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Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

Official Report

MEETING OF THE PARLIAMENT

Tuesday 5 January 2016

Session 4

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Scottish Parliament

Tuesday 5 January 2016

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

Time for Reflection

The Presiding Officer (Tricia Marwick): Good afternoon and happy new year to you all. The first item of business is time for reflection. Our time for reflection leader today is Chris Gordon, community fundraiser for the Bethany Christian Trust.

Mr Chris Gordon (Community Fundraiser, Bethany Christian Trust): Presiding Officer, members of the Scottish Parliament, it is a pleasure to come and speak with you today, as the first week in January is traditionally one that is filled with hope. New year's resolutions are made, gym memberships are taken out and the latest fad diet is promoted in the media. Each is undertaken with the longing that our lives will in some sense be better than they were the year before, and it is that promise of hope that drives us as human beings.

In my role at Bethany Christian Trust, I have the opportunity to meet some of the people who use our services, and I am continually struck by their desperation for change. From listening to them, it seems that the fullness of the change that they seek will not necessarily be achieved through financial or material improvements in their lives. They are seeking support and friendship in their community, and they are searching for opportunity and purpose in their lives.

Jesus brought that hope to first-century Palestine. In drawing widows and children towards him, he radically changed society to include the most vulnerable and marginalised. Jesus began to model a society free from man-made social barriers, in which those on the fringes could have a future as part of a community.

The promise that Jesus brought was not a temporary fix that would bring material gain but rather a lifelong—indeed, an eternal—transformation in people's lives. When a person encountered Jesus in the gospel stories, their life became radically different, with the apostle Paul perhaps the best-known example. At Bethany, in our work, we see changes in people too. Families flourish when they are supported through challenging times, and individuals fulfil their potential when they are given space and opportunity. We are witnessing communities becoming strengthened as people support one another.

Of course, creating community is no easy feat. It requires time and patience, and results might not be seen within a month or a year. Above all, it is necessary to listen, for it is in listening that we have the opportunity to truly engage with someone and to understand the challenges that they are facing. So this year my resolution will be to keep my running shoes under the bed and instead to be intentional in my listening. Then, perhaps, I can play my own small part in supporting those in my own community who are hoping that 2016 will be better than the year before.

Thank you, and happy new year.

Topical Question Time

14:03

Flooding

1. Alex Johnstone (North East Scotland) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what action it is taking in response to the recent flooding. (S4T-01262)

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Finance, Constitution and Economy (John Swinney): My sympathies go to those who have been affected by the recent severe weather, and I pay tribute on behalf of the Government to the first-class response that has been offered by local authorities, emergency responders and the public themselves.

The Scottish Government places a priority on reducing flood risk throughout Scotland, and we are committed to working with the Scottish Environment Protection Agency, local authorities and other partners. SEPA's recent flood risk strategy set out an agenda for the national direction of flood risk management, helping to target investment and to co-ordinate actions across public bodies. The strategies explain what causes flooding in high-risk areas and the impacts when flooding occurs. That information is used as a basis for better decision making across flood risk management organisations and for supporting actions such as flood protection schemes and flood warning schemes.

Alex Johnstone: The minister has visited the upper Deeside area and seen for himself the conditions that have prevailed there. Is he at this stage able to tell us what support the Government can offer to the local authority and to individuals who have been seriously hit by the flooding damage?

John Swinney: There are two specific pieces of support that the Government is able to make available, but before I come on to those, I will say a word about the scale of the devastation in Ballater that I saw last Thursday. It is of a quite incomprehensible scale, to be frank, and I pay tribute to the efforts of the many individuals who worked very hard to protect their neighbours' and their own properties and to support one another in that difficulty. I would single out a number of firefighters in the area who were out helping other people while their own properties were being flooded. That tells us something about the extraordinary commitment that we are lucky to receive from the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service.

I turn to the two specific areas of assistance. First, I have activated the Bellwin scheme, with

which Mr Johnstone will be familiar. It establishes a threshold for what local authorities are expected to provide to deal with emergency situations of this type, and any costs beyond that threshold are met by the Government. I have invited and encouraged Aberdeenshire Council to submit an application for financial support under the Bellwin scheme.

Secondly, in the budget statement in December, I exceptionally made some support available to Perth and Kinross, Dumfries and Galloway and Scottish Borders Councils because of the impact of recent storm incidents. I intend to make a further financial allocation that I will expect Aberdeenshire Council to use to relieve council tax payers of their council tax bills and business rates payers of their business rates bills and to contribute to the regeneration that will clearly be required to recover the situation in Deeside.

Alex Johnstone: One of the features of the devastation in upper Deeside is the serious damage that has been done to the A93 trunk road. Is there any prospect of that damage being rectified in the near future, with all costs being covered by the Scottish Government under its commitment to our trunk roads?

John Swinney: It is a bit early for me to give the commitment about timescale that Mr Johnstone is looking for. The photographs speak for themselves. Serious damage has been done to the A93. It is a crucial access route, but currently it cannot be used to provide a route from Braemar to Aberdeen. That situation is unsatisfactory and we have to resolve it as quickly as we can. There is access from the south via the A93 through Glen Shee but, as we all know, that route can be vulnerable and susceptible to the normal weather conditions that we have at this time of year, with very heavy snow in Glen Shee. We are taking forward discussions with Aberdeenshire Council on the steps to ensure that the route can be rectified.

Angus MacDonald (Falkirk East) (SNP): The Deputy First Minister will be aware of the good work that is going on in conjunction with Falkirk Council and the petrochemical industry in my constituency to provide flood defences for Grangemouth's refinery and petrochemical plants. Can he assess the success of flood protection schemes to date in mitigating the impacts of the flooding and extreme weather over recent days?

John Swinney: We have been very fortunate in the sense that the flood protection schemes that we have in place have been successful to date. Last night, I was in regular discussion with Perth and Kinross Council and SEPA in my local area as the city of Perth faced a significant challenge and a significant test of the existing flood protection scheme. By the end of last night, I was, frankly, relieved that the flood protection scheme had been

successful in Perth. It shows the wisdom and the value of the sympathetic investment that has been made, which protects householders and communities.

Today in Perth, we have had to wrestle with the challenges of surface water run-off and drainage challenges, although the flood defences proved themselves to be entirely secure in the face of the astonishing volume of water that came down from the catchment area of the River Tay yesterday.

Elaine Murray (Dumfriesshire) (Lab): I again pay tribute to the work of Dumfries and Galloway's major emergency team in the latest flood. Many of my constituents with small businesses in the Whitesands area who have been flooded again already do not pay business rates, so they cannot be assisted through that route. Many have been unable to get insurance or have found that the excess payments are prohibitive. Might assistance be made available to those businesses? I make it clear that I am not referring to my office, which was under two and a half feet of water.

John Swinney: On the television footage of Dumfries that I saw, I regrettably saw Dr Murray's name in lights, so she has my sympathies for the difficulties that she will undoubtedly be experiencing in wrestling with the flooding issue.

I take the point that Dr Murray made. It is a fair point that there will be many smaller businesses that will not pay business rates and will not be covered by the assurance that I have given. She will know that I made a financial commitment to Dumfries and Galloway Council. I intend to look again at that in the light of the events of the past seven days and the issues that have been wrestled with in Dumfries and Galloway. Given the financial commitment that I have made to the local authority, I would look to it to make any provision that it can to support individuals in restoring their businesses and getting back to operating in those localities.

There will of course be further discussions about flood prevention measures in the Whitesands area. I know that the council has recently come to some conclusions about the preferred option for those flood protection schemes. Those issues will of course be taken forward as part of the discussion about how the resources that we allocate to this area of activity are deployed around the country in the course of the next spending review period.

Alison McInnes (North East Scotland) (LD): Communities around the whole north-east have been affected by flooding, but in Aberdeenshire in particular it has been unprecedented in its scale and scope. I hope that the Government can reassure us that its response to Aberdeenshire Council and local agencies will reflect that.

The Deputy First Minister mentioned access via Glen Shee, which he is right to say is at risk of closure if severe weather closes in. There is therefore an urgent need to move as swiftly as is safe to protect the remaining road links and to restore what is there. What temporary support can the Government give?

John Swinney: We are actively involved in discussions with Aberdeenshire Council about the recovery steps that are required to be undertaken. I am sure that Alison McInnes will realise that the scale of the damage to the A93 on Deeside is such that, frankly, the road has gone for large parts of its length. We therefore have to take considered and safe steps to recover the situation as timeously as we can. I assure the member of the prompt attention of the Government in that respect.

Rob Gibson (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP): I have huge sympathy for the communities that are coping with the floods and, in the case of our communities, with inundations from the sea as well. However, I want to turn to the way in which ScotRail handles the Highland main line. I experienced a two-hour delay myself and a bus all the way from Inverness to Perth, although there is a breach in the railway only south of Pitlochry, which is in the cabinet secretary's constituency. A problem has been going on since long before Abellio took over ScotRail, because information is dreadfully poor for the travelling public. Indeed, that is something that ScotRail needs to change quickly so that we can use our main, spinal route with some confidence.

John Swinney: The Minister for Transport and Islands is here and has heard Mr Gibson's point about the information from ScotRail. Having spent virtually every day of the Christmas and new year parliamentary recess on telephone calls involving ScotRail, I feel as if I have heard a lot from ScotRail over the course of the past couple of weeks. We will take Mr Gibson's point seriously, though, because the Highland main line is a significant part of our rail infrastructure.

The foundations and the ballast of the rail line at Inchmagrannachan have been swept away by the flooding. There is work on-going, but it is of course difficult to gain access to the foundations to execute a repair as quickly as possible because of the volume of water surrounding the site. The projected date for the completion of that work is 18 January, but that is of course dependent on being able to get access to the site.

Mr Gibson's point about the essential requirement for good-quality information to be available to members of the travelling public is well made. Over the course of the incidents over the past few weeks, the use of social media by public

agencies and organisations and travel companies has been first class. I have seen a number of organisations use it to tremendous effect, capturing great degrees of public involvement and interest to make sure that we can resolve and overcome some of the challenges. However, I will ensure that the transport minister looks carefully at the point that Mr Gibson raised about ScotRail communication.

Claudia Beamish (South Scotland) (Lab): Across my region of South Scotland, many communities have been affected by the floods recently and in previous years. I want to focus on New Cumnock. On 5 November last year, when my colleague Graeme Pearson asked the Minister for Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform, Aileen McLeod, about the area, she told the chamber:

“To reassure the member, New Cumnock is ... very much part and parcel of the national flood risk management planning process and will be considered accordingly.”—
[*Official Report*, 5 November 2015; c 8.]

That is no reassurance to my and Graeme Pearson’s constituents, who have yet again found themselves devastated by deluge.

Therefore, I ask the cabinet secretary whether he will look again at the Scottish Environment Protection Agency’s budget in view of the responsibilities that it has for flooding and the cuts that the Scottish Government has made. Will he also consider Scottish Labour’s call—made by my colleague Sarah Boyack—for the Government to carry out a review of flood strategy, working with all the local authorities across my region and more widely in Scotland?

John Swinney: I am a bit surprised by the line of argument that Claudia Beamish has taken, because I know that she takes a keen and acute interest in such issues.

The first thing that I would say is that SEPA has no responsibility whatever for flood protection measures. It has a responsibility for the flood warning system, which is fully and entirely funded by the Government and which was protected 100 per cent by my budget settlement in December. It is true that SEPA is facing a 6.8 per cent reduction in its resource budget. That is because I must require public authorities across the board to contribute towards meeting the financial challenge that we have to meet. Of course, it is up to Scotland Labour to change my budget, if it wishes to do so. We have heard so much from Scottish Labour about this question that I will expect it to seek to rectify that reduction in the budget that it has been going on about. If it does not, we will know that what it has been saying is just rhetoric.

My second point relates to the flood risk management strategies and the work that has

been undertaken following Parliament’s passing of the Flood Risk Management (Scotland) Act 2009. The reason for my being so surprised at Claudia Beamish’s question is that that act required us to do the groundwork of establishing flood risk management strategies around the country. We now have 14 of those strategies, which have reported to the minister. They have generated suggestions and propositions for 42 formal flood protection schemes that will cost an estimated £235 million, and I have made provision in the budget for that to be delivered as part of my commitment to the local government finance settlement.

Therefore, I would have thought that, instead of having another review, we should just get on with implementing the flood risk management strategies. Instead of having another talking shop, we should get on with delivering the action that Parliament legislated for in 2009, which the Government is getting on with and is putting in place the resources to deliver.

Alex Fergusson (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con): Yesterday, I visited the village of Carsphairn in my constituency, where almost every house has been flooded, some for the third time in three years. Today, my office has taken a number of calls from businesses in Newton Stewart, which the First Minister and the environment minister visited last week. Those people need financial help and they need it now. They are very aware that, just across the border in Cumbria, people in similar situations are receiving such help. Will the Deputy First Minister consider giving urgently needed financial assistance to every business and household that has been so badly affected by the recent floods, as is happening in other parts of the United Kingdom?

John Swinney: In my earlier answer to Alex Johnstone, I spoke about the specific financial support that I have made available. In December, I made an announcement about Dumfries and Galloway Council being able to remove any obligation for residents who had been removed from their properties to meet council tax bills and for businesses that had had to relocate to pay business rates. In the light of the events of the past couple of weeks, I intend to provide a further allocation in relation to the costs that will be involved in localities. That will inevitably have some additional consequences for Dumfries and Galloway, and I will make announcements in due course, once I have had due opportunity to have discussions with the local authority about how that can be taken forward.

Dennis Robertson (Aberdeenshire West) (SNP): I echo the words of the Deputy First Minister in congratulating the emergency services,

the council workers and the army of volunteers in Ballater and Aboyne.

Yesterday, I was in Ballater again. The people there appreciated Mr Swinney's visit, but they are asking who is going to help with the clean-up. There are caravans and cars in gardens—someone needs to recover those and dispose of them. Can the cabinet secretary give an assurance that that work will be done without penalising those people to whom the caravans and cars do not belong? Can he also show the businesses that remain open that they, too, will be given some financial assistance, given that Ballater is virtually cut off?

John Swinney: On the cleaning up of debris, there is a complicated interaction at the local level. Let us take as an example the caravan park in Ballater, where, I assume, individuals and the caravan park operators will be required to make wider insurance claims. There will be an interaction between their properly having the opportunity to secure their insurance rectification and the need for there to be a clean-up in the town. Aberdeenshire Council is best placed to cooperate with individuals in that respect, and we have an open dialogue with Aberdeenshire Council. I compliment Aberdeenshire Council on the way in which it responded to what was a very traumatic situation last week. That is the best way for that dialogue be undertaken, so that the issues can be resolved at the local level and the necessary support can be put in place to address the difficulties that individuals face as a consequence of a quite unprecedented event in that locality.

Lewis Macdonald (North East Scotland) (Lab): The Deputy First Minister has rightly focused on upper Deeside, but will he recognise that there have also been issues overnight in Donside in Aberdeenshire as well as at the mouths of both the Don and the Dee in the city of Aberdeen? These are whole-catchment-area issues. For example, the other day, the residents of sheltered housing in Bridge of Dee Court in Aberdeen had to be evacuated. Will he confirm that the Government is working with both Aberdeen City Council and Aberdeenshire Council on whole-catchment-area strategies? When will the recommendations in the flood management strategies for the Dee and the Don be taken forward?

