well, if you look down south, they have that mechanism." For the public sector, the fact that the Queensferry crossing came in several hundred million pounds under budget meant that it was a success. The fact that the risk related to the Aberdeen peripheral route had been allocated to the contracting companies meant that it was considered a success. In fairness, after such notable successes, which saved the public purse many hundreds of millions of pounds, you might be careful in terms of rebalancing matters to give more comfort.

I like to think that the initiative to introduce the Scottish Futures Trust rebalanced the relationship for capital projects. Before that body was introduced, the private finance initiative was raking in money from the public purse the length and breadth of the country. Highly experienced negotiators and PFI contractors were taking on local authorities and taking them to the cleaners. When we introduced the Scottish Futures Trust, we reversed that balance of power. We brought some of the best negotiators into that organisation and they had more experience than many of those who were employed by private contractors.

In these matters, there is always a balance and an equilibrium that must be restored at some stage. That is why it is good that the committee is exploring other financial mechanisms that would give contractors more comfort. I am not convinced by the guaranteed 3 per cent return, for example. I would have preferred to look at the comfort that can be given to a contractor by extending the time periods for contracts—rather than them having one contract for three years, they could be awarded three contracts for nine years, because that brings substantial economics for the contracting world and would give contractors a security that, often, they do not have.

If we think about the school estate, BAM Construct & Ventures UK had a long-term arrangement that meant that it could effectively build the same school in various parts of Scotland, which was incredibly helpful for the standard and continuity of work, as well as for the cost effectiveness of capital contracts. Perhaps those areas would be worthy of the committee's exploration.

Maurice Golden (North East Scotland) (Con): I am quite interested in the dualling of the A9 with respect to its compatibility with climate change. I suspect that the theme might be more relevant

now than it was during your time, Mr Salmond. I am conscious that, between 2007 and 2011, Scotland established itself as a world leader in climate change. The Climate Change (Scotland) Act 2009 was enacted and the zero waste plan was put in place in 2010, which I have been reflecting on. We are still struggling to meet many of the fantastic ambitions of that plan, but was the theme of how compatible the dualling was with the climate change targets that you had set questioned during your time in office?

Alex Salmond: I found myself in the very unusual position this morning, as the convener will testify, of in effect defending the Scottish Greens from having all the responsibility for the slippage in the A9 project. In most matters, the Greens have been the winter on the native pasture of recent Scottish Governments, and have been responsible for all sorts of highways and byways that have badly damaged Scottish politics. However, in the case of the A9, given that they were not in government until comparatively recently, the Greens do not bear the heavy burden of responsibility. Perhaps they would be a much more legitimate target in relation to the A96.

The relevance is this: I have not no patience but very little patience for the idea that building a road damages your greenhouse gas targets. If you build a road and run nothing but electric vehicles up and down it, you will keep your greenhouse gas targets, but if you do not have enough electric vehicles or low-emission vehicles, clearly you will not.

In 2014, Scotland was 4 per cent ahead of our greenhouse gas targets, with six years to spare; we were 4 per cent ahead of our 2020 targets. The reason for that is that we had made big moves forward, principally in the production of renewable energy. Bringing on stream the largest onshore wind farm in Europe has a big impact on your greenhouse gas targets. I have never been convinced that the way that you achieve your greenhouse gas targets is by nibbling away at some building in Forfar or somewhere and spending a couple of million quid to convert a £100,000 building—I am exaggerating slightly, but not by much.

That is not how you meet your greenhouse gas targets. You meet your greenhouse gas targets by making big moves, such as the electrification of vehicles to a far greater extent than has been achieved, the conversion of the natural gas network to hydrogen and carbon capture. That is how you achieve your greenhouse targets; you do not do it by nibbling away at extraordinary public expense and saying, “Ochone, ochone, we can’t do anything.”

The end game of saying that transport projects are not compatible with greenhouse gas targets would be for nobody to move anywhere. Even for the Scottish Green Party in its current manifestation, that would be a step too far.

The Convener: I am not sure that it would.

Alex Salmond: Perhaps we should lighten up on them in their absence. In my early years, from 2007 to 2011, we had the great fortune of having a Green representative in Robin Harper who you could rely on. You could rely on him in two ways—to put forward green policies as opposed to whatever issues they have been concentrating on of late in identity politics. That is understandable; if somebody comes forward with a green agenda, you can understand it. Secondly, of course, he is someone who kept to his commitments, which is not something that I have noticed that Mr Harvie does consistently over a period of time.

