

SCOTTISH PARLIAMENT

Scottish Labour Party Debate: The Scottish Newspaper Industry

Jan 28, 2010

S3M-5620 Pauline McNeill: The Scottish Newspaper Industry—That the Parliament notes the important role played by local newspapers in Scotland; believes that, in the current economic climate, it is more important than ever to recognise the importance and value of community newspapers; notes that local newspapers provide a forum for expression that enables local people to deliberate on issues affecting their community; notes with concern the Scottish Government proposals to remove the legal requirement for local authorities to advertise public information notices in newspapers; believes that, if this proposal succeeds, it will deny the 38% of Scots who do not have internet access vital information currently available to them in newspapers, will create a democratic deficit and damage the local and national newspaper industry at a critical time; fears that a smaller newspaper industry will dilute quality journalism and training opportunities for young journalists, and calls on the Scottish Government to withdraw the draft Local Authority Public Information Notices (Electronic Publication) (Scotland) Order 2010.

To see the amendments tabled, please check the [Scottish Parliament website](#).

Labour spokesperson on Constitutional Affairs & Culture Pauline McNeill (moving the motion):

- Fewer people would have access to public information notices (PINs) hosted on the internet.
- Newspapers are merging, jobs are being lost. Twenty years ago impact of the internet had yet to be felt; today it has in effect mounted “the challenge of a lifetime” to the print media industry.
- Thus far - print media has attempted to adapt to challenges brought about by the internet, relatively few closures of local newspapers. Migration of PINs to the internet, however, another blow to the industry.
- Only four per cent see PINs online; 28 per cent view them in local newspapers. It is therefore imperative that people continue to have ready access to such information.
- Scottish Government proposals to remove the legal requirement for local authorities to advertise PINs in newspapers could potentially strike a fatal blow to the industry. Loss of revenue would result in journalists being the first to be retrenched.
- Equality of access to information and democratic deficit: 60 per cent of Scots have broadband; figure falls to 39 per cent in Glasgow; with 70 per cent of those over the age of 65 having no access to the Internet at all.
- Serendipity – using the internet to source information is not the same as coming across information by chance in a local newspaper.

- Despite internet access being made available in local library or in local council offices, print media still provides the most readily accessible source of local information, especially for certain socio-economic groups/the elderly.
- Case for removing PINs has not been properly researched. Figure citing that only two per cent of readers actively seek out PINs in local newspapers would appear to have been the result of a survey conducted by Camden Council. Questionable nature of findings resulted in Westminster Government dropping their own plans for local authorities to advertise public information notices in newspapers.
- Value for money argument has been raised to defend plan. This does nothing to improve equality of access to information.
- Scottish Government can perhaps consider newspaper subscriptions for all 18-year-olds.
- Investment should be made to ensure the industry is more attractive to young people.
- Better/sustainable newspaper industry is fundamental to the democratic process.

Minister for Enterprise, Energy and Tourism Jim Mather (moving the SNP amendment):

- Consulting on PINS as Scotland needs a vibrant press, steps taken would result in a vibrant/viable local newspaper industry.
- Newspapers play a vital local role, part of local history/valuable and unique resource.
- Outmoded – there has been a change in consumer tastes over the past two decades.
- PINs are a type of indirect local subsidy paid by local councils to newspapers, jeopardizes local democracy.
- New business models must be considered: electronic editions, for example. Caledonian Mercury most recent example of innovation in the industry – which must be encouraged.
- New ways of engaging with readership must be considered, local businesses and media should consider partnerships.
- By moving to a new advertising model and simplifying processes, councils will make savings of between £3m and £4m per annum
- COSLA President Pat Watters has stated that each local authority will retain control over the mix of advertising media they choose to use, including traditional print-based publications, in order to meet their particular requirements
- Local newspapers should not depend on indirect local subsidies, resilience and harnessing of digital medium is necessary; industry need to build on strengths to properly prosper in internet age.

Conservative spokesperson on Culture Ted Brocklebank (moving the Conservative motion):

- Web is an invaluable tool – but it has led to disappearance of newspaper jobs. Print media facing very real difficulties currently – and this risks being exacerbated by Scottish Government proposals to remove the legal requirement for local authorities to advertise PINs in newspapers.
- Recent ELLC Committee inquiry had heard newspaper proprietors' claims circulations had fallen – Trinity Mirror (publishers of Daily Record) had seen circulation dip 9 per cent; Johnston Press (12 per cent, with advertising revenue down 38 per cent year on year).

- Migration of local government advertising onto the internet must be managed carefully. Recruitment (myjobscotland) is acceptable; however, any such migration of PINs would disenfranchise certain members of society, the elderly, for example.
- PINs portal questionable when majority of elderly people, single parent families have little or no access to the internet.
- Cost-cutting measures rather than means of keeping public properly informed.
- Jobs will be lost – will have an impact on democratic process.
- Print media industry discourse thus far “underwhelming”. Politicians had attempted to raise questions on problems industry facing, however, this had barely made headlines. NUJ “like rabbits caught in headlights”. Behaviour had changed in recent weeks, Dundee Courier taking proactive role in discussion.
- Labour Govt had introduced proposals to create independently funded news consortia (IFCNs). A Conservative government would not go down this route and would instead overturn Labour bid to subsidise broadcasting. Existence of BBC sufficient.
- Future of broadcasting in Scotland – new digital channel.

Lib Dem party spokesperson on Culture Iain Smith (moving the Liberal Democrat motion)

- Making information available is not the same as making it accessible. 38 per cent of Scots do not have access to the internet. Those who do use the internet would have to know exactly where to look and how to navigate this new information portal.
- Few might actively seek out PIN, local press offer opportunity to chance upon information. New information portal would only host notices for one week, print media “hard copy” is a resource.
- No objection to councils putting PINs on a website – but continue to make available in the print media too.
- Local press facing perfect storm: economic downturn; advertising revenue down; newsprint more expensive; public sector recruitment advertising lost (to myjobscotland), now risk losing PINs.
- Local press only source of news for some; loss of PINs impact on democratic process as local newspapers would be forced out of business.

The debate was then opened up to the rest of the Chamber with the majority of points raised following party lines. Labour, Conservatives and Lib Dems all solidly opposed SNP plans to remove the legal requirement for local authorities to advertise PINs in newspapers. All argued strongly that it would limit access to information; hasten the demise of Scotland’s vibrant print media industry thereby creating a democratic deficit at local level.