John Swinney: I acknowledge the issues to be wrestled with in Kintore and Inverurie as well as in the city of Aberdeen following the incident that took place just before hogmanay and the events of the past couple of days. We are in discussion with both Aberdeen City Council and Aberdeenshire Council, whose response has been very clear and

comprehensive, to ensure that the necessary support has been put in place.

The development of the flood management schemes will be part and parcel of the discussions that we will have with local government over the next few years about how we should prioritise those schemes. Ministers will be actively involved in that process and will report to the Parliament in due course.

Forth Road Bridge

2. Mike MacKenzie (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what progress it has made on reopening the Forth road bridge to all vehicles. (S4T-01264)

The Minister for Transport and Islands (Derek Mackay): Following the successful completion of the complex and detailed interim repair by a dedicated team of highly skilled staff, who had worked 24/7 since 3 December, the Forth road bridge reopened on 23 December—well ahead of schedule—to 90 per cent of traffic. A permanent repair to allow heavy goods vehicles across the Forth road bridge will commence in the coming days and, subject to favourable weather conditions and no further defects being identified, the bridge will reopen to HGVs in mid-February.

Mike MacKenzie: What discussions have taken place with the Road Haulage Association?

Derek Mackay: There has been on-going dialogue with Transport Scotland officials, and reopening the bridge to HGV traffic is a clear priority. We have engaged with both the Road Haulage Association and the Freight Transport Association on that, and an action plan has been produced. The Cabinet Secretary for Infrastructure, Investment and Cities and the Deputy First Minister have engaged with industry, and that action plan will support them in a range of areas while we work on repairing the bridge to ensure that HGVs can cross the Forth.

Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): The reopening of the bridge to cars earlier than the originally indicated date was welcome, but the minister will be aware of the dismay among many businesses in Fife and beyond that the bridge did not reopen to HGVs on 2 January, as was hoped for, and will not do so for several weeks. What assessment has the Scottish Government made of the impact on the Fife economy of the further delay?

Derek Mackay: The works were ahead of schedule. We want to get the bridge reopened to HGVs as quickly as possible, and safety has to be paramount. We are working to that, and I again thank the dedicated staff who are making it possible. We have undertaken an exercise on

disruption to the area and there will be on-going engagement with the local authorities.

I think that many people appreciate the effort that Government and our agencies have put in to ensure that the bridge reopened. We will continue that immense effort to get the bridge reopened to HGVs, to support commerce and the haulage industry. I would have thought that the Conservatives would support us on measures to ensure that everyone gets back to business. The Government's interventions and handling of the issue have been right, in building the new bridge and supporting industry in the interim.

David Stewart (Highlands and Islands) (Lab):

I welcome the minister's announcement that the bridge will reopen to HGVs and I put on record my thanks and those, I am sure, of all members to the workforce for all the work that they have carried out in appalling conditions over the past month.

Will the minister confirm that it is the active plan of the Scottish Government to provide compensation for hauliers who have lost out during the period of the bridge's closure and subsequent restrictions?

Derek Mackay: No. The action plan includes a number of other items, such as an HGV hotline to enable drivers to alert Traffic Scotland to incidents, extra support for the trunk road incident support service, fast-track maintenance along trunk road diversions, support from local authorities to keep roads clear, and relaxation of European rules on drivers' hours, which we are pursuing through the Department for Transport. Those are the key areas in the action plan that were agreed with the industry, but dialogue continues and the priority has to be to get the Forth road bridge reopened to all traffic.

Willie Rennie (Mid Scotland and Fife) (LD): I thank the minister for his constructive engagement on the west Fife travel plan, which was causing particular problems for my constituents.

The temporary fix was supposed to enable all vehicles to use the bridge until the new bridge opened, when a permanent repair could be made. Why is the temporary fix insufficient for HGVs, and why has the permanent repair had to be brought forward?

Derek Mackay: I think that it is clear that we are phasing works. I give Willie Rennie credit for the active interest that he has taken in the technical briefings that have been offered to members of the Scottish Parliament. I am happy to provide even more of those.

The temporary repair allows more than 90 per cent of traffic to cross the Forth road bridge, and the further strengthening works will ensure that safety is not compromised and that the bridge can

carry HGV traffic. That is all based on the engineering expertise on which we have depended, which is doing excellent work on the bridge. I am happy to share even more information to show how the phased works will give the certainty that is being sought.

Public Services, Inequality and the Economy

The Presiding Officer (Tricia Marwick): The next item of business is a debate on supporting public services, tackling inequality and growing Scotland's economy.

14:28

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): Thank you, Presiding Officer. I wish you and all members a very happy new year.

Given our discussions at question time a few moments ago, I take this opportunity to express my sympathy to everyone across the country who is dealing with the impacts of flooding, and to express my heartfelt thanks to all those who have been working over the past few days, and who continue to work, extremely hard to respond to the challenges that the flooding is posing.

The year 2016 will be another hugely important year for Scotland. That is why it is right to use this first debate of the new year to look back at the progress that has been made and, more important, to look to the future. Over the next four months there must be a great, ambitious and thriving debate in Scotland about how we will build on our achievements, address the challenges that we face and, in so doing, realise the full potential of our nation. Let me be clear that it is a debate that I, my Government and my party are determined to lead in the months ahead. It is on the strength of our record, ideas and vision for this country that we will ask people to elect us as Scotland's Government for an historic third term.

In setting out our future priorities, we are building on strong foundations. Today, for example, our national health service has a record budget, has record numbers of staff working in it and is—as we have seen this morning—delivering some of the best and fastest care in the United Kingdom. I again take the opportunity to thank NHS staff for their efforts day in and day out.

We have more world-class universities per head of population than almost any other country in the world. Our universities are also accessible to a higher proportion of students from deprived backgrounds than was the case in 2007. I am proud that this Government has ensured that our universities' success has not, crucially, been achieved at the expense of the free tuition on which our students depend.

We also have a reformed school curriculum. We have seen record exam passes, and the information that we have about performance in the upper stages of secondary school shows signs of a narrowing of the attainment gap. According to

the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, we have the potential to become a world leader in education.

We have also taken tough but necessary decisions to reform our police and fire services. As the Deputy First Minister has just said, we have in recent days seen the benefits of the new arrangements in our fire and rescue services as they have responded to flooding.

Neil Findlay (Lothian) (Lab): I do not know whether the First Minister has moved on from the education section of her speech; perhaps she has missed the section on colleges.

The First Minister: I will be coming back to education, so perhaps Neil Findlay could exercise a bit of patience.

We have seen crime fall to a 41-year low, and we have built new colleges, schools, hospitals and health centres in every single part of our country. We have not met but have exceeded our five-year target to deliver 30,000 affordable homes, and we have helped into home ownership 20,000 people—three quarters of whom are under the age of 35.

Those are all hard practical achievements. Just as important, although less tangible, is that we have, by trusting the people of this country to decide their future, helped to create a flourishing of democratic debate and have played our part in building renewed national confidence.

Those achievements have made society stronger as a whole, but they have also made a difference for individuals across our nation. It is worth reflecting on the impact on people of just some of those initiatives. For example, before prescription charges were abolished by this Government, 600,000 families who were earning as little as £16,000 a year had to pay for their medicines for conditions including asthma. Now they receive essential medication without financial worry.

In 2007, just 85 per cent of hospital in-patients and day-case patients were seen within 18 weeks, which was the waiting time back then. Last year, 95 per cent were seen within 12 weeks.

In 2007, just 45 per cent of school students stayed on until year 6; now 62 per cent do so. That is because, among other things, we took the decision to retain the education maintenance allowance when it was being abolished by the UK Government.

At the start of 2014, just 4 per cent of Highlands and Islands' households had access to superfast broadband; by the end of this year, the figure will be 84 per cent, which is making a major difference to the opportunities and quality of life in our rural communities.

On those and many other indicators, we should be proud of our achievements. Our challenge is to build on them. In the run-up to the election, we will set out a range of ambitious plans that will, over the next five years, help to transform our country even further.

Let me make it clear that education will be at the front and centre of our plans for the next session of Parliament. Our attainment fund is already helping more than 300 primary schools across the country. In the coming weeks, we will set out further plans to achieve both excellence and equity in education by building on the work that we are already doing through the attainment challenge. That will start tomorrow, when I will publish the new national improvement framework to ensure that our focus on closing the attainment gap is driven by robust evidence on children's progress in primary and early secondary school.

In health, we must focus ever more on the—

Willie Rennie (Mid Scotland and Fife) (LD): Before the First Minister moves on from education, new official Government figures show that only 7 per cent of two-year-olds are receiving nursery education. The First Minister's promise was that 27 per cent would. How can she talk about a revolution in education and in childcare when she cannot even meet her timid plans?

The First Minister: We are seeking to increase the number of two-year-olds who take advantage of our commitment to free nursery education and early years education. I am happy to write in more detail to Willie Rennie about that. Because of the time of year when those figures are gathered, they tend not to capture all the young people who go into early years education, so the current figure is already much higher than that which Willie Rennie cited. He is shaking his head, but I am happy to write to him with the detail.

Willie Rennie: Let us go for the previous year's figure, which was supposed to be 15 per cent. Even if the figures are old, the current figure is still half that. The First Minister is not even meeting the previous year's commitment. She is not fulfilling her promise on nursery education. When will she step up to the mark?

The First Minister: Willie Rennie has to understand that we are funding provision of early years education for 27 per cent of two-year-olds. That is why we are focusing so much on ensuring that parents take up that opportunity. I have offered to write to Willie Rennie, because the figures that he cited are already out of date. We remain focused on ensuring that we increase the numbers of young people who take advantage of that commitment.

I will move on to health. We must focus ever more on the needs of our older people, which is

why the process of reshaping care is well under way. Health and social care integration is the most significant reform of how we deliver healthcare since the creation of the national health service. In the coming months, we will set out further plans to shift the balance of care and the balance of investment even more decisively towards primary and social care. We have already set out plans to create five new elective treatment centres in order to meet growing demand for hip and knee replacements and cataract operations. In the weeks to come, we will set out detailed plans to further improve child and maternal healthcare, cancer care and mental health services.

Our ambition for public services is matched in other areas. Last month, we received the final report of the commission on local tax reform. Since 2007, households across the country have, of course, benefited from the council tax freeze. In the coming weeks, building on the commission's report, we will make proposals for a fairer and more progressive system of local taxation. I call on the other parties to do likewise so that the people of Scotland can make their choice at the election.

We will also set out plans to use new welfare powers to create a distinctively Scottish approach to social security.

Ken Macintosh (Eastwood) (Lab): Will the First Minister take an intervention?

The First Minister: I want to make some progress.

We will continue to do everything that we can to mitigate the bedroom tax, for example, and to shield people from the worst impact of Tory cuts, but our approach will not just be about mitigating bad UK decisions; we will reject Westminster's sanctions-based approach and will place the dignity of individuals at the heart of what we do. Delivery of efficient public services and delivery of humane social security are among the ways in which we will create a fairer and more prosperous country. Make no mistake: those two ambitions go together. We want a society in which strong public services are underpinned by a successful economy, and in which our nation's prosperity is stronger because it is better balanced.

Our commitment to sustainability means that we will continue to prioritise action to meet our ambitious climate change targets. We want everyone to be able to contribute their talents in full and to be well rewarded for doing so.

Our employability services will focus on improving individual skills and confidence, and on helping people into productive employment. We will promote greater gender equality in the workplace and we will build on the approach that means that Scotland already has one of the highest female employment rates anywhere in the

European Union, with greater support for people who are returning to work after maternity leave and increased efforts to tackle the pay gap. We will also build on the success that we have seen over the past 12 months in setting out action to extend even further payment of the real living wage.

We will support internationalisation and innovation as the bedrock of a successful modern economy. We will publish an action plan for manufacturing and a new trade and investment strategy to grow our exports and maintain our position as a leading destination for inward investment. Indeed, it is precisely because we need to strengthen the global links that are so vital to economic growth that we plan to reduce air passenger duty.

Our review of business rates will ensure that Scotland continues to have a competitive business tax environment, and we will set out how we will use new powers over tax fairly and progressively.

We will also continue our strong investment in infrastructure. By the end of this year, the new Queensferry crossing will be completed. Work on dualling the A9 has begun. We will also see major investment in the Aberdeen bypass, the central Scotland motorway network and rail services between our major cities.

We will boost house building even further with our commitment to building 50,000 affordable homes by the end of the next parliamentary session, backed by investment of more than £3 billion. Of course, we will also continue to help people into home ownership through our successful shared equity schemes.

Let me make it clear that our most transformational infrastructure investment in the next parliamentary session will not be in a bridge or a road; it will be in our investment to transform early years education and childcare by providing parents with 30 hours a week of Government-funded childcare. That is double the current provision; it will enable parents to return to work, to pursue their careers, and to know that their children are being well cared for, well educated and given the best start in life. As I have made clear previously, as we extend childcare, we will focus as much on quality as on quantity, with investment in teaching skills—especially in our most deprived areas—as well as in bricks and mortar.

We will use the powers that we have as a Government to the full. Of course, I believe as strongly today as I always have that independence is the best future for our country. That is why, in the months to come, we will also lead a renewed debate on how the enduring principle of the case that decisions about Scotland are best taken by

people who live here is relevant to and demanded by the circumstances of the world in which we live today. We will make that case positively and powerfully, and we will do it in a realistic and relevant way. In doing so, I am confident that, over the next few years, we will build majority support for that proposition.

My party enters the new year riding high in the polls. However, the support that we enjoy today has not come easy, but has been hard earned over many years. As we now seek the endorsement of the Scottish people for a third term in office, we will not take one single vote for granted. During the next few months, no matter what the polls say, we will not assume success. We will work for it—we will work harder than we have ever worked before. Our perspective for the future will be ambitious, upbeat, visionary and detailed. The coming months will see this Government and my party set out plans to invest in and improve our public services, to innovate and grow our economy, and to tackle inequality. Our plans will mark a new phase in Scotland's journey. They will see us take the next steps towards fulfilling our great national potential. I hope that our plans will win the trust and support of all those whom we are so privileged to represent.

14:43

Kezia Dugdale (Lothian) (Lab): Presiding Officer, I wish you and all members a very happy new year. I also associate myself with the First Minister's remarks about those who have been affected by the floods and all those people who are working to keep us safe.

I take this opportunity to congratulate Sir Paul Grice, who has just left the chamber, on his well-deserved recognition, which I know that he will accept on behalf of all those who work so hard behind the scenes to keep our democracy working. Voters should know that any frustration that they feel at our political process is the blame of parliamentarians, never of the Parliament.