Finally on the Greens, I watched Lorna Slater’s remarks on the A96. First, I thought that it was a pretty poor way to send off a First Minister—it was almost a taunt. It also struck me that this committee might want to have an early, close look at the assessment of the A96, which was part of the Bute house agreement, as I understand it, in terms of green compatibility. I may be doing her an injustice, but Ms Slater seemed pretty confident in her questioning of the First Minister that that would be a negative assessment of some kind. I do not know whether it is within your remit, convener, but perhaps you might want to understand better the reason for her confidence.

Maurice Golden: Thank you, Mr Salmond. Do you have any reflections on why you think the A9 dualling project was not completed and will not be completed by 2025?

Alex Salmond: What does Sherlock Holmes always do? You eliminate things that you can and then you are left with something that must be the case, however improbable. In this case, I think that we will be left with something that is highly probable.

We can eliminate the various excuses that have been made. I am afraid that transport issues, general inflation, contractors’ inflation and so on are just part of the slings and arrows of doing anything—that is just what happens; that’s life. Further I do not think that we can blame either Vladimir or Volodymyr—we have to excuse them from responsibility. I do not think that that war is an acceptable reason for the delay, although it has had an impact on inflation.

10:15

The only excuse that carries any weight is the pandemic—that is reasonable. If this committee was considering a two-year delay in the A9 commitment, the Government could say that it had

lost two years due to the pandemic and that would be an effective alibi—in fairness, you would probably accept that. Other than that, the excuses are pathetic.

Basically, what we are talking about is an issue of priority—politics is the language of priorities. What you are left with is the fact that, at some point after 2014—I suspect after 2016, when John Swinney stopped being finance minister; that is what I hope, anyway—other priorities became somehow more important, and I can give you evidence for that. I think that, at that point, it was decided that other things were a more important use of the 40 per cent of the available capital budget that, in 2011 or 2012, Alex Neil had estimated would be required.

An analogy is provided by the case of the Queen Elizabeth hospital, which we decided in the first term of the SNP Government to build using conventional finance, which meant that it became a huge part of the capital budget. I remember ministers occasionally grumbling—obviously, they would not dare to question the health secretary directly—about the project taking up such a large part of the capital budget. However, once you commit to a project, you do it. You do not say, "Right, we're going to do this," and then start moaning; you find a way to get it done.

As I said, I suspect that other projects were prioritised, although, to be absolutely honest, I struggle to think what they were. You can see what happened with the capital projects that I have mentioned—the ones that were planned between 2007 and carried forward to 2014. I mean, all of Scotland knows that there is a Queensferry crossing, and, in central Scotland, they all know that the motorway network is almost complete and that, although a bit of edging is required here and there, things are much better with the M74, that the M80 has three lanes and so on.

The same thing applies with the Borders railway—of course, again, that had to be constructed using a conventional capital project, because Network Rail is a good example of a central institution that does not regard a periphery as important. Network Rail said that the project did not meet its criteria for numbers of passengers, so it had to be done by the Scottish Government and then handed over to Network Rail—of course, it has exceeded its expected passenger levels several times over.

At some point after 2014, the language of priority changed and the A9 became less of an overriding commitment. I am not saying that people did not want to do it, but other things must have impinged on the capital budget. As I say, the change may have been after 2016, when John Swinney stopped being finance secretary, because I like to believe that he regarded himself as bound by the commitment, as Fergus Ewing and I were, and would still regard himself as bound by it now that he is in his current position. No doubt you will ask him about that, convener.

The Convener: On that point, I have noticed that parties that make the long march from Opposition into Government are committed to the manifesto that they fought the election on and which got them there, as I think you said was the case in 2007. However, in the time that I have been involved in politics, it has seemed to me that, the more that a Government is re-elected, the less importance it attaches to manifestos and the more it starts to evolve priorities that perhaps did not feature in manifestos to quite the same extent, with the result that a kind of drift can occur.

There is a difficulty in that I do not think that we have really understood what happened around 2018, which is after your time, when it looks as if the commitment to completing the dualling by 2025 was lost. That deprioritisation may have been led by ministers who were on top of the project and realised something was not right and started to think about whether there were other ways that the project could be funded, or it might have come about because officials started to think that the project might not be affordable and that they might need to find other ways of funding it, but there seems to have been a lack of grip and leadership at that point—that is what the evidence suggests.

