

Peter Peacock MSP

Speech in the Scottish Parliament

RAF Kinloss and RAF Lossiemouth

3 November 2010

*Motion debated,*

That the Parliament considers that RAF Kinloss and RAF Lossiemouth make a substantial contribution to the Moray economy; notes that the two bases collectively support 5,711 full-time equivalent jobs in the local economy, which equates to 16% of all full-time equivalent employment in Moray; further notes that direct on-site employment has been identified as 4,037 full-time equivalents and gross income as £158.3 million; considers that the wider impact on population is significant, with the families of RAF personnel accounting for 1,457 spouses and 1,919 children up to 16 years of age, which is 7% of the total population of Moray and 8% of its working-age population; believes that the economy and population of Moray are heavily dependent on the RAF and that the two bases make a highly significant contribution to the population and economic prosperity of the area, and considers that any decisions about the future of RAF Kinloss and RAF Lossiemouth should take into consideration the social and economic role played by both bases in the Moray area.

Peter Peacock : I will be comparatively brief.

I very much welcome the fact that Dave Stewart has brought this motion for debate and I welcome the support from all parties in the chamber on the issues that Moray faces.

Dave Stewart's motion captures adequately the scale of the problem that will be visited on Moray and the challenge that that community will face in coming years.

I first became fully aware of the scale of Kinloss as a base in the 1970s when I set up the first citizens advice bureau in Moray, which was in beside that base—it subsequently moved to Forres and then on to Elgin.

I made many trips to the base over that period and I became very familiar with service personnel, their comings and goings to and from the base and the huge number of suppliers to the base from the local community—suppliers of food, administrative support and a variety of other things.

I also became aware of the nature of the employment of many of the RAF personnel's spouses. They were employed as nurses, care workers, teachers and classroom assistants, by the local authority, in lawyers' offices or in the retail sector.

One of the key things to understand about the Moray economy is that the wider economy is inextricably caught up with the success or otherwise of the RAF bases.

Dave Stewart's motion provides the figures on the scale of that impact in Moray.

I have been around public life in the Highlands and Islands for about 30 years.

I have seen big closures, such as the closure of the aluminium smelter in Invergordon, with thousands of job losses, and that of the pulp mill in Fort William.

I have seen the rise and fall of the oil construction bases in the region.

The RAF closures, particularly if the closure of RAF Lossiemouth goes ahead, which I hope it will not, are every bit as big as any other closure that has been visited on the Highlands and Islands at any point in the past 30 years.

I know from my experience of working in the CAB when the aluminium smelter closed and of being a local authority leader during other parts of that period that it takes a decade and more for any local economy to recover from such a blow.

In that decade, huge personal tragedy follows—there is unemployment and loss of opportunity; people's aspirations go and are blighted; and the value of houses is affected.

People experience a range of changes.

As Dave Stewart says, what is particularly perplexing about the Kinloss decision—and possibly the Lossiemouth decision that is to come—is that it is irrational, given all the statements that have been made about the need for that strategic base.

As Dave Thompson hinted and as Dave Stewart said, the UK Government cannot be allowed simply to walk away from the situation.

A facility cannot be present in a community for half a century or more and create an economic dependency—which has suited the RAF and the defence industry in that time—from which the Government simply walks away.

As Dave Stewart said, a social covenant is required between the UK Government and the community for the future.

The immediate priority is to continue to argue against the closure of Lossiemouth.

With other members, I will take part in the demonstration on Sunday.

We also need to continue to make it clear to the UK Government that, whatever the decisions and the final impact are, it cannot walk away from its responsibility to play a full part in helping to restore the community's economy.

We must not let the UK Government off the hook on that.