I look forward to 2016 with hope and ambition. As elected representatives of the people, we have the potential to achieve more change in one day's work than many can achieve in a lifetime. The power that is held in this Parliament places a special responsibility on us, and that responsibility will only grow. To make the most of our opportunity, we have to change people's lives for the better. We have an incredible opportunity to use the power of this Parliament to break from austerity, to restore aspiration for the generation that has been left behind in the past few years and to tackle the poverty and inequality that holds too many Scots back. We can close the education gap, pay carers the living wage, secure our NHS

for the future and help people to own their own home. That is what I resolve to work for at the start of this new year.

It is the first day back. Does the First Minister come to the Parliament to propose measures to deal with the decline in our schools? Does she come to explain why the Government has not abolished delayed discharge in the NHS? Does she come to talk about the future of our economy, how to prepare for the jobs of the future and how to meet the challenges of an ageing society? Does she come to talk about the jobs crisis in our North Sea oil industry? Of course not.

Dennis Robertson (Aberdeenshire West) (SNP): The member has just mentioned a jobs crisis in the North Sea oil industry. There is no crisis. We have just extracted more oil than ever before in the North Sea. [*Interruption.*]

The Presiding Officer: Order.

Dennis Robertson: We have the most skilled workforce in the North Sea and the industry is booming.

Kezia Dugdale: I think the member's constituents will find that an absolutely astonishing remark, as will the 50,000 people directly employed by the oil industry in Aberdeen and the 50,000 people indirectly employed in related jobs in the surrounding areas. That truly is an astonishing remark to start this year with.

The First Minister returned to the chamber with a statement launching her election campaign. It is politics first, the possibilities of power second. When I saw her adverts in the paper asking for people to trust her, after nearly a decade in office, and to give her another chance to deliver the change that she promised at the previous election and the one before that, I was reminded of the SNP's sales pitch last time. The slogan then was "record, team, vision."

Let us turn to that record. Elected on a promise of cutting class sizes, the SNP instead cut teacher numbers and now it will cut local school budgets. It was elected on a promise to protect NHS spending and yet its own auditors confirmed that it instead cut NHS spending. Elected on a promise to abolish student debt, it has doubled it and cut student support. It was elected on a promise to create an opportunity economy, and yet six out of 10 new jobs are low-wage and insecure—and meanwhile it has slashed college numbers.

What about the First Minister's team? We have an education secretary who cannot even answer basic questions from childcare campaigners on how she plans to deliver the previous childcare promise that she made, let alone the new one made today. We have a justice minister who did not even bother to meet the chief constable while

Police Scotland was engulfed by crisis after crisis. We have a health secretary who has now failed on her personal promise to eliminate delayed discharge by the end of last year and has instead managed to turn the annual NHS winter crisis into an all-year-round NHS crisis. We have a finance secretary, who, rather than ending austerity, has delivered a budget welcomed only by the Tory benches. The nationalist front-bench members are making faces, but a team who refuse to accept responsibility—[*Interruption.*]

The Presiding Officer: Order.

Kezia Dugdale: I know that the members sitting behind Mr Swinney cannot see his face, but I promise them that it is a picture.

Mark McDonald (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP): Will the member give way?

Kezia Dugdale: No, thank you.

A team who refuse to accept responsibility for the power that they have simply cannot unlock the potential of the powers that are coming.

What about vision? The SNP stands for independence. We know that. We respect that.

The First Minister: No, you don't.

Kezia Dugdale: Yes, we do.

The Presiding Officer: Order.

Kezia Dugdale: What else does the SNP stand for? Who else in Scotland does it stand with? Who does it stand up to? On the bedroom tax, the living wage, the education gap, the social care crisis, living rents and fairer taxes, every time we have pressed it, pushed it and pleaded with it to deliver the change that Scotland needs, it has had to be dragged there kicking and screaming. Every time, it chooses the easy politics of grievance over the hard choices of radical change.

Looking at the First Minister's pitch for re-election in the newspaper adverts this week, we can see that this time it is not about team, record and vision; this time the offer is just more of the same. Scotland cannot keep waiting for the change that it is crying out for. If she has not delivered that change after nearly a decade in charge—with all her power and a majority in this session of Parliament—why should people wait another five years? We can do so much more if we have a Government that looks beyond the politics at what is possible. To borrow a phrase from the First Minister, we have a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to change Scottish politics and, in doing so, to change Scotland for the better. We have a chance to leave behind the arguments of the past and use the opportunity that real power brings to deliver real change and break from Tory austerity. That is what we need. That future is in

our hands. We just need a party in government that has the ambition to seize it.

When the First Minister was first elected to this Parliament—when she stood where I do now, in what is my first session in this Parliament—and when she looked at those in power and held them to account, she would never have been satisfied by the excuses that she makes in this chamber. When she responds with the usual “SNP bad. Talking Scotland down” and blames Westminster—*[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Order. Let us hear Ms Dugdale.

Kezia Dugdale: She knows that those are just excuses. They are a way of evading responsibility for the power that she holds. It is time for real change, not excuses. We can do so much better for the people who are counting on us. Rather than adding to austerity by giving a tax cut worth hundreds of millions of pounds to an airline industry that is already booming—an inexcusable tax cut in an age when climate change wreaks such havoc around the world—she could offer an alternative and help people from my generation whom the aspiration of owning their own home has passed by.

Rather than managing Tory austerity with a one-year budget that will see the children in our schools facing cuts, we could set a three-year budget and grasp the new tax powers to ask the wealthier to pay more to ensure that children, regardless of what their parents earn or where they live, get an education that they deserve—an education that allows them to aspire to anything and liberates them from any predetermined destiny.

Rather than having another winter in which emergency teams are hurriedly dispatched to accident and emergency departments in our national health service, we can deal with delayed discharge by investing in social care and paying a living wage to care workers across Scotland.

That is the radical change that Labour will make. If people vote for Labour, with both votes, they will be voting for leadership that is in a hurry to change things—not for five more years of excuses.

One phrase in the adverts rang true—that the Scottish National Party “will never stop campaigning.” Nearly a decade into government, it is time that the First Minister stopped campaigning and started truly governing. It is time to use the power of the Scottish Government. In this election, Labour will offer the real change that Scotland wants and needs now.

14:53

Ruth Davidson (Glasgow) (Con): I add new year wishes from these benches, and offer my thanks and those of my party to all the emergency workers and council staff who were hard at work while Parliament was in recess.

Fourteen months ago, on the day that the First Minister was elected to office, I made my own case for an alternative Scottish Conservative Government. I seem to recall that I was slightly pipped into second place, but the case that I put forward was clear. It was aimed not at ending devolution but at developing it. It was driven by our desire to use the powers of this Parliament to push more power into communities and to increase freedom and choice. We had a commitment to our public services: a sustainable NHS, a police service that local communities could once again trust, an education system that strives for excellence and an economy that works for us all.

I spoke up for a Government that is there to help, not hector; for a Government that does not seek to stifle individual freedom or crowd out society but that uses its power and influence to release people’s potential and empower communities for the better.

As we head towards the election in May, those are the same principles on which the Scottish Conservatives will stand: a principled, practical Scottish alternative to the SNP with, as its foundation stone, our support—head, heart, body and soul—for Scotland’s place in our United Kingdom.

I am not as naive as the Labour Party leader on this matter. The SNP must be held to its pledge to guarantee that there will be no second referendum for a generation, and I will never apologise for standing up for the union—and, unlike the case with some parties, I can assure people that that goes for every Scottish Conservative candidate.

The Labour Party has had nine years—and six leaders—since this SNP Government came to power to act as a competent and effective official Opposition, with all the extra parliamentary powers and resource that that entails. However, in those nine years, it has comprehensively failed in the only two duties that an official Opposition has. It has failed to hold the Government to account and it has failed to put forward a positive alternative vision for our country. I stand ready to do both.

The hard truth is that the SNP is in a stronger position now than when Labour entered Opposition in 2007. I think that something in Scotland needs to change, and if the electorate does not change the Government in May, they should consider changing the official Opposition—and the Scottish Conservatives stand ready to serve. *[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Order.

Ruth Davidson: I see that the battle of ideas ahead of the election has begun already. Indeed, only this morning, Scottish Labour has pocketed a good Conservative idea: that of supporting first-time buyers through help to buy. I believe that that is progress, although only Scottish Labour could base its flagship spending announcement on completely non-existent money.

Scottish Labour's nine years in the wilderness seem to have taught it nothing. We, however, have learned. We have learned first and foremost to focus on the priorities of the people of Scotland. We know that nothing matters more to them than providing opportunities for the next generation. During this campaign, that is our focus.

Our paper on state schools, which was published this morning, proposes several policies that could be considered now, including more autonomy for schools, an independent inspectorate and greater support for literacy and numeracy. It also includes a proposal that I hope will be received warmly by our bookworm First Minister: a First Minister's reading challenge, which will inspire children with regard to the pleasures of a good book. I am glad to hear that the SNP will publish tomorrow its national improvement framework for education, and I look forward to its findings. I dearly hope that the party of independence will see fit to give some independence to Scotland's schools.

Over the coming days, we will unveil our plans on childcare and on support for greater skills, and, over the coming weeks and months, we will set out our belief in a fair Scottish deal, including 1,000 extra nurses for the NHS, paid for by prescription contributions from those who can afford to make them; putting a vocational education back on the same footing as an academic one and rebuilding, not decimating, our colleges; and, most of all, an economic strategy that works for the long term and sets out how we become a country of full employment, building a working Scotland no matter where in it people live. We will soon also be able to draw on the findings of the independent commission on fair and competitive taxation, headed by Sir Iain McMillan, on how we best use the huge new powers coming to this place. As the First Minister says, it will be a great debate, and it is one that we on this side of the chamber relish.

Too often in this Parliament, the debate has focused on ourselves—on the powers that we have, the powers that we do not have and on the powers that are coming. I fear that that will always be the case when we are governed solely by a party whose primary goal and purpose is the break-up of Britain. I can assure people that, for the course of the next session of Parliament, we

on these benches will demand that this Parliament and whatever Government is formed focus on the communities that we serve.

Like a majority of Scots, we want to move on from the false grievance, the unnecessary division and the endless complaints. We will make sure their voice is heard loud and clear.

The Presiding Officer: Before we move to the open debate, I say to members that, because I allowed topical questions to run on a bit, we are tight for time in this debate. It is therefore likely that the speaking time of some of the later speakers will be cut to five minutes, so they should be prepared for that.

14:59

Willie Rennie (Mid Scotland and Fife) (LD): That was an astonishing speech from the leader of the Conservative Party, who said that we must hold the Government to account then proceeded to attack the Opposition. The SNP ministers must be quaking in their boots at such logic.

I will focus on our vision for our country and my party's plan for the next five years. First, I wish everyone a happy new year and thank the emergency service workers who have displayed huge dedication over the past few weeks and days.

I will set out why four key liberal values should be at the heart of the next parliamentary session. They are that every individual should be free to achieve their potential, that we should stand with the weak against the strong, that power is safer when it is shared and that we are trustees of the world and must pass on a sustainable legacy.

My challenge is that the best way to deliver on those liberal values is to get behind Scotland's liberal force. With only five MSPs in the Parliament, we have achieved much. We have stood up for college places, made and won the case for extending nursery education for two-year-olds and led successful campaigns against unjustified stop and search practices and armed police. We have also championed mental health services, which are often the poor relation in the NHS, and provided the most effective challenge to the Government on Police Scotland. We have provided strong liberal voices. With more MSPs, those voices will be much louder.

I admire Nicola Sturgeon for what she has achieved in becoming First Minister and winning emphatically last May. She should be pleased and, to judge from her speech, there is no doubt that she is pleased with herself. However, I suggest that she is a little too pleased.

The past five years in the Scottish Parliament have been dominated by independence. That is

fair enough, as it was the SNP's explicitly stated manifesto commitment. However, there is little doubt that, while independence was in the front seat, the police, schools, the NHS and our environment were stuck in the boot. Even though some people found the experience uplifting, there is also little doubt that the referendum divided many communities, families and friendships. I have some advice for the SNP: for the sake of our public services and the unity of the country, it should move on from the constitutional debate.

John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP): Will Willie Rennie give way?

Willie Rennie: Not just now.

That advice applies equally to the Conservatives, who seem as eager as the SNP is to continue that damaging debate. I remain a strong supporter of the United Kingdom, but we all need to move on from the constitutional debate. Instead, the next five years should be dominated by a bright, liberal and green programme for Scotland.

People deserve the best healthcare that is available, so we need to reverse the decline in the NHS. That is why we support a step change in mental health services, the recruitment of more general practitioners and social care that meets the needs of our growing elderly population.

The planet must be protected, so we need to end the habit of missing Scotland's climate change targets. That is why we support action on climate change, including warmer homes, better public transport and an end to opencast coal mining.

Our traditional Scottish freedoms must be protected, whether that relates to the excessive use of stop and search, armed police or an identity superdatabase. We must also bring an end to stripping power from communities and hoarding it in Edinburgh. That is why we support a reform programme that includes transferring power to communities, protecting our civil liberties and empowering the police, nurses, doctors and teachers to do their jobs.

Our children and young people deserve the best education, so we need to reverse the decline in our once leading education system. That is why we support proper investment, ambitious nursery education expansion and a pupil premium to give every child the chance to get a good job and realise their potential.

I will give members an example, to which I referred earlier. The annual schools census in September found that only 7.3 per cent of two-year-olds were registered for early learning and childcare. The level was supposed to be 27 per cent. The First Minister said that the figure was out of date but, if we take the previous year's figure,

which was 15 per cent, we are 50 per cent short—that is only half of the target.

Therefore, the Government is failing on nursery education. How can we believe any of its promises on a massive expansion of nursery education if it cannot even deliver the timid and pathetic commitment that it has given on two-year-olds?

Let us contrast that with the Liberal Democrat plan for education for our children that is the best in the world again, for an NHS that delivers the best available care, for an environment programme to protect our planet and for a reform programme to return to traditional Scottish freedoms.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Elaine Smith): Could you draw to a close please, Mr Rennie?

Willie Rennie: That is the plan that will deliver opportunity for everyone. It is about standing with the weak against the strong, sharing power and building a sustainable world for the future. With just five MSPs, Liberal Democrats have punched above our weight—just imagine what we can do with more.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I am afraid that you must close.

Willie Rennie: We need more strong liberal voices in Parliament to advance that bright, liberal and green Scotland.

15:05

Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green): Everybody has been wishing each other a happy new year and it would be wrong of me not to do the same. Shamefully, I neglected to do that when I passed the First Minister in the street in Glasgow yesterday—we gave each other a wave, but I forgot to say happy new year, so I am pleased to have the opportunity to correct that. I wish the First Minister, all colleagues—including you, Presiding Officer—and others who work in the public services in Scotland a very happy new year.

The First Minister has brought to us a debate with three broad headings: public services, tackling inequality and economic growth. Those issues are not separate; they are deeply connected and are about our society's future. There is a long-standing commitment among the majority of those across the Scottish political spectrum to resist the agenda on privatising and diminishing public services. That applies to most, but not all, political parties in the Scottish political spectrum.