I wonder whether the focus on and drive behind delivering on commitments that parties are very concerned with when they come into office—possibly because those are on the great projects that they have thought about—are lost the longer that they stay in office. How would you reflect on that?

Alex Salmond: I do not think that it is just parties; it is individuals. If you do not mind me saying so, convener, you aspired to elected office for a number of years, and on a number of occasions, before you achieved it. That would be the case for the overwhelming bulk of the SNP representatives who were elected in 2007 and 2011. They were people who had slaved in the vineyard or at the coalface for years and years, often with no expectation of winning. Therefore, when they arrived in the reconvened Scottish Parliament, it was a most amazing privilege and their determination to redeem the commitments that they had made was very great.

This is not a comment on any particular individual. I wonder whether, in parties that assume office, people who are on a certain trajectory from, say, constituency assistant to special adviser to MSP—who have moved so seamlessly up the ladder of opportunity—perhaps have the same awareness that politics is about

snakes as well as ladders. The people who came in in 2007 and 2011, not just at Cabinet level, but at party level, were invested with a great sense of responsibility. Such responsibility is given manifestation by the manifesto—that is what a manifesto is.

Secondly, I wonder whether some people lack awareness. With your business background, convener, you will be aware of the totality of what is going on. Earlier on, I rejected a few excuses, which leaves us with the question of priorities, but of course priorities are important as well. When I listen to people, I sometimes wonder whether they are aware of the full extent of the capital investments that are taking place in the north of Scotland at present—in particular in energy, but elsewhere as well, and in the private sector. That matters.

I do not want to pick on Lorna Slater again, but last week I saw her on a BBC programme during which she was asked about the bottle return scheme. She said that it had not cost anything because business had paid for it, which I thought was a most amazing comment. That is not true, incidentally, because, as you will remember, a large sum was lost from the public purse as well, but her attitude was that it did not matter because that was private business. However, what is currently happening in private business on energy infrastructure is hugely relevant to our capacity to deliver public infrastructure projects.

Scotland is a green energy powerhouse. As you will know, convener, that has been a hobby horse of mine for decades. You might even have teased me about it from time to time. However, there is no doubting my focus and ambition on that and on the requirement for the amount of capital that we would have to spend. Being aware of what else is happening in the world is really quite important. I hope and believe that the Cabinet is making provision to enable it to say that there is enough slack in the system to have enough civil engineers out there, doing the job. There are ways to cope with any of those factors. It is, by definition, a good thing that there are so many capital projects, and that there is such a demand for skilled labour.

Looking back, one thing that I liked about Alex Neil is that he is one of those politicians with the capacity to understand that what we do in one area will affect another, and therefore we have to ensure that, by one means or another, the supply of skilled labour is coming through to further a project. Many politicians in this place are fully aware of world developments, but I just wonder whether all are.

The Convener: That is a perfectly reasonable point, and I slightly share your analysis of the way in which these things can drift.

I will now bring in our reporter, Edward Mountain.

Edward Mountain (Highlands and Islands) (Con): Good morning. I want to take you back.

Alex Salmond: Sorry, but I am genuinely interested. Who do you report to?

Edward Mountain: I report back to the Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee, of which I am convener.

Alex Salmond: That is a good example of what I have just been talking about. You are a living manifestation of the global nature of these decisions.

Edward Mountain: Transport falls within our committee's portfolio, so it is right that we have some representation here.

Alex Salmond: Sure.

Edward Mountain: You mentioned the middle of June. It was actually on 6 June 2012 when Alex Neil announced that the Government's aspiration was the completion of the dualling of the A9 by 2025. I am assuming that you had a Cabinet meeting on the Tuesday, so you would have known that he was going up on the Wednesday to make that big announcement.

Alex Salmond: Definitely. The commitment to 2025 was made in December the previous year, however.

Edward Mountain: Indeed it was, on 6 December 2011, but he was going to announce it and use the opportunity to stand on a bridge and make the announcement—which I applaud.

Alex Salmond: All Governments announce things at least twice—sometimes more than that.

Edward Mountain: My point is that, between then and when you stopped being First Minister, you would have regularly requested updates from Alex Neil at Cabinet meetings as to how the project was going. Surely it was not something that you just left to him; it would have been discussed around the Cabinet table.

Alex Salmond: No. The big discussion at Cabinet is on the infrastructure plan. The way I ran Cabinet was that every cabinet secretary had a turn to speak, to raise anything or to put anything on the agenda. Normally, we would only expect something to come back to Cabinet for a decision if something had gone wrong: if something was being blown off course or was not right. That did not happen, as Alex Neil testified to you. There was no need for him to come back to be asked to confirm once again that 2025 was our target date. As long as he was on track, he would not do that.

