

## News from ...



### **Peter Peacock** **Scottish Labour Regional MSP for the Highlands and Islands**

Speech in the Scottish Parliament

20 March 2008

#### Marine Environment

Like other members, I welcome this debate and hope that it allows ministers to accelerate the progress of what, in its attempt to rationalise all the institutional arrangements, will inevitably be a fiendishly complex bill. I also hope that, given that the UK Government is slightly ahead of us in developing its own marine bill, we will be able to dovetail our legislation with its framework.

Indeed, briefings that we received today from various non-governmental organisations, such as the RSPB, stressed the importance of working with the UK and Irish Governments and other bodies.

I have spoken before about the importance of, and the challenges involved in, providing better care for and protection of the marine environment, and I do not intend to repeat myself this afternoon.

However, the proposed marine bill will unquestionably provide us with an opportunity to make progress on a range of fronts.

As other members have pointed out, AGMACS created a framework for the bill, and its approach received broad agreement from a committee in the previous parliamentary session.

Of course, any bill that comes before Parliament provides an opportunity to adjust Scotland's institutional landscape, and the bill will be no different. I have no doubt that in the bill, ministers will seek to create a

Scottish marine management organisation, which will lead to better co-ordination, better coherence in policy, better prioritisation and a better approach to investing in the future.

Bills also allow new concepts to pass into law, and I hope that the proposed bill will provide for marine spatial planning, marine protected areas and nationally important marine areas.

However, the bill will also allow us to be more ambitious than simply seeking to adjust institutional arrangements or to introduce new planning concepts, important and vital though such matters are. As we move further into this century, human damage to the sea becomes ever more apparent.

We are losing biodiversity and inflicting physical damage on the sea bed in many stretches of our coast.

Moreover, as our population grows, the pressures on the sea and the potential for damage increase.

As we are constantly reminded, despite our own puny efforts we will never conquer the sea's powerful forces.

However, we have learned to navigate the seas and to use them to travel relatively safely around the globe.

We have also learned how to exploit them for oil, wind power, tidal power, leisure opportunities and—most important—food.

Such exploitation has to be managed and controlled if we are to secure the long-term future of our seas and our planet.

Not so long ago, man's ability to destroy the marine environment was kept in balance; in other words, our activities did not outstrip the sea's ability to cope.

However, as technology has improved over the past 50 or so years, so exploitation has increased. At some point in the past century, the balance flipped and mankind has now started to cause real damage to the marine environment.

The damage is most noticeable in fish stocks, but it is also happening in a less visible way to the sea bed.

When the balance flipped, the interests of those who were benefiting economically from managing the seas began to dominate the debate, which is perfectly understandable.

As Dave Thompson says, people's jobs and communities depend on the marine environment.

It is therefore natural that human interests have long dominated the debate.

However, if we are honest, we will admit that some of our activities in the marine environment are unsustainable.

We will have to address that.

The coming bill is an opportunity to rebalance the forces that impact on our seas and to protect the marine environment much more successfully than in the past.

That will require more than simply laws on institutional and planning arrangements.

It will require ministers, the Government and all its institutions to have specific duties to care for the seas—binding duties on ministers to secure the protection of the marine environment; duties to act sustainably, which Robin Harper spoke about; duties to take a precautionary approach; duties to pursue ecosystem health objectives; and duties to secure scientific evidence that will help to guide decisions, and to have regard to it. Unless a bill contains those obligations, in the long title and its provisions, it will fall short.

We have to embrace new thinking.

That will mean more no-take zones and more marine ecosystem objectives.

It will mean marine protected areas and possibly marine national parks, which Dave Thompson mentioned.

It may mean designating nationally important marine areas.

It will mean that more fishermen have to adopt the best conservation practices of our inshore fleet.

It may mean that we have to put our dolphins ahead of our short-term oil needs.

It will mean ending some of the dredging of our sea lochs.

It will also mean new economic opportunities.

If we get it right, there will be more opportunities for sea angling, leisure and tourism around our coastline, and more people will be involved in shellfish production and in sustainable inshore fisheries.

However, in addition to the practical arrangements, the bill will have to contain points of principle and a visionary approach.

I hope that the Government will ensure that that is the case.

If it is not, we will seek to amend the bill accordingly.

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