However, we know that the pressure will increase in coming years. Partly but not exclusively as a result of UK-driven cuts, public services in Scotland will be under increasing

pressure to outsource, privatise and diminish the scope of what they do. Let us be clear that a tax-cutting agenda in the next session of the Scottish Parliament—whether it benefits aviation, as some have argued it should, or high-paid individuals such as us as a result of progressively lower local taxation in real terms—will make the pressure on public services worse over the next session.

Therefore, the Green Party will make a clear commitment to introduce proposals on local taxation that are just and progressive. There is a third priority for taxation that the First Minister failed to mention, which is that the proposals must be adequate to fund local services of the scale and quality that Scotland deserves and to ensure that local councils have the ability to set economic policies that are right for their local circumstances. Greens will most certainly ensure that.

On inequality, the Scottish Government has a clear intent to close the gap between rich and poor. Again, the context is partly set by the UK Government, which has pursued welfare reforms that will be destructive to that agenda. For example, there are reforms to tax credits, on which the cuts have been not defeated but merely delayed, and to a host of other welfare aspects. The context on that is set not just by the UK Government but often by big business and the ethics-free zone of market power. Too much of what should be democratically accountable power has been handed to big business over the years and decades.

Just one example is the introduction of a new upper age band for workers who are aged over 25. That will give such workers a small income benefit, although it will not be enough to make up for the tax credits that they will lose out on. However, it will also give big businesses an incentive to put more of their workers, including younger workers, on zero-hours contracts so that those businesses can decide who they will give shifts to and find new and creative ways of reducing their wage bills. Exploitation will not be ended under the proposal; it will merely be changed. However, in discussions with the Scottish Government, there still seems to be resistance to introducing conditionality in publicly funded Government support schemes and business support services that could give companies incentives to shift to ethical employment practices.

We need to be bolder. Scotland's Parliament and Scotland's Government can be bolder on that agenda and the Greens will come forward with proposals to make sure that that happens.

On the third leg of the debate topic—growth—members know well the traditional Green critique. Measuring our economy simply on the basis of gross domestic product growth means that we fuel inequality. We do not support economic activity

that benefits those who need the benefit least and which is often predicated on exploiting people and the planet.

Green energy, for example, shows up in our GDP figures, but so would fracking. GDP measures all the supportive and constructive stuff in our society and all the negative and destructive stuff and just calls it all positive. We need to move away from that agenda.

The opportunities for Scotland are extraordinary at the moment. The world is changing in so many ways, and any process of change opens up opportunities as well as risks. Unless Scotland grasps the opportunities that are ahead of us now, we will lose them to other countries. Those opportunities come not from having more of the same but from speeding the transition—from making the break with the fossil fuel economy that we have depended on for far too long.

Already, we are at risk of losing out to other countries on jobs that will emerge from oil and gas decommissioning. If those countries develop the skills, the expertise and the reputation for undertaking that work, we will miss out when that work increases in scale.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You must draw to a close.

Patrick Harvie: Unless we make that change—unless we make that transition urgently—we will risk missing out, just as we did on industries such as wind power. The opportunity for us is to move faster in making the transition. That is where the opportunities are not just for a better and stronger economy but for a fairer and more socially just economy in the future that supports the public services that so many of us believe in.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You must close, Mr Harvie.

Patrick Harvie: Those are the opportunities that the Green Party will present in the next election and I look forward immensely to debating them with all the parties across the chamber.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you, Mr Harvie.

I also wish all members a happy new year but apologise for starting on a slightly negative note by saying that, after the next two speakers, I am afraid that I will have to restrict all members to five-minute speeches. I call Clare Adamson to be followed by Iain Gray, with speeches of a maximum of six minutes.

15:12

Clare Adamson (Central Scotland) (SNP): Thank you, Presiding Officer. I reciprocate the new

year goodwill expressed by my fellow members across the chamber.

In her address to Scotland, the First Minister emphasised that 2016 will be another big and important year for Scotland and I heartily agree. I am delighted that we have heard a vision today from the First Minister of a Scotland that is moving forward, a Scotland that is growing in confidence, and a Scotland that is governed in complete recognition of and belief in our country's limitless potential.

The plans are about harnessing our economic potential; more important, they are about harnessing the potential of the people of Scotland and enabling them to participate and succeed in a Scotland that embraces innovation and a can-do attitude for our future. We should make no mistake—there are challenges ahead, especially while we governed from Westminster by an austerity ideology. As deputy convener of the Welfare Reform Committee, I am only too well aware of the damage that welfare reform is doing to our communities and the growing inequality that it promotes.

However, we also have great opportunities ahead. As a former information technology professional, I trust that members will let me reflect on the opportunities within my own previous area of work. I am delighted that there was a commitment in the budget to invest in excess of £345 million to support research innovation across Scotland's universities, businesses and enterprise agencies—aligning their approaches, pooling funding and simplifying access to support. I also welcome the increase in digital strategy spend to £130 million in 2016-17, as part of a package of measures to bolster the culture of innovation and connectivity across Scotland's homes, businesses and universities. I further welcome the fact that the Scottish Further and Higher Education Funding Council will provide £120 million to eight innovation centres, thereby bringing together universities, research institutes and businesses to support world-class research in big data, digital health, industrial biotechnology, sensor technology, construction, stratified medicine, aquaculture and oil and gas.

There has been discussion this afternoon about the Opposition's response to what the Government has presented as its record to date, but it is interesting to look at how industry views the budget. ScotlandIS responded to the budget a few weeks ago in an article on its website by Steven McGinty. It recognised that Mr Swinney highlighted that the Scottish budget will continue to fall year on year leading up to 2020, that it will have fallen by 12.5 per cent in real terms since 2010, and that the figures paint a very bleak picture for Scotland's public finances. However,

ScotlandIS goes on to recognise that, even with the pressure on public funds, the Scottish Government has given a clear commitment to digital. It recognises the steps that the Government has taken to extend digital applications in public services; to increase the use of shared services; to secure further value from procurement developments; and to ensure effective use of assets and reduce overlap in public services. It recognises that the digital agenda will produce savings and improve the quality of our services.

ScotlandIS goes on to recognise the Government's main initiatives, which include £100 million to improve broadband services as part of the £400 million digital Scotland superfast broadband programme; the establishment of the alpha fund to help to improve the efficiency and quality of digital public services; and the provision of support to the digital transformation service to develop digital public services from a user perspective and to realise the benefits of digital technology.

The article ends by stating:

"the digital sector needs to focus on addressing the challenges highlighted in the Budget. This includes providing creative, efficient, technological solutions that support the everyday needs of both central and local government."

The response from ScotlandIS exemplifies the can-do attitude of the IT industry in Scotland to which we all aspire.

I commend the Government's vision in the areas that it already supports. For example, it supports Equate Scotland in making a positive difference for women in science, engineering, technology and the built environment. The Government's support is based on a vision of tackling inequality at its very heart.

I also commend the Government's support for CodeClan, which aspires to be a world-class coding academy that creates a new generation of software developers and plays a leading role in accelerating Scotland's progress in building a high-performance digital economy. It is new and innovative, and it is supported by the Government and Skills Development Scotland.

I highlight the work of Edge Testing, which is based in my area of central Scotland. Last year, during apprenticeship week, I had the pleasure of visiting the company to meet the chief executive, Brian Ferrie, and his trainees and staff. As well as recruiting highly skilled graduates, Edge Testing recruits from local communities and student cohorts, and it has developed a training programme in conjunction with Skills Development Scotland in which it trains candidates in a highly

regarded and highly valued aspect of the computing industry.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The member must draw to a close, please.

Clare Adamson: I believe that the digital economy is one of the ways in which Scotland can grow its economy. In doing so, we can build those highly skilled, highly valued jobs, and this Government has the vision to see that through.

15:18

Iain Gray (East Lothian) (Lab): The title of today's debate is certainly wide ranging, but Patrick Harvie is right to say that there are interlinking themes. If there is one area of public policy that binds the various elements in the title together, it is education.

Education is arguably the oldest of the public services, and it is certainly one of the biggest in terms of budget; I would contend that it is also the most important. If there is a silver bullet that can slay the scandal of inequality, it is education. If there is a master key to create economic growth and greater prosperity, it is to increase the quality of education, to raise the level of skills in the workforce and to support more academic research in our universities.

It is no wonder, then, that all parties in the chamber claim to have education at the heart of their programmes, and that, when the First Minister says that she wishes to be judged on her record, we should look first at her Government's record on education. In truth, that record does not bear much examination.

There are almost 4,500 fewer teachers in our schools and 140,000 fewer students in our colleges, and student support for those who remain has been declared "not fit for purpose" by NUS Scotland. We have bigger class sizes in schools, though the Government promised smaller. Student debt has doubled, though the Government promised to abolish it altogether. There are fewer level 3 and 4 apprenticeships than we had 10 years ago. Standards in literacy and numeracy are falling, and the attainment gap between the rich and the rest is as bad as ever. If that is a strong foundation, I would hate to see a shaky one.

This Government has broken every promise it has ever made on schools or colleges. A whole cohort of young Scots had been through their entire primary school careers before this Government stirred itself to try and address the attainment gap, and it is still spectacularly missing the target.

Just before Christmas, Kezia Dugdale described a visit that I made with her to a shared campus

school in Renfrewshire. The two schools share the same building, the same dining hall and the same gym and they have pupils from the same streets, but one school gets attainment challenge funding and the other does not. That is nonsensical. In my East Lothian constituency, not a single school receives a single penny of extra funding to close the attainment gap, yet in my county one child in five lives in poverty. Where is the support and help for them? That cannot be right.

The truth is that, if a Government wishes to will the end of improving education, it has to will the means as well. It cannot claim to be prioritising education, as this Government does, and at the same time target education budgets for repeated real-terms cuts, as this Government is doing. It cannot claim to have a passion to close the attainment gap and then allocate to that task one tenth of the resource that it is prepared to use to cut the cost of a plane ticket.

That is why Scottish Labour is committed to raising the top level of taxation as soon as that power is available to us and using the resources for fair start funding, following every pupil from a poorer family so that almost every primary school and many nurseries, too, would have a fund—controlled by the headteacher—to implement real action to close the gap.

John Mason: Will the member give way?

Iain Gray: I am sorry. I am about to finish.

I said that my schools receive not one penny from the First Minister's attainment fund. They would receive almost £900,000 from Labour's fair start funding. That is putting your money where your mouth is. A school such as Dunbar primary could have a fund of perhaps £90,000 per year. It already runs the Dunbar mile, one of Scotland's fastest growing science festivals and a reading programme that involves the whole community. That is the kind of imagination and innovation that we should be backing up with resources in every single part of Scotland. Instead, from this Government, in this year's budget, we have nothing but more cuts for schools and colleges.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Final minute.

Iain Gray: In her opening speech, the First Minister hailed the OECD report. It says that our schools are above average, but it also says that the rest of the world is catching up and that the attainment gap is growing. The First Minister may be satisfied with the damnation of such faint praise, but that vision is not good enough for us or for Scotland. Every child who is left behind shames us all, limits our economic prospects and entrenches inequality for another generation.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Will you draw to a close, please?

Iain Gray: The new powers that are coming to this Parliament mean that we can ask those with most to pay a little more and then invest that in schools and colleges, in skills and in closing that gap. We need not warm words or empty promises but real transformational change for a better future for the next generation.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Mark McDonald, to be followed by Michael McMahon. Speeches of five minutes, please.

15:24

Mark McDonald (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP): Over the festive season, we spend time with family and friends, reflecting on the year gone by and looking ahead to the year to come. As I spent time in the company of family and friends, I was struck not only by the challenges that many in our communities are facing but by the distance that we have travelled in some areas and the opportunities that exist to go further.

Kezia Dugdale mentioned the oil industry in her speech. Through family and friends, I have experience of the pressures that many in the industry are facing. The Scottish Government has established the jobs task force, and I think that it is doing extremely important work both in trying to ensure continued employment for individuals and in seeking alternative employment for those who are made redundant.

Patrick Harvie mentioned green energy in his speech. There are many transferable skills that I think the green energy sector could take advantage of. One of the difficulties that the sector faces is the policy approach that is being taken by the UK Government, which seems hell-bent on throttling the renewables sector rather than invigorating it.

Patrick Harvie: Will the member take an intervention?

Mark McDonald: I am afraid that I have only five minutes.

I have spoken to individuals who act as unpaid carers in our society by looking after loved ones. Those carers do us all a great service in the work that they do. However, we know that it is a struggle for many of them to get by, which is why the First Minister's announcement that unpaid carers will receive a boost to the carers allowance when the power to do that is in this Parliament's possession was welcome. I think that carers deserve such an increase. It is something that UK Governments of many shades have failed to provide in the past, and I welcome the commitment to this Parliament doing something about that when it has the opportunity to do so.

There will undoubtedly be opportunities from the new powers that will come to the Scottish Parliament. Previously in the chamber, I have spoken of my own experiences of the welfare system. For example, there is the soul-destroying experience for a parent of filling out their child's disability living allowance form, giving more than 40 pages of answers to explain their child's limitations and the things that they are incapable of. That is an extremely difficult experience for many families. Are there ways in which we could provide in Scotland a system for initial application and renewal that would be less onerous and less emotionally distressing for individuals?

Education is absolutely at the forefront of my concerns as a parent, not just for my own children and the children who go to school with them but for the children who live in my constituency. I see two sides of the coin: education in the mainstream environment and education for children with additional support needs. However, I am fully behind the Government's plans to improve attainment in our schools, first and foremost.

In my constituency, there is a great disparity between schools that are located in what we could call communities of plenty and those that are contained in communities of poverty. We used to be able to use the uptake of free school meals as a barometer of the level of social deprivation in schools in our constituencies. One school in my constituency had a 65 per cent entitlement rate for free school meals, but another had a 0.2 per cent entitlement rate. That showed the great disparity that was present.

The school with the 65 per cent entitlement rate has achieved great things in terms of attainment. It has twice won the city council's Baillie John Porter award for educational performance and attainment. The interesting thing about that school is that it is one that the Labour Party tried to close. The school is Bramble Brae primary in Northfield, which serves a community of deprivation and has done great things. However, the Labour council attempted to close it, which became a focal point of the by-election that led to my being returned to the Parliament following the sad passing of our friend and colleague Brian Adam. It was the campaigning efforts of parents in the community that led the Labour council to change its plans and remove the proposal for closure.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You must draw to a close.

Mark McDonald: In my constituency, I will always stand up for educational advancement. I hope that we can rely on local authorities, particularly Labour-led ones, to back us in that in terms of the local delivery that they are responsible for.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I must reiterate that five minutes is the maximum for speeches.

15:29

Michael McMahon (Uddingston and Bellshill) (Lab): I thank the Scottish Government for holding this important debate right at the start of the new year. I also warmly welcome the comments that the First Minister made about establishing education as a priority. It certainly came as no surprise to me that, in the final few weeks of 2015, after eight years of Scottish National Party Government, the Government's poverty adviser Naomi Eisenstadt indicated that the populist policy agenda of the SNP was failing to tackle the inequalities that exist in Scotland.