Edward Mountain: So, if a cabinet secretary decided to be slow in implementing such a project, you would have no way of checking up on that.

Alex Salmond: I will tell you something: the words “slow” and “Alex Neil” are seldom used in the same sentence.

Edward Mountain: I am not suggesting that he is slow, and I have huge respect for him, but if a cabinet secretary was not pushing a project forward, would you pick that up?

Alex Salmond: I would have not only picked it up; it would have been automatic. I would have been astounded if any cabinet secretary was not bringing that information to me and to Cabinet.

Edward Mountain: Highlanders do not understand where the commitment, having been made, went off the rails. You have said to the committee this morning that, when you left office, the project was still on track and everything was going well. You are implying that, up until 2016, when John Swinney was still in post, you believed that it was going well.

Alex Salmond: Only because John Swinney was so much part of that decision making. I would find it difficult to believe that John would have allowed the project to slip off track. You can ask him yourself. He has been in a position of influence throughout, but there is a difference between being First Minister or finance secretary and being education secretary or Deputy First Minister. To a certain extent, the person in those latter posts is a receiver of decisions; the finance secretary and the First Minister make decisions.

Edward Mountain: So, there would be no excuse for a First Minister not knowing that the project was not on track and was regressing in relation to the target that had been announced.

Alex Salmond: No. I can only speak for my Cabinet, but the relevant minister would have come to me.

Nobody has asked me—probably wisely—what I would suggest to get things back on track. On the retro theme that you established earlier, convener, what about bringing back Mr Neil as some sort of tsar to get the transport projects that he initiated in the infrastructure plan back on course? The Scottish Government could do a lot worse. I am not demeaning the talents or abilities of anybody that John Swinney is about to appoint; I am merely saying that, in my estimation, Alex Neil was a great loss to Government, and I am still bemused as to why he was lost to Government when he was. Perhaps this would be the moment to bring him back and allow him to have a role in the completion of what he started.

Edward Mountain: The project languished for six years—for nearly seven years, actually—and no one told anyone in the Highlands that the dualling would not be completed by 2025. Who was responsible for that languishing? Should Highlanders and the people of Scotland have been told that the dualling was not going to be achieved before two years before it should have been completed, if that makes sense?

10:30

Alex Salmond: Clearly, the primary responsibility to report to Parliament and to the people lies with the Government. There is, of course, a responsibility on all members. I am looking at Fergus Ewing—I have seldom seen a more determined back-bencher campaign to expose what needs to be exposed in the project, and to demand what needs to be demanded, than the one that he has been deploying in his new-found liberation over recent years.

There is a responsibility on all members, but primary responsibility lies with the Government to tell the truth to the public.

Edward Mountain: So, the First Minister should have told them.

Alex Salmond: Well, the Government—the First Minister, yes, and the various transport secretaries.

The committee has a right to allocate responsibility where it feels fit—of course it does—but I am sure that, with regard to the collective duty that we have to the Highlands, the committee really wants to get the project back on track. I am sure that the main objective is not to parcel out blame but to look for the answers to questions, with a drive and determination to get things back on track. That is why I have, today, offered my hope and belief that John Swinney will, because he was so intricately involved in setting the commitments, feel duty and honour bound to redeem them.

Edward Mountain: Fergus Ewing and I drive up the A9 weekly, and all the experiences that the convener quoted earlier are what we experience every time that we get on the road. We realise the danger that exists, and that is why the project needs to get back on track. The need to get the project back on track in order to save people’s lives is what should drive everyone, because it is a disgrace that we are where we are.

Alex Salmond: As I mentioned earlier, that was the most important thing in the 2007 SNP manifesto—that was the context in which the commitment was placed. I think that it is a highly suitable context in which to place the project now, in what we all hope will be a renewed effort to see it brought to fulfilment.

Fergus Ewing: I echo Edward Mountain's sentiments about safety.

I take the former First Minister back to something that he remarked on—namely, that people might not understand the scale of the planned public and private investment in the Highlands and in Aberdeen and the north-east over the next 10 to 20 years. In the Highlands, over the next 10 years, investment of £40 billion or £50 billion will be made in the grid, renewables, pump storage, water, roads and so on. All of that will involve potentially thousands—possibly tens of thousands—of jobs over 10, 20 and 30 years.