Therefore, it is not before time that the posturing gives way to proper progressive planning, because no amount of talking about progressive, anti-austerity policies can disguise the fact that the SNP Government has redistributed public resources towards the better-off. It is no wonder that Ruth Davidson is happier to concentrate on changing the Opposition than on changing the Government. As the late David McLetchie said, the next best thing to having a Tory Government is the SNP Government doing what the Tories want.

With educational attainment slipping, inequality of opportunity in education stubbornly entrenched, hospital performance levels even breaking the laws set by the Scottish Government, and escalating levels of homelessness, fuel poverty and waiting lists indicating the scale of the housing crisis in Scotland, it is really not before time for us to get a vision for schools, hospitals, housing and local government that is genuinely progressive.

In making those points, I recognise that it is not good enough for me to merely criticise the Scottish Government's approach. That is why, when we debated housing before the turn of the year, I stated clearly that Labour accepted that in our most recent period in office we did not build houses to a level that met need at that time. I recognised that although our record was not bad, it was not good enough, and that was why we accepted the recommendation of the housing sector that at least 12,500 affordable homes needed to be built each year in order for us to seriously combat the crisis that we face. It is a crisis, and no amount of denial will change that, so I am sorry that the Scottish Government's commitment on the issue falls short of what the housing sector says is needed and that it still stubbornly refuses to accept that there is a housing crisis. However, it is not enough for Labour members just to say that—we have to show that what we will do is what is needed.

That is why I am so pleased that Kezia Dugdale kicked off the new year by focusing on housing and put some meat on the bones of our commitment to first-time buyers when she outlined how we would do more to help the aspirational young home owners in Scotland who are finding it so hard to make the initial move on to the property ladder. More needs to be done to create greater availability of social housing and protection for private renters, and we will spell out how we think that that should be done in due course.

Building enough homes is fundamental to our country's social wellbeing and economic success. Given that the number of new homes that are being built in Scotland is still well down on 2007 levels, that intensifies the housing pressures that existed even before the recession. If we can build 12,500 affordable homes and double that figure to at least 25,000 by adding greater levels of private sector building, we can start to get to the levels of house building that we need for our young people and our growing families.

Whatever we deliver for people should have a strong evidence base that shows that it will respond to need and not just pander to preconceived and ill-informed populist opinion. All Governments in recent history have been rhetorically committed to localism and preventative spend, but we are far from delivering either of those in practice. Large inequalities of income and wealth scar our society, but it is not enough just to recognise that, wring our hands and point the finger of blame at someone else. If we have the power and ability to do more to address that inequality, we should do more. If not, we are as culpable as those whom we seek to blame.

We must commit to reducing inequalities of income and opportunity through a public service agenda that, for once, truly merits the label of being radical and reforming. That is what Labour intends to lay out in 2016, and I invite the SNP Government to follow our lead.

15:34

Christina McKelvie (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP): I wish a happy new year to all.

In a recent technology, entertainment and design—TED—talk, the topic was vision. The questions that were asked to stimulate debate were:

- “What is your vision for a (nearly) perfect society?
- If you could make your own vision of humanity, what would it look like?
- What type of economic system, social structure, and government, as well as their roles would you propose?
- What will humanity be like?
- What will our neighborhoods look like?
- Education, infrastructure, anything really.

Here's the hard part, how do you (we) achieve this vision?"

The answer to those fundamental questions is will—personal will and, in terms of this debate and this nation, political will.

I know personally what I want for the future of my kids, my friends, my family, my constituency and my nation. I want a vision that invests in people and, by extension, in its public services. I want a vision that embraces the fundamentals in life: good health, safety and security, good nutrition, good education, opportunities for all and equality.

Let us start with health. What vision do we have for health? A health service that is free at the point of need from the cradle to the grave. The First Minister has outlined her plans for making that kind of universal national health service.

What about humanity and equality? We need a vision that reacts to help and protect people in nations that are affected by climate change or tragedy with the same vigour as the reaction to worldwide humanitarian crises such as the recent and on-going refugee situation and nations being ravaged by war.

We need to be a nation that believes in human rights and that is a safe place in which to live and grow. We are starting at a very good point, with a 41-year low in crime making our communities safer. We need to be a nation in which there is zero tolerance of discrimination and domestic violence and that provides the best support and legislation for any man, woman, girl or boy who becomes, or is at risk of becoming, a victim. We need to be a nation that tackles human trafficking and that works with global partners to stop the trafficking.

We need an education system that gives young people the ability to learn not just by rote but by thinking critically with the ability to see the world in which they live and explore all the possibilities.

We need 1,140 hours of childcare to give our youngest the best start in life and their parents the best chance of learning and working. That is directly tackling not just financial poverty but poverty of opportunity.

How about our education system? We need higher and further education that is based not on the ability to pay but on the ability to learn. Imagine if the cure for cancer was locked inside the head of a young person who could not afford to go to university.

What about a social security system that means just that? In a person's time of need, we will not call them a skiver or a drain on the system but will give them hope—not a handout but a hand-up; not demonisation but actualisation. Whether people

have a disability or a long-term condition or just find themselves victims of life, they will have the support to get well or live life in comfort within a society that cares. When and if they are ready to go back to work, we will retrain them and they will have the correct support to do so.

Young people will have access to high-quality training opportunities or apprenticeships to open up the jobs market and career paths that help them to realise their potential to become the public servants of the future; the entrepreneurs, innovators and researchers of the future; the business builders; and, just as important, the designers, engineers and infrastructure builders that we need to build and rebuild our nation.

Vision is foresight, and this Government has had the foresight to protect our public services when others are going in a different direction. Investment in public services is a direct investment in our people. In my view, continued commitment to that ideal builds a society that values every single one of us—woman, man, girl and boy.

I ask again:

"What is your vision for a (nearly) perfect society? If you could make your own vision of humanity, what would it look like?
What type of economic system, social structure, and government, as well as their roles would you propose?
What will humanity be like?
What will our neighborhoods look like?
Education, infrastructure, anything really.
Here's the hard part, how do you (we) achieve this vision?"

I believe that, with the political and personal will, this Government will overcome the hard parts and achieve the vision that we all desire. I believe that the SNP is the only party that will deliver that vision.

15:39

Kevin Stewart (Aberdeen Central) (SNP): I wish everyone in the chamber and beyond a happy new year.

I was interested to hear Ms Dugdale's speech. She spent nine and a half minutes castigating the Government and all of 30 seconds trying to put forward Labour's vision for the forthcoming election. I am so glad that I belong to a political party that takes a much more positive view in putting forward its policies.

The First Minister talked about the progress that has been made; I will concentrate on progress in my city and my constituency over the past four and a half years. In Aberdeen, Government has invested in hydrogen technology. An emergency care centre has been constructed on the Aberdeen royal infirmary site. Construction of the

Aberdeen western peripheral route, which was first envisaged in 1948, has begun.

More is to come. There is investment in innovation centres, including the oil and gas innovation centre in my city. A new women's hospital and a cancer care centre are being built in Aberdeen and improvements are being made to the Aberdeen to Inverness rail line, which will be greatly appreciated.

To grow Scotland's economy, there has been investment in infrastructure in Aberdeen and elsewhere, the small business bonus scheme has been used to great effect by small companies across the country, and moneys have been used to support research and innovation.

Members mentioned the oil and gas sector. The news that production rose last year is welcome. When she welcomed that news, Deirdre Michie, the chief executive of Oil & Gas UK, took the opportunity to reiterate the call for immediate action by the UK Government to drive investment in the future of the North Sea. I agree with Deirdre Michie. I call on the chancellor to heed the SNP's long-standing shout-out and introduce exploration incentives in the North Sea, to protect jobs and sustain an industry that is vital for the north-east and beyond.

We have seen the progress that has been made by the Scottish Government over the piece, but we have also seen the Scottish Government having to mitigate the worst of Westminster's austerity measures. This Government established the Scottish welfare fund, with £38 million of investment to help the poorest people in our society. There has been investment of £343 million to protect vulnerable households from increased council tax liabilities through the council tax reduction scheme, and investment of £35 million to mitigate in full the impact of the bedroom tax and ensure that no one in Scotland pays that unfair tax.

We have maintained free higher education and funding for free prescriptions and eye checks. Under this Government, we still have free concessionary travel for older people and disabled younger people and, of course, free personal and nursing care is still provided in Scotland.

Despite all the austerity measures that the Westminster Government has put in place, the Scottish Government has proven that it will do all that it can do to protect the most vulnerable people in our society. I hope that we can continue to ensure that those who are most at risk are protected. I am sure that a future SNP Government will do so. If that is to happen, we must retain the strong economy that has been achieved under this Government. Long may that continue.

15:44

Ken Macintosh (Eastwood) (Lab): Happy new year to you, Presiding Officer, and to colleagues across the chamber. I cannot help but feel that there is something otherworldly or slightly surreal about our debate—or at least in the First Minister and SNP back benchers' approach to it.

The debate is entitled "Supporting public services". Across our country, the future for public services is very much on people's minds. Public servants and elected representatives are struggling with impossible decisions over which public services to cut. That does not, at least this afternoon, seem to include SNP MSPs and ministers, but it most certainly includes our local councillors and local government officials. The grim reality that faces people—usually the most vulnerable people—in many communities is that they will lose support and they will be charged more for the services that they require. However, I have not heard about any of that in the contributions from SNP members.

Labour and the SNP can make common cause in this Parliament in opposing George Osborne's austerity. We agree on the damage that those UK Government decisions will have on our economy and our society, but we differ on what we then do about that. John Swinney spent most of his budget speech just before the Christmas recess telling us how wrong the Conservative chancellor was in his approach to the economy and to public services. He then copied or echoed virtually every one of those Conservative Government budget decisions. I concede that we welcomed some announcements—in fact, we called for them. Indeed, I am pleased that the cabinet secretary has agreed to meet Labour demands to protect health spending and to allocate any ring-fenced increase to health and social care. That is the one crumb of comfort for those who rely on local care services in a budget that will be incredibly painful for those who receive most of their support locally.

How can the First Minister, Mr Swinney or their back-bench supporters talk about protecting public services when Mr Swinney has cut hundreds of millions of pounds from local authority budgets? That is more than 5 per cent in revenue terms and 7 per cent if cuts to the capital budget are added to the mix. We will all feel that. Even those with a steady job and a secure income will feel it through the holes in the roads, the loss of lollipop crossing attendants, extra charges for our children's music lessons and increased costs when using the local swimming pool.

As is always the case in such situations, those who need our support most will feel John Swinney's cuts the most. Young people with additional needs will lose learning support, care centres for people with learning difficulties will no

longer open and garden assistance for older people will be removed.

We are only too painfully aware of who will suffer most from the Swinney cuts: single-parent families, disabled people—those on the lowest incomes. We are only too painfully aware of who will suffer most from the Swinney cuts because they are already suffering from his cuts to local government.

In some ways we should not be surprised by the SNP budget. The cabinet secretary's record over the past eight years has been to take the cuts handed to him by George Osborne and then to double them for Scottish local government—a 3 per cent real-terms cut for him and a 6 per cent real-terms cut for our local councillors. Those are not my conclusions but the findings of the Scottish Parliament's very own independent researchers.

I genuinely do not understand the contradiction between a Scottish Government constantly arguing for more powers to protect the Scottish people against Conservative austerity and that same SNP Government steadfastly and point-blank refusing to use any of the vast powers at its disposal to do exactly that.

In fact, there is an even greater contradiction in the SNP's whole approach to devolution and local government. John Swinney has not only taken hundreds of millions of pounds straight out of local public services, but has stripped our locally elected representatives of any power to do anything about it. This same cabinet secretary and the same SNP Government, which sound off at every opportunity about the importance of securing full fiscal autonomy to ensure the democratic accountability of the Scottish Parliament, have removed all traces of fiscal authority or responsibility or any remnant of independent local revenue raising from our local government colleagues.

The SNP Government constantly demands more powers for itself but, with its centralising agenda, it has stripped our local councillors of the ability to defend their communities. John Swinney's rhetoric is full of defiance for George Osborne's austerity, but his record is to hide behind it. George Osborne does not set the budget for local authorities; John Swinney does. These are not local authority cuts or George Osborne's cuts; they are John Swinney's cuts.

15:49

Joan McAlpine (South Scotland) (SNP): The First Minister and other colleagues have outlined extensively and eloquently the progress that has been made in Scotland across our public services, whether on the international status of our universities, the additional young people who stay

on at school, the doubling of apprenticeships or the mitigation of Westminster's welfare cuts, such as the bedroom tax, at the same time as the NHS budget, which is now almost £13 billion, has been protected and an additional £250 million has been provided this year in aid of the integration of health and social care.

Those achievements are valuable in themselves, of course, but to evaluate them properly, we must see them in the context of the cuts to the Scottish Government's grant from Westminster since 2010. The overall budget cut in Scotland has been 9 per cent, and the capital budget has been slashed by 25 per cent. It is against the background of that cut that we should judge the Government's achievements in, for example, maintaining the NHS and, at the same time, expanding early-years provision and apprenticeships and countering the recession by transferring revenue spending to capital, which is one of the clearest ways to stimulate economic activity.

The infrastructure spend includes spend on new schools and hospitals, as has been said, and, crucially, spend on a new Forth crossing, which previous Governments shied away from building. I am very pleased that that commitment to infrastructure investment is going forward, particularly the commitment to build 50,000 new affordable homes by 2020 on top of the target to build 30,000 affordable homes, which has already been achieved.

Those achievements in infrastructure investment must be seen in the context of the cuts and, indeed, the Scottish Government's additional burden as a specific result of the Westminster welfare cuts, which are in addition to those that have already been outlined to the Scottish Government. Those are cuts to reserved spending that affect vulnerable people in Scotland, but the money to mitigate them comes from the Scottish budget. For example, there is £38 million from the Scottish welfare fund, £343 million to protect against cuts to council tax benefits, and £35 million for the bedroom tax. Strictly speaking, we do not have that money, but quite rightly we have found it from devolved budgets. We must see the achievements in that particular context.

I welcome the Government's commitment to universal benefits, which is radical, because it underpins social cohesion and knits us together as a society. Those who benefit most are not the well-off; they are average earners and hard-pressed families, as well as the poor, of course. Free university tuition, nursery places, personal care for the elderly, school meals for the youngest pupils, prescriptions and eye checks all deliver and are based on the principles that underpin the

NHS, which is our most popular universal public service.

It is sad that those things are continually attacked by ideologues in the right-wing press and, sadly, by politicians and commentators who should know better but have swallowed the attacks on universal benefits. I draw their attention to a paper entitled “The Case for Universalism”, which was published by the Jimmy Reid Foundation a number of years ago. The writers of that paper included Paul Spicker, professor of public policy at the Robert Gordon University in Aberdeen, whose recent evidence to the Parliament’s Welfare Reform Committee made an impression on all who heard it. The writers pointed out that universalism is not a something-for-nothing approach; it is a something-for-something approach, which is a core value of not just the Scottish Government, but the Scottish people. Universalism as opposed to selectivity is desirable because

“selectivity increases social and economic inequality and diminishes rather than enhances the status of the poor”.

Selectivity demonstrates what we euphemistically call “targeting”.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Draw to a close, please.

Joan McAlpine: Selectivity stigmatises the poor, and it does not have any place in Scotland.

15:54

Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): Despite the title of the debate, few members so far have made much reference to the economy, but a strong economy is the key to improving public services and quality of life. It is only by having a strong economy and a vibrant tax base that we can raise the revenues that we need to pay for the quality public services that we all want to see. That will become increasingly important in the years to come as the Parliament acquires greater tax powers and we see a closer link between the money that Parliament spends and the underlying strength of the Scottish economy and the tax base.

The advantage that we in Scotland have through being part of the UK was made clear in a report that was issued shortly before Christmas by the Centre for Economics and Business Research. According to that report, the UK is set to become the best-performing economy in western Europe in 2016 and is likely to overtake Germany and Japan as a global economic leader in the 2030s. That is all good news but there was a word of warning, in that the possibility of Scotland leaving the UK could hurt the UK’s economic growth.

The central message of the CEBR report is testament to the success of the economic plan that is being pursued by the current UK Government and the chancellor’s plans for deficit reduction. We should not forget that those plans were vigorously opposed by other parties in the chamber and are still being opposed, if we go by what we heard from Mr Macintosh earlier, when he talked about the damage that the chancellor is doing to the economy. If that is Mr Macintosh’s definition of damage, I would hate to see how he would define economic progress. On the basis of the CEBR report and many others, the chancellor’s plans are delivering success.

Ken Macintosh: Will the member take an intervention?

Murdo Fraser: As I mentioned Mr Macintosh, I will give way to him.

Ken Macintosh: Does Mr Fraser believe that the austerity budget that the Conservatives have pursued for the past five years has achieved better growth than we would have seen if they had gone for an interventionist and expansionist budget?

Murdo Fraser: The member does not have to listen to me, but I suggest that he listens to the economic experts in the International Monetary Fund—which produced a report in December that praised the decisions taken by the chancellor and the growth in the UK economy—and to the CEBR. Maybe Mr Macintosh has better experts in his party whom he can quote in support of his arguments, but I have yet to hear them.

Earlier, the First Minister reminded us that the Scottish Government has an ambition to reduce inequality. According to the Scottish Government’s own analysis, and contrary to the rhetoric that we often hear in the chamber, income inequality has not been increasing in Scotland. Indeed, over the past decade, we have seen a small reduction in income inequality according to official statistics.

However, if income inequality is a concern for the SNP, it has the power to do something about it. The assessment of the SNP’s policies by the First Minister’s own poverty tsar, Naomi Eisenstadt, is a damning one. She told the First Minister last year that flagship SNP policies on free university education and providing pensioner benefits at the cost of young families risk diverting public resources to the better-off at the expense of people who are enduring severe deprivation.

Those are areas where the Scottish Government does not need new powers. It already has powers. It is already making choices that, in the view of its own poverty adviser, are going in the wrong direction. It is time that the SNP stopped lecturing the rest of us about equality when its own measures might be contributing to the problem.

For our part, the Scottish Conservatives believe that the key to tackling inequality is to provide opportunity for all. Here I agree with Iain Gray that having a world-class education system for every child in Scotland has to be the priority. Those who come from better-off backgrounds always have a choice in education. They have always been able to buy houses in the catchment areas of the better schools. They have always been able to buy additional tuition or, if they could afford it, to opt out of the state system altogether and buy independent schooling. Those alternatives have not been available to those who come from poorer backgrounds, so improving state education for all must be a priority for the Government.

Today, the Scottish Conservatives published a set of policy proposals on how we can make the school system better for all our pupils, particularly those who come from disadvantaged backgrounds. There are simple solutions, such as putting headteachers properly in charge of budgets and school management, concrete proposals on improving literacy and numeracy, on which our record in Scotland is nowhere near good enough, and ensuring that new standards at primary 1, 4 and 7 fit into international methodologies to allow a proper comparison with other countries. Those are all practical policies that could be implemented now, which would particularly benefit those who come from poorer backgrounds and help those who get left behind.

As we start a new year, let us hear less about the powers that we do not have and more about the powers that we already have and could use to tackle inequality, to grow the economy and to deliver better-quality public services.

16:00

Michael Russell (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): In an election year, it is not likely that this chamber will find much to unite it. That much has been clear this afternoon and I suspect that it will remain clear for the next 11 weeks and one day, until dissolution. However, one thing to which I think every politician can assent is that the preference of the people—in a democracy at any rate—must be heeded. That preference may change from election to election, or even from referendum to referendum, but it is the basic and best guide as to what we as politicians should be doing and delivering.

Therefore, I was a little surprised to read in *The Herald* at new year the view of the former Lib Dem MP for Argyll and Bute Alan Reid, who will contest the Scottish Parliament seat, that the wheels are about to come off the SNP and that voters will at last “see through” the party of which I have been a member for 40 years. Leaving aside the fact that the Lib Dems now have fewer wheels than a

monocycle, such contempt for what Scottish voters are actually saying and doing is breathtaking.

The First Minister alluded to such anti-democratic sentiment in her new year message, drawing attention to the commentators and others who want Scotland to believe that some Svengali-style deceit has resulted in the present electoral strength of the SNP and who urge Scots to awake from their state of enforced slumber and to vote for someone—indeed, anyone—who is not a nationalist.

It is always tempting to believe that one's opponents are tricksters and hucksters. I can remember the days when this party took that view of Labour and the Lib Dems in coalition and, to quote Lord Braxfield, “muckle guid” it did us. Voters do not usually choose Governments and their futures because of manufactured fear, visceral dislike or thwarted entitlement; they prefer to make positive choices. It was a positive vision that propelled the SNP into government in 2007; it was a positive record, team and vision that produced an SNP landslide in 2011; and it was a positive, inclusive vision that we heard today from the Scottish Government as it looks forward.

That positive vision, of public services supported and reformed, education continuing to improve, admittedly from a high and positive base—this is a country of educational achievement and progress at every level and no one should forget or wilfully misrepresent that—the health service protected, a start made on fair taxation and equality enshrined and opportunity renewed, is what Scotland wants to hear. As the First Minister said this afternoon, we need to hear that message of great ambition in a thriving debate.

Scotland is in optimistic mood. Although I remain of the belief that it will take full independence to realise Scotland's full potential, we can make use of the growing powers of the Parliament to achieve some of those aims and to realise some of that vision.

We can renew and reform our country, our democracy and even the proceedings of this Parliament in ways that meet Scotland's demands for a more participative way of working, engaging the energies and the talents of our fellow citizens. However, to do so we will need to ensure that we encourage and embed subsidiarity and localism wherever possible. Subsidiarity and localism are particularly important in rural and island Scotland, in places such as my own constituency of Argyll and Bute. Subsidiarity and localism are in the DNA of the SNP; they were the petrol that drove the engine of the referendum. They can revitalise much of Scotland, as progress with land reform and community purchase is already demonstrating. However, we need to get them

embedded further and deeper into our society, perhaps into local authorities.

I will not rehearse the inability of, say, Argyll and Bute Council to recognise changed times and the thirst for involvement. The saga of Castle Toward and the present inappropriate and mishandled “service choices” consultation give evidence of something severely wrong. However, there is something wrong not just there but in much better-led and better-managed authorities, because, as is widely recognised, most Scottish local authorities are too big to serve their electors properly and are too distant to be of utility to their communities. Inevitably, one size will not fit all. It may be that city regions are the right way forward for the cities, but we need more focused and more effective smaller authorities with more councillors who are properly resourced and rewarded. Island communities in particular, which will benefit from the devolution of the Crown Estate, can and should be much more locally responsive and responsible. That need not cost more, because we can secure greater economy and effectiveness from reimagining and redesigning many of the services that are now being delivered—such redesign is long overdue.

The party best placed to respond to the desire awakened across Scotland by the referendum experience and the demand for greater involvement and participation in democracy is the SNP. Those are a core part of our vision of Scotland. Allied with the vision outlined by the First Minister today, it opens up the prospect of a dynamic future, in which the great talents, powerful ambitions and boundless energy of those who live in this country can be put to work for all of us.

16:05

Sarah Boyack (Lothian) (Lab): The end of 2015 saw the Paris climate talks, which focused on the challenge of reducing our emissions to avert dangerous climate change. It is absolutely right that they did so, because it is the world’s poorest communities and citizens who are bearing the brunt of climate change. We need to act to reduce our emissions, whether in energy and heat, housing and transport or how we use land. The past couple of weeks have shown us that we also need to make our infrastructure fit for the future and that there are challenges in Scotland in that regard. We must not only reduce our emissions but make our infrastructure more resilient.

In the short space of time since the Parliament was established, our electricity supply has been transformed, with a huge increase in the development of renewables. However, there has not been the Scottish manufacturing that we had hoped for; nor have the benefits—the investment

and profits—gone directly to communities. Further, it is predominantly wind that has been developed, and not the range of possibilities that now exist. In marine developments in particular, there has not been the speed or scale that were hoped for, which means that we are missing out on jobs and export opportunities.

In this session of Parliament, we have seen the closure of coal-fired power stations—Longannet will close in a few weeks’ time—and the start of big changes in oil and gas. We cannot afford to be complacent. We need a plan for transferable skills and investment in the future to help not just our companies but our communities to be resilient. We need a plan for transition—it needs to be a just transition for communities, and for workers and skills. A key part of that transition must be to make our housing and transport fit for the future.

As members have mentioned, a third of households in Scotland live in fuel poverty. Everyone knows that there is no chance of eliminating fuel poverty in time for the Scottish Government’s target next year. It is a scandal that, every year, 4,500 people die preventable and premature deaths. Those are people on low incomes—in work or on benefits—who cannot afford to heat their homes. Such people are often stuck in housing that is not just expensive to heat; they also face rising rents. That is why we need investment in energy efficiency, action on fairer rents and a whole new generation of affordable rented housing.

We need to ensure that our houses are fit for the future, because 80 per cent of existing houses will still be there in 2050—they have already been built. We need a warm homes act so that we provide a focus for investment in energy efficiency. We also need a new framework to transform how we heat our homes in future.

We are missing opportunities for cleaner, environmentally friendly technologies that our Scottish companies are developing and exporting abroad. That should not be the case. We need to ensure that local authorities are geared up and able to invest in the technology. We need co-operatives in solar and community heat so that we make the most of those new opportunities. We need to get ahead of the game.

I was very disappointed to hear the First Minister talk once again about her flagship policy to cut air passenger duty, which ignores the emissions impact of increased flights. The Deputy First Minister has left the chamber, but I am sure that he would want to tell us that it also creates a big hole in the Scottish budget.

We know that the budget that we are scrutinising is under unprecedented pressure, which means that our investment in infrastructure

for low carbon and electric vehicles needs to be protected. We need to make the most of the opportunities. We need to tackle air quality and ensure that we promote health and active lifestyles through transport investment in electric vehicles and new types of travel, but particularly in low emission zones and promoting walking and cycling. There is much more that could be done; it is not all expensive, but it requires joint work by the Scottish Government and local authorities.

The past few weeks have exposed the vulnerability of our transport infrastructure in Scotland. I am talking about not just the Forth road bridge but the lack of resilience and capacity that has been exposed in our rail network. We have seen the challenge of bridges and roads being damaged or swept away by flooding. We need better public transport that is more affordable and reliable for passengers.

When we bring that together with low carbon investment and new models of investment through co-operatives, we see that there are opportunities for community investment, job creation and economic prosperity that we are not seizing. In the next session of the Scottish Parliament, we need to focus on those opportunities, think about investment and deliver progress on climate change and climate justice.

16:10

Bruce Crawford (Stirling) (SNP): At the beginning of my speech, I would like to wish those who I have not yet managed to speak to a happy and healthy 2016, particularly those of my colleagues who have decided to retire from the Scottish Parliament—I thank them all for their contribution to the political life of Scotland.

The rest of us will submit ourselves to the test of the people in May. I, for one, am relishing the contest of the Scottish general election for three good reasons. First, I love campaigning and, as any SNP activist will confirm, I have a never-ending appetite to knock on the next door in an effort to engage with yet another constituent.

Secondly, I am looking forward to prosecuting the argument that, despite an incredibly challenging financial backdrop, the SNP Government has a quite remarkable record of achievement in government. I also believe that, without a shadow of a doubt, we have in Nicola Sturgeon the most accomplished leader in Scotland and the best team to take Scotland forward.

The third reason is that, as was laid out clearly by the First Minister today, the SNP has a vision for how we will go about continuing to transform Scotland over the lifetime of the next session of Parliament.

In contrast, we will face an Opposition campaign, particularly from Labour, with one simplistic slogan: #SNPbad. Kezia Dugdale's speech could have been shortened to that key phrase. Instead, we had nine minutes and 20 seconds of "SNP bad" followed by 10 seconds of Labour policy before it went back to "SNP bad" for the rest. That will suit the SNP just fine. We will leave the negative campaign tactics to the Opposition while we get on with the job of talking about Scotland's potential and our aspiration to take Scotland forward and, despite the undoubted challenges that lie ahead, providing a positive message of hope for the future.

The title of today's debate is "Supporting Public Services, Tackling Inequality and Growing Scotland's Economy". On the theme of growing Scotland's economy, it is hard to find a better example of the real, practical help that the SNP Government has provided to small businesses than the small business bonus scheme. Figures for 2014-15 show that the number of businesses that are benefiting from the scheme by having their rates either reduced or removed entirely now stands at almost 100,000.

Small businesses across the country have benefited from the scheme, including around 2,400 in the Stirling area alone. Those small businesses are creating jobs, boosting growth and supporting local communities. I know that the Government will continue to do everything that it can to unlock Scotland's huge entrepreneurial potential and to support businesses to flourish and grow, as Clare Adamson outlined so well earlier.

I know what an SNP Government will do, but I struggle to fully understand what the Labour Party's position is with regard to business and growing the economy. For instance, small business people in my constituency ask me all the time whether Labour supports the small business bonus scheme. Perhaps someone from the Labour front bench will tell us during today's debate whether the party will commit to supporting the scheme during the lifetime of the next session, thereby, like the SNP, showing leadership and forward thinking when it comes to supporting Scotland's small business sector.

Tourism makes a huge contribution to the Scottish economy, touching in some way on almost every business in Scotland. It certainly makes a vital contribution to the economy of the Stirling constituency. That sector is a key contributor to the economic health of Scotland and my constituency. I say to Sarah Boyack, who is not with us today—rather, she is not with us now; I know that she was here earlier, because I heard her—that I am looking forward to hearing my Labour opponent, whoever that lucky person turns to be, explaining to the thousands of tourism-

related businesses why Labour is opposed to a cut in air passenger duty.

I am looking forward to my Labour opponent explaining why a 50 per cent cut in APD is bad for the tourism industry. I also look forward to them explaining why it is a bad thing to halve APD, create nearly 4,000 jobs and add £1 billion the Scottish economy by 2020 and how it would be a good thing for the Scottish economy to lose up to £68 million per year in tourism revenue until 2020.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (John Scott):
Draw to a close, please.

Bruce Crawford: Whatever, the Labour candidate will always be able to fall back on their campaign slogan #SNPbad. That slogan is doomed to failure. I say bring it on.