What impact would there be on Scotland realising its potential, especially in renewables, were the slow pace—the snail's pace—in dualling the A9, with zero progress on the A96, to continue? If that pace remains for the next 10 years, what impact will that failure have on the ability to realise the potential that could transform Scotland's economy over the next couple of decades?

Alex Salmond: That investment has clear traffic implications for the A9. Many of the materials will be transported by sea, but there will be traffic implications for the A9. That is why taking a holistic view of these matters is so important. You need an available workforce, and that workforce has to be accommodated.

On a much smaller scale, we can look back to the great hydro expansion of the late 1940s and 1950s and what had to be done to accommodate the workforce in significant parts of depopulated areas of the Highlands. The holistic view would be that we need people, housing, skills and training, not just financial mechanisms, which John Swinney and I find fascinating. We need the real stuff—the stuff that makes things possible.

It would be a great shame if the opportunity that that investment confers was lost to the Highlands. It is not just about the great city of Inverness, which has a vibrant economy; there is an opportunity for a great revival throughout the Highlands, as opposed to having bottlenecks in the work and seeing the opportunity disappear elsewhere. Of course, the costs are much greater—which is one of the other implications for the public purse—because of the pressures on resources and people and because of inflation. There is a great opportunity, but it requires imagination to seize it and make sure that things are put in place as quickly as possible.

David Torrance: In her evidence to the committee, Màiri McAllan, who was the cabinet secretary at the time, said that the A9 dualling project was to be funded by a mixture of traditional capital funding and PFI and public-private partnership funding. Is that your recollection?

Alex Salmond: It certainly would not have been PFI funding when I was in office. People say that NPD is just like a PFI, but it is not. It is about 30 or 40 per cent more efficient than your average PFI. You build better schools through an NPD project than you ever did through a PFI project. I will go through the reasons for that, if you wish, and explain the differences. I am quite happy to do so. Neither I nor any Government that I led would have had anything to do with PFI funding.

That does not mean that you do not have access to private finance. Of course you do, but you do it in such a way that there is no dividend on equity, which is the major scandal of PFI, along with the renegotiations of ownership—having to pay for water up in the Edinburgh royal infirmary and all that nonsense. No Government that I led would have engaged in PFI funding.

A mixture of traditional capital and finance can have great advantages. You can move very quickly. Why did the Queensferry crossing come in so far under budget? There were two reasons. First, once we decided to do it with traditional capital finance, and because of the financial crash and other things that were happening, not very much was being built across the continent of Europe. Therefore, when we came along with the Queensferry crossing project, construction companies from all over the continent were anxious to bid for it. It then came in several hundred million pounds—whatever it was—under budget.

Conventional finance can have a big advantage, because you can move very quickly to put things in place and take advantage of it. Why is that relevant now? I have spoken about the pressure on capital projects in the Highlands, but one other thing that has happened recently was the United Kingdom Government's decision not to go ahead with high speed 2 to the full extent. Many construction companies that were expecting to be part of HS2 will have been disappointed by that announcement. By and large, most people over the piece were not that disappointed, given what had happened to the other sections of it, but it was an opportunity nonetheless. You would hope that, if you were quick on your feet, you would be looking to see whether anything could be done with a construction company that had planned to be part of that project and suddenly found itself without an order book. Traditional capital finance gives you that element of flexibility. You can seize the moment in a way that is more difficult if you are using private finance through an NPD.

That said, in his evidence, Alex Neil made an important point. He looked at the availability of NPD finance over the period and pointed to something called the 5 per cent rule, which is a rule of thumb. You would not want to spend more

than 5 per cent of your total budget on repayments and commitments through a private arrangement or through an NPD arrangement. However, he pointed out that, when he planned this back in 2011-12, substantial scope was opening up in the 5 per cent rule towards the end of the period, from 2017 onwards.

You would expect a mixture of conventional public finance and non-profit distribution or a variant of it—that would always be the expectation. Both have advantages, and you would have hoped that, with sufficient priority, both would have been available in order to seize the moment as events transpired.

The Convener: Earlier, I alluded to a couple of supplementary questions, one of which is on oversight. We have talked about the Queensferry crossing. It was motivated by a bill that allowed a committee of Parliament to be intimately involved in the planning of the access route that would be required, including looking at the different types of bridges that might be available and handing to the Government, through the bill process, a project that it was then able to execute on time and on budget and within the lifetime of everybody involved, from those who were involved in the initial decision to do it through to those who cut the red tape, if you like, on the project.