16:15

Mary Scanlon (Highlands and Islands) (Con):
Given that this is the last year that I will come back to the Parliament, I wish everyone, whatever party they are in, a very happy new year.

I will focus not on how much money we have and whose fault it is that we do not have enough money but on value for money and good-quality public services.

The extra £2 million that has been allocated to teachers will not deliver the closing of the attainment gap to which the First Minister is committed—I welcome that commitment—unless the Government considers the teacher training degree. In Scotland, 20 hours in a three-year degree are allocated to literacy and numeracy training, compared with 90 hours in England. It is not all about the money that is spent but about how well that money is spent.

To ensure that the £100 million that is being provided over three years to address the attainment gap is effectively spent, we need to understand why pupils perform well in numeracy in primary 7 but their performance falls by more than a third by secondary 2. Surely we need to understand that rather than spending the money and then trying to find out what the problems are.

We should also understand why, in Dundee, less than 30 per cent of pupils achieve five awards at S4 compared to 70 per cent in East Dunbartonshire and East Renfrewshire. Coming from Dundee, I feel passionately about that. People should have the same opportunities wherever they live in Scotland.

I thoroughly agree with the Conservative policy of giving the attainment fund moneys to schools because not every pupil with low levels of attainment lives in a deprived area. Many do, but pupils of all ages and from all backgrounds suffer

poor attainment. They should get the same help individually whatever school and area they are in.

When it comes to addressing inequalities, Scotland's colleges are important. I know because I was a lecturer for 20 years before coming to the Parliament. Many people got a second chance of qualification and a training course at college. However, 150,000 part-time places have been lost and 74,000 places have been lost for people who are over 25. Where are the efficiency savings from the college merger programme? They have still to be identified.

The Government's management not only of colleges but of severance payments to senior staff and principals has been shameful. When the Public Audit Committee examined Coatbridge College, where the principal walked away with £304,000, it found out that most of the other colleges in Scotland had done the same. The Scottish Government should have managed that but did not.

Then we had T in the Park. The request for funding from DF Concerts and Events clearly stated:

"There are four main areas ... regarding infrastructure".

The Government's guidance on the funding stated:

"Under no circumstances can the Grant be used to"

supply

"infrastructure".

Never mind the guidance, the Government gave £150,000.

After nine years of the SNP being in government, we still do not have a set of accounts for the devolved public sector in Scotland. Audit Scotland says:

"it is difficult for the Scottish Parliament, taxpayers and others to get a full picture and understanding about"

public spending

"and the ... implications for public finances."

We are going into another election, and we still do not have a balance sheet for Scotland.

It is very easy for the SNP to blame Westminster but, in what is one of my last speeches in the Parliament, I ask the Scottish nationalist Government to start taking a bit of responsibility for the powers that it has instead of constantly blaming Westminster.

I will give a couple of examples that relate to information and communication technology. The new NHS 24 IT system is costing £450,000 every month for nothing, because it does not work, and the common agricultural policy futures programme is 78 per cent over budget. We were assured that

the Government was going to help and sort all that out, but it has not happened.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Draw to a close, please.

Mary Scanlon: I say to the SNP that, instead of arguing and constantly blaming Westminster, it is time to get the same grip on the delivery of public services and value for money; only then will all of Scotland prosper.

16:20

Sandra White (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP): A number of members, including Ken Macintosh and Murdo Fraser, have mentioned the title of this Government debate, which is “Supporting Public Services, Tackling Inequality and Growing Scotland’s Economy”. I will not reiterate all the points that my colleagues have made, because they have covered the issues very well. Mike Russell mentioned localism and subsidiarity, Bruce Crawford mentioned business rates and small businesses, and others have mentioned health and education.

I am really proud to take part in the debate in this first meeting of Parliament in 2016. As the First Minister said, the debate puts the full potential of Scotland and its people at the forefront in Parliament. I thank the First Minister for laying out her vision—in particular, for the emphasis on tackling inequality. Opposition members have asked where the inequality is. If members are out and about in their constituencies, they will be able to see inequality every single day. It exists not just in deprived areas: there is inequality for those who happen to be women if they try to get a position on a board, and there is inequality in that some men and people of a certain appearance happen to have a higher profile in various industries. That is all to do with inequality. We really need to tackle that and we are doing so. Certainly, with the 50:50 Cabinet, the First Minister has started very well on that.

Through education, we can get rid of inequality. That will not happen as quickly as we would like, but we will get rid of it—especially if we invest in learning from the early years through to higher education. I imagine that education is, for all of us, the key to creating a fairer Scotland. I welcome the £33 million investment in attainment. I disagree with some of the points that Mary Scanlon made about where the money should go, because I think that the schools are best placed to make up their minds on that.

Murdo Fraser mentioned that people in the Scottish National Party—I point out to Mary Scanlon that that is the correct name—always talk about powers in this Parliament and powers at Westminster. It will come as no surprise to anyone

in the Opposition that I would like full powers for this Parliament and that I think that that is the right way to go—but we are where we are and we work with the powers that we have. However, I will name just some of the powers that I think would be beneficial not just to the Scottish Parliament but to the Scottish people. I have talked about equality of opportunity and of ambition and about aspirations for all. What about having powers over Trident? If we had those powers, we would not need to send money down to Westminster for Trident. What about having powers over the war in Syria or over the House of Lords?

Mary Scanlon: Will Sandra White give way?

Sandra White: I am sorry, but I have only about a minute left.

In the House of Lords, people get £300 for walking in, staying for 15 minutes and going off again. They do not even need to pay tax on that money.

Those are some of the powers that we could start off with, and there are various other powers. Why should not the money that we raise in Scotland be kept in Scotland?

I see that Sarah Boyack is not here at the moment, but I was impressed by her speech. She is absolutely correct about green energy, carbon capture and wind and wave power, but our hands have been tied by Westminster, which has prevented us from pushing forward on green and renewable energy. We lead the way on that and we could lead the way even more, but because we do not have the powers over that, our hands are tied. People need to learn not a lesson but the truth of that matter.

I would love to go further with the aspirations that we have for this country: people share those aspirations, as we saw in the referendum. There was also such a return of Scottish National Party members to Westminster because people saw that the SNP and the people in the SNP were putting forward fantastic aspirations for this country. There is nothing to be ashamed of in having aspirations for our country and our people; we should not be ashamed of saying that we do.

Mary Scanlon: Will Sandra White take an intervention?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The member is just closing.

Sandra White: I am sorry, I have only 30 seconds left.

We cannot take away the fact that we desperately need and should have full powers. However, we are currently working as best we can with what we have, with an aspirational Scottish Government—a Government that supports

equality of ambition and equality of opportunity—and I am proud to represent the Scottish National Party Government in this Parliament.

16:25

Mary Fee (West Scotland) (Lab): Our public services are a lifeline to many people, so it is vital that we fully support and invest in those services. Over the past nine years, many of our public services have been under financial pressure through the council tax freeze, the recession and Tory austerity. Our public services workforce has suffered while striving to perform to the best of its abilities. We must all be grateful to that workforce.

Thousands of council workers have been made redundant, more than 4,000 teachers have been lost, libraries and community halls have been closed, colleges have been squeezed—with 140,000 fewer students—and there has been failing after failing in the police service. On that record, it is clear that the SNP has failed to support public services in Scotland and has failed to keep its promises.

The recent budget shows that local authorities will face further cuts. Although I accept that the Scottish Government's budget has been cut by 2.2 per cent in real terms, the reduction to the local authority budget of £350 million—a cut of 3.5 per cent—is simply unacceptable, unjustified and wrong.

John Mason: Will Mary Fee give way?

Mary Fee: No. I am sorry, but my time has been cut and I have heard enough meaningless rhetoric from the SNP today, thank you.

A cut to local authority spending of such a high proportion affects the quality of the public services that we receive and will inevitably lead to a great number of job losses. Local authorities play a key role in the education of our young people, they play a vital role in childcare and they play an important role in supporting our most vulnerable people, so they should be protected from such savage cuts.

After John Swinney's budget announcement, the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities highlighted that as a direct impact of the SNP's austerity budget, 15,000 local authority workers will either lose their jobs or be made redundant. The SNP is not working for people the length and breadth of Scotland and it must be held accountable for that.

The SNP failed to use its new tax-raising powers and refused to increase to 50p the top rate of tax for the very richest. The SNP could have chosen a different path in order to avoid swingeing cuts to local authorities. However, it is clear that

the SNP has decided to copy and paste the austerity economics of George Osborne.

The social justice budget has been cut by 7.9 per cent in real terms, the education budget has been cut by 6 per cent in real terms, the fair work budget has been cut by 5.1 per cent in real terms, and the justice budget has been cut by 5.3 per cent. Those decisions on cuts that have been made by this Scottish Government will have a damaging impact on public services and on our most vulnerable people.

Tackling inequality is one of the main issues that brought me into politics. Creating a fairer society with equal opportunities for all is the goal of any socialist, and I aim to work for that goal every day. To tackle inequality, we must invest in education, housing and wages. The 2016-17 budget shows that the Scottish Government has little interest in tackling inequality, with cuts to social justice, education and fair work.

On Sunday the First Minister revealed her key election issues, one of which is the living wage. Over the past couple of years we have heard much from the SNP about the living wage. However, the Government has said that it cannot legislate for the living wage, and SNP members voted time after time against Scottish Labour amendments to the Procurement Reform (Scotland) Bill.

The Scottish Parliament information centre briefing "Earnings in Scotland 2015" shows that Scotland lags behind the rest of the UK on paying the living wage of £7.85 an hour. When the figures are broken down by gender, they show that 24 per cent of women employees, in comparison with 15 per cent of men, earned less than the living wage in 2015.

Kevin Stewart: Will Mary Fee give way?

Mary Fee: No, thank you.

The SPICe briefing also shows that 65 per cent of those who earn less than the living wage are women. It is no surprise that the private sector pays below the living wage, with 28 per cent of companies paying less, in comparison with 4 per cent in the public sector. Private sector areas such as accommodation and food services, retail and wholesale trade and administration and support services are the worst industries for paying below the living wage.

The debate has covered three important topics, and there has been limited time for us to discuss them all fully. I stress once again that if we are to tackle inequality and grow the economy, we must invest in better housing, better education and better public services.

16:30

Dennis Robertson (Aberdeenshire West) (SNP): Like other members, I extend to everyone my best wishes for 2016.

I begin by looking at our public services. I commend the work that has been going on in my constituency during the flood crisis in Ballater and the surrounding areas. We have seen the public services—our ambulance, police and fire and rescue services—working in a co-ordinated way, along with our council workers and an army of volunteers. We should be very proud that we have such community spirit—indeed, it should give us a sense of pride throughout Scotland. That spirit is replicated in various areas that face crises, and we should commend our emergency services on stepping up to the plate when they are needed.

I was struck by a thought when I was in Ballater and Aboyne yesterday. Bruce Crawford has said today that tourism and small businesses play a vital part in Scotland's growing economy, which is very true. I believe that Ballater and the surrounding area will play a vital part in that economy. Ballater will be open for business again, and that is due to the community spirit that exists there. That spirit was demonstrated yesterday by the business community, which is working together with everyone else to try to ensure that the clean-up operation takes place as quickly as possible and that a recovery plan is put in place. The Cabinet Secretary for Finance, Constitution and Economy, John Swinney, has already indicated that there will be additional moneys available. Again, it was much appreciated that he went to Ballater to see for himself what is going on; I believe that he felt the impact as much as I did. It was quite emotional for me to engage with many of the people in the area. Again, I come back to the community spirit, which was absolutely immense.

We have a lot to be proud of in my constituency, including the work that has been going on with the Scottish Government. Mary Fee says that she has heard enough SNP rhetoric, but I am proud of what we have achieved in this session of Parliament and during the SNP Government's terms of office since 2007.

In my constituency, the work on the Inveramsay bridge, which has nearly been completed, will make a tremendous difference for commuters on the A96, and the work that will take place on the railway between Aberdeen and Inverness, with Kintore station being ready by 2019, will make an immense difference for people in that community.

We should also be proud of the infrastructure work that is going on with BT through the rural connectivity programme to enable people in rural and remote areas to set up small businesses.

Digital connectivity also enables people to engage with health services—for example, through videoconferencing. People no longer have to travel for many hours to go to a 20-minute appointment. We should be proud of what the Government has achieved in that regard because it is something from which people get a tangible benefit.

Members have mentioned in the debate that there are other areas to be proud of, but I am very proud of what we have achieved in the health service. Grampian underwent a difficult time, but it has come through that period and we now have in Grampian a health service to be proud of. We can also be proud that new moneys have been introduced to our mental health service. That is additional money. We also have moneys that were not there before for our child and adolescent mental health services, and we can see the benefit for our young people.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Will you draw to a close, please?

Dennis Robertson: There is much to be proud of with this Scottish Government and the aspirations that we have for the future.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Before we move on to the closing speeches, I say that I would be grateful if the four members who are due to be in the chamber for the closing speeches would rejoin us for them, please.

16:36

Jackson Carlaw (West Scotland) (Con): I, too, wish everybody a happy and eventful new year.

I start by paying tribute to a public service that has not been mentioned this afternoon—public service broadcasting. In particular, I pay tribute to our public service broadcaster in Scotland, BBC Scotland, and more particularly still to that consummate broadcaster Jackie Bird and the BBC's Hogmanay coverage, which mercifully spared the nation the commercial alternative, for there on the other channel was the former comedienne in what used to be known as the "don't watch alone" slot, staging a sort of recreation of the opening scenes of "Macbeth" and that sort of new year programming that Nicolae and Elena Ceaușescu used to be so fond of. The First Minister likes to refer to polls and trends. In the last poll of 2015 and the first of 2016, the nation voted with its remote controls, and by a margin of eight to one it switched away to public service broadcasting and from the SNP.

The opening speech in this afternoon's debate, which is on public services, was in fact the inaugural campaign speech for the elections that are due in May, and that tone was followed,

although if the contributions from SNP back benchers this afternoon are any indication of their enthusiasm for the campaign, they were as lacklustre a collection of tributes as one could possibly imagine.

During the recess, I read something that the First Minister said, and I thought that it was a truth. She said that, when Opposition parties and others accuse the SNP and say that Scotland is a one-party state, it says more about the shortcomings of others than it does about the SNP's political success. There is some truth in that. There is a responsibility on Opposition parties to provide opposition and critique, but also to provide an alternative vision for Scotland.

However, this afternoon, the First Minister gave us a highly selective series of statistics across all areas of responsibility. This is not an Administration of wholly mendacious people and I am happy to acknowledge that, like any Government, it has some achievements and things that are to its credit in its account. However, as Willie Rennie and others demonstrated, the unalloyed tribute of success that the First Minister articulated is far from a comprehensive truth.

The SNP came to office nine years ago with no record to defend. Now, it spins to deny its failures and failings and, without so much as a passing blush, it extols its doings as an almost biblical success in worldwide democratic politics. This afternoon, the First Minister made fresh promises with so many of those that she made before yet to be fulfilled.