We can reflect on the A9 project. The commitment was first made in 2007 and remains unfulfilled now, in 2024—we are talking about it being completed potentially in 2035. That is a lifetime, several times over, of interested parties and those who were committed to the project coming and going and, potentially, losing sight of the narrative. Your creative suggestion was, in essence, “Bring back Alex Neil and all will be back on track.”

The Government has expressed some interest in the engagement that we have had to date. Therefore, I wonder whether, with your parliamentary experience, it would be possible to find some mechanism whereby there might be consistency of attention on the project from the Parliament, which might help to maintain momentum and focus. Can you think of a mechanism that might assist in ensuring that we do not find that even the work that we are doing here is forgotten about in the course of the next parliamentary session and that, in the parliamentary session after that, people are sitting wondering why we have not delivered the project even by then?

Alex Salmond: The suggestion about Alex Neil was not meant to be flippant. It was meant seriously because of the scale of the project and the scale of the failed commitment. Therefore, I would be very open in that regard, although it is not for me to pursue. However, it would have been much preferable if the Government had just stuck to its commitment. If I had been the First Minister and Alex Neil had been the infrastructure secretary, that is exactly what would have happened. The committees of the Parliament, including Edward Mountain’s committee, are able to examine matters as they wish. You would hope that they would be keeping on top of recalcitrant ministers if they were not fulfilling commitments.

However, I think that there is something there, because, as you know, the reason for the Forth crossing special committee was that all sorts of special instruments were required—some ancient and some modern—so you needed a parliamentary committee to get them into legislative shape. That is not the case with a road project.

The Government will have to do something to convince people that it means what it says. It needs to do something a bit more than saying, “Oh well, see when we said 2025, my goodness, it was really 2035.” It will have to do a bit more than that, which might involve thinking about bringing in somebody with some business nous.

My view on that sort of thing was that, if there was somebody available—Lord Smith of Kelvin comes to mind for a number of roles; you might remember that that was the case with the Commonwealth games—who you thought had the heft to help, you brought in the person with the heft, because, if they succeeded, you got the credit. If they did not succeed because you did not do it, you would get the blame.

An admission of failure, including the failure to keep a solemn commitment, would be a good start, as opposed to a litany of excuses, some of which are better than others. Given the failing, a parliamentary committee might be a way to approach things. Mr Neil’s reincarnation—life after death—might be a way to approach that. However, something needs to be done to re-establish the faith that people in the Highlands once had in their Government—faith that would have been redeemed if I had had anything to do with it but which has now obviously been lost and needs to be restored. Therefore, perhaps a parliamentary mechanism might be appropriate.

10:45

The Convener: My final question relates to the second part of Laura Hansler’s petition, to which you alluded, which is on a national memorial to the many people whose lives have been lost. We had a rather bizarre intervention in our conversation with Transport Scotland, which seemed to think that we were suggesting having a memorial in the middle of the carriageway, with people driving past it, which it said would be a distraction. However,

having it there was never the intention. It is to recognise the extensive loss of life and for people to have somewhere to commemorate—as is the case with some other tragedies, albeit that they have been more concentrated. Do you have sympathy with that idea, or can you foresee issues arising from it? If you have sympathy with it, where should the momentum come from?

Alex Salmond: The momentum should come from the petitioner and the other people involved. The monument to those who died in the construction of the Forth railway bridge is something of an analogy, although it is not an exact one. That was not without controversy over the years, because it was difficult to estimate the correct number of people who lost their lives. We would hope that, given modern construction methods, the number of fatalities during the construction of the new A9 would be nil. Nonetheless, there is something of an analogy, in that it is a great achievement to finish something, but we should reflect on those who died while it was awaiting completion. There is something in that.

Like all committee members, I have spoken to Laura Hansler. As well as speaking to her outside today, I have spoken to her online recently, and I have heard her very movingly express the overhanging shadow of A9 fatalities on her and the communities that she speaks for. It would be appropriate to have such a memorial. Thought needs to be given to how it is pitched, but, if it was done properly and sensitively, it would be well understood and well worth doing.

The Convener: As I said at the start, I will now give you an opportunity to add any final reflections before we draw the meeting to a close.

Alex Salmond: My only reflection is more power to your elbow—get on with a very important bit of unfinished business.

The Convener: We shall embrace that as our motto. Thank you very much. We are very grateful to you for finding the time to be here and for giving such expansive responses to our questions.

10:47

Meeting continued in private until 11:02.

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