Bruce Crawford demonstrated the SNP mantra that any criticism of the SNP is simply to be rebutted by saying, "SNP bad". If we talk about the police, education or health, SNP ministers say that it is an attack on the police, teachers, nurses, hard-working civil servants and others in the public service. Of course it is not. It is an attack on the political, incompetent management of those public services that has been the hallmark of this SNP Government because there is no follow-through.

there was a reorganisation of policing that led to well-advertised failings in people being able to contact the police.

The First Minister talked about the percentage of those from deprived backgrounds who are in higher education being higher than in 2007, but she did not mention that it was a far smaller percentage than has been achieved in England, where higher education is underpinned by far lower bursaries.

There was no mention of the fact that the Scottish Government spent great amounts of money on a new hospital in Glasgow—great news for Glasgow—but did not think about how people and staff were supposed to get to it and where

they were supposed to park when they did, or about how people were supposed to be treated when they went into the hospital. Constituents from the south side of Glasgow are still coming to me and saying that when they arrive at the hospital and ask at reception for accident and emergency, they are told, "We don't know where it is."

The First Minister: Will the member give way?

Jackson Carlaw: In a second.

When I raised that issue in the programme for government debate at the beginning of this term, the First Minister's response was to say that she had sent in a team that would rectify all the problems. All the problems continue, however, and we are now told that we can expect that hospital to be functioning effectively some time in the spring, at the earliest.

The First Minister: In case Jackson Carlaw forgets—I am sure that he was not going to—will he take the opportunity to join me in congratulating NHS staff across the country on delivering the best accident and emergency waiting times in the whole of the United Kingdom?

Jackson Carlaw: As if to prove my point, any criticism of the SNP's performance on health is responded to by the SNP saying that we are criticising the staff. However, the staff in the NHS do not want platitudes of congratulations in the chamber from politicians. [*Interruption.*]

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Order!

Jackson Carlaw: What they want is a proper health service being delivered that is sustainable going into the future.

What we got today from the First Minister was the usual overblown, highfalutin' rhetoric about her successes. She said that she was going to make a fresh argument about independence, but singularly failed to articulate it this afternoon. To my absolute astonishment, she concluded with a political tribute to Margaret Thatcher—I know that the First Minister has just finished her biography. I remember that Margaret Thatcher's third election campaign had a strapline that referred to the next steps forward and at the heart of Nicola Sturgeon's peroration were the words "the next steps" forward.

Between now and May, the Scottish Conservatives will build on our education announcements, detailed by Ruth Davidson and Murdo Fraser today, with policies on health, justice, opportunity and the economy. We will do so as a party with an unswerving commitment to the United Kingdom and Scotland's place and role in it, to the defence of the UK and to a low-tax, entrepreneurial economy that offers real opportunities to the have-nots in Scotland, who

have been so let down by this Government in practice.

16:42

Alex Rowley (Cowdenbeath) (Lab): As Mary Fee said, three big issues are being debated today: public services, tackling inequality and growing Scotland's economy. In the time that we have had in the debate, we have been able to do them some justice. However, I certainly look forward to the debate over the next four months and I hope that they will be the big issues that we will debate as we go forward to the Scottish general election.

To reflect on the debate, I will start with Ruth Davidson's comments about the Conservatives making a play to be the official Opposition in Scotland. I say to her that for the first time in more than half a century, we have absolute poverty in communities the length and breadth of Scotland, which is absolutely down to the policies of the Tory Government. I do not know about "SNP bad", but I certainly know that the policies of the Tories and what they stand for in Scotland are bad. I am sure that the people of Scotland will recognise that at the polls in May.

Bruce Crawford talked about "SNP bad", but I thought that it was the SNP that came up with that term. So, if Bruce Crawford is unhappy with it, he will need to give his own party a ticking off. However, Bruce Crawford also talked about record numbers of flights and air passenger duty, and said that he could not understand why Labour would oppose the SNP's policy on APD. We have record numbers of flights in Scotland right now and airline companies are reaping the rewards from record low levels for fuel costs. However, abolishing air passenger duty will cost us millions upon millions of pounds. The Scottish Government is willing to spend hundreds of millions of pounds on a tax cut in an area where it would be fine to do so in good times, but at the same time we are seeing hundreds of millions of pounds being cut from public services right across Scotland. That is the choice and, for me, the choice that I would make every day would be to invest in public services.

Kevin Stewart said that he wanted to concentrate on what Nicola Sturgeon had to say and I will do likewise. I am someone who tends to believe that his glass is always half full. Where I see policy and investment, I will welcome that. I take the example of health and social care. I have raised with the Deputy First Minister on a number of occasions the need to shift funding from health to health and social care in recognition of the fact that community care does not come cheap, and I welcome the fact that he said in his budget that he intended to do that.

However, there is a further crisis in social care, which brings me to another issue that the First Minister raised: the living wage. She rightly highlighted the success of the efforts that have been made on the living wage, in that more and more companies are introducing it, but that is causing problems in some sectors, particularly health and social care. If the living wage is to be paid in that sector, the money needs to be found from somewhere. Given that the majority of the moneys that go into health and social care go in through the public sector, if we want care workers up and down Scotland to be paid a decent wage—the living wage—we must recognise that it is the responsibility of Government to put money into that. Labour in Scotland has said that we will fund the introduction of a living wage right across the care sector in Scotland and I hope that the SNP will consider doing that with us.

We also need to recognise where we can grow jobs in the economy in the short term. One such area is the care sector. This morning, I read about a company in the care sector in Fife that has reported losses for the first time. One reason that it gave for that was the use of agency staff. It is having to bring in agency staff because there is a major problem with recruitment and retention in the care sector. We must recognise that, in investing in the living wage, as well as investing in quality social care across Scotland, we would be growing the economy and growing the number of jobs, and the case for that is absolutely clear.

For me, when it comes to the economy, the key issue is jobs—good jobs—for young people and for the long-term unemployed. I am talking about quality jobs that will last and around which we can build our future. That is why what we need is a strategy for jobs, to ensure that we can give everyone that opportunity and show that we are ambitious for all the people of Scotland and not just some of them.

Mary Scanlon: Does the member agree that social care, whether it is home care or residential care, should be funded at the same level regardless of whether the person is in a council-run home or an independently run home? If that were the case, it would allow every care worker to be paid the living wage.

Alex Rowley: I do not agree, but that is a different debate and one that I do not have time to engage in now.

On 2 December, I wrote to the Minister for Housing and Welfare to welcome the fact that Nicola Sturgeon had confirmed that the Government had a commitment to building 50,000 houses for rent. I see that that has become a commitment to building 50,000 affordable houses. Shelter Scotland and others have talked about the need for 50,000 houses for rent to be provided—

Mark McDonald: Will the member take an intervention?

Alex Rowley: I am sorry—I do not have time.

I wrote to the housing minister and I set out a number of proposals. The First Minister constantly invites those who have ideas to bring them to the Government. I made some very positive suggestions to the housing minister. There is a consensus that there is a housing crisis in Scotland. Shelter Scotland tells us that there is, and we know that from the statistics. There were 150,000 households on local authority waiting lists as of 31 March last year.

The First Minister: I agree with Alex Rowley on the importance of housing supply, which is why we have committed to providing 50,000 affordable houses over the next parliamentary session. Will he explain why the pledge that he is making on housing is nothing to do with housing supply and why Labour has still said nothing about increasing housing supply in Scotland?

Alex Rowley: That is only one part of housing. For Labour in Scotland, housing is a big issue and we will talk about housing and bring forward more proposals for housing in the coming weeks and months. I hope that we can have a debate on housing in Scotland.

As our leader, Kezia Dugdale, announced today, we will help young people to get on the housing ladder. Many young people in my constituency and, I am sure, in other members' constituencies find it difficult to raise a deposit to get a mortgage. Particularly since the banking crisis, banks are not helping young people. Labour in Scotland will help young people to get houses, but we are equally clear that Labour will build houses and ensure, in partnership with local authorities, that we build social houses for rent—recognising, as Shelter Scotland has said, that we have a housing crisis.

I finish where I started. My glass is always half full. I and Labour in Scotland will work with any party in the chamber to tackle inequality, get good public services and create jobs so that we share the wealth throughout the whole of Scotland.

16:51

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Finance, Constitution and Economy (John Swinney): This afternoon, we learned something important—it was a revelation to me—about Jackson Carlaw. I think that there was a hint of jealousy in Jackson Carlaw's condemnation of STV's screening of that magnificent piece of Hogmanay television that involved the First Minister.

Jackson Carlaw: Did you watch it?

The Presiding Officer (Tricia Marwick): Order.

John Swinney: Mr Carlaw is such a gentleman that he should know not even to ask the question. Of course I watched the programme—it was magnificent, and Mr Carlaw knows that it was magnificent because he watched it, too. I hope that that demonstrates, for the benefit of Mr Carlaw, that I am not on the mendacious side of this Administration. I will be fascinated by his explanation of who he believes fits into which particular category as the months leading up to the election campaign wear on.

I am going through one of those phases in my life during which I am enjoying the speeches of Michael Russell. It has not always been like that, but Mr Russell made a substantial and thoughtful speech today. In one phrase, he captured the difficulty and the dilemma that lies at the heart of the Opposition's critique of the Government. As I put away the Christmas decorations, I had the misfortune to come across an old box of press cuttings in the attic, which deserves to be thrown out. Those cuttings showed how the SNP just argued its case against whatever was prevailing from the Government, saying only what was wrong with the incumbent Government. Mr Russell summed up that approach beautifully when he said that "muckle guid" it did us. If the Opposition parties do not listen to what Mr Russell said today, they will have invited upon themselves what comes their way. As Ruth Davidson eloquently predicted, they will be involved in a scrap for second place between the Conservatives and the Labour Party—and they will be welcome to that scrap for second place while we set out our vision of how we will take forward the future of our country.

Although we accept that there is always work to be done to deliver on the commitments and priorities of Government and to meet the challenges of the day, there are achievements on which the Government is right to found its record and opinions. The Opposition parties could have talked about the fact that our economy has grown in each and every quarter over the past three years. They could have cited the fact that employment in Scotland has risen again while unemployment has fallen. They could have cited—as the First Minister did during an intervention—the fact that, in the week ending 27 December, 96.1 per cent of patients were seen, treated and discharged from accident and emergency units within four hours—the best performance in any of the past five years. They could have talked about the record passes in the advanced highers system and the implementation of curriculum for excellence, about how children in Scotland now have access to 600 hours of free, high-quality early learning and childcare, or about the 41-year low in crime.

The Opposition could have talked about all that, but no, it chose to run the familiar critique that Mr Russell effectively captured, with its agenda of running down everything that the Government represents. Mr Rowley knows that I have the greatest and deepest respect for him, but when he says that the Labour Party is prepared to work with us on all the issues, I have to say that there is scant evidence in Labour members' speeches of the party's willingness to work with us on any particular question. There is a need for Opposition members to take heed of the wise words that Mr Russell quoted—"muckle guid" it did us—as they look forward to the forthcoming election campaign.

Another point that came out of Mr Russell's speech was that Scotland is in an optimistic mood. I think that that is where Scotland is today. Scotland wants to hear about what it is possible to achieve and what we can do to ensure that we live in a stronger and more effective society. The Government debate's focus on improving the delivery of public services, measures to strengthen the economy and efforts to tackle inequality captured the range of propositions and approaches that we are taking forward and which underpin the choices that we made in the budget that we put to the Parliament.

Patrick Harvie: Some of us give credit where it is due. For example, I like the business pledge and the ethical standards of employment practice that it sets out. However, will the First Minister and Deputy First Minister go further and make those ethical standards of employment practice a requirement for companies that want to access taxpayer-funded support services and grant schemes? That is the kind of measure that would build on the credibility that has been generated and make a difference to our ability to ensure that employees in Scotland are treated well by their employers.

John Swinney: The Government is trying to win the argument, across all sectors of the economy, about the importance of making the commitments that are inherent in the Scottish business pledge, and the business community in Scotland has responded strongly and positively. Many advocates in the small and medium-sized enterprise sector and in larger companies are prepared to make the commitment. We want to build on companies' willingness to work with the Government voluntarily to improve the quality of employment, because if we improve the quality of employment we will improve productivity and ultimately the public finances of Scotland, thereby increasing the resources that are at our disposal to deliver on the agenda that we take forward.

Much of today's discussion has hinged on questions that are inherent in the Government's budget, which reflects the themes of improving

public services, strengthening the economy and tackling inequality. Over the next few weeks in Parliament, the debates that we will have on the scrutiny of the Government's budget will require Opposition parties to come forward with alternatives to the Government's propositions. It is all too easy to come to Parliament and just set out all the things that appear to be wrong with the Government's budget.

Mr Rowley just said that he fully supports what the Government is doing to shift the balance of care and put much greater emphasis on social care—an approach that is being fuelled by the £250 million of new resources that we are putting into the system. Mr Rowley's support is welcome, but his position was scarcely recognisable in Mr Macintosh's speech, when the whole proposition, which is central to the budget that I set out in December, was attacked as being some form of attack on local government in Scotland.

Alex Rowley: Does the Deputy First Minister accept that, as a result of the budget, education authorities up and down Scotland will cut education budgets this year?

John Swinney: I do not think that that is in any way inevitable. At the heart of the budget there has to be acceptance of the arguments for the necessity of reform in how we deliver public services. The reform agenda is inescapable and unavoidable for every member of this Parliament. This Government has embraced it and accepted reform. We have accepted reform of the police and fire services.

Mr Rennie belittles the approach on police reform, but crime is at a 41-year low in Scotland today. On the fire service reform, in my constituency I saw with my own eyes the strength and the advantage of that reform, because it has ensured that resources that would not ordinarily be available in Tayside were made available to help my constituents deal with the difficulties that they faced. The reform was difficult, but this Government progressed it. We have also reformed colleges to ensure that we focused courses on employment. There are also other aspects of public service reform that we will undertake.

Willie Rennie: I know that we are not allowed to question the Scottish Government any more, but is that the Deputy First Minister's considered analysis of the Police Scotland reforms? Crime is at a 41-year low—is that it? Is there nothing else—nothing about call centres, stop and search or armed police? Is that his analysis, seriously?

John Swinney: It is, Mr Rennie, because the people whom I represent care about living in a country where crime is at a 41-year low. The sooner that the Liberal Democrats understand that

the better—they might even have more than five members in this Parliament after the election.

We are proud to stand on our record. More important, we will set out, as the First Minister did today, a vision of how we can build on that record to create a strong society that is driven by the determination to tackle inequality, to deliver the economic opportunity of that society and to deliver the public services on which our citizens depend.

Decision Time

17:01

The Presiding Officer (Tricia Marwick): We move on to the next item of business—decision time. There are no questions to be put as a result of today's business.

Celtic Rainforest

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Elaine Smith):

The final item today is a members' business debate on S4M-14521, in the name of Michael Russell, on the Celtic rainforest. The debate will be concluded without any question being put.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament notes the work being done by Plantlife Scotland and others to celebrate and encourage the conservation of the Celtic rainforest; commends the involvement of a range of organisations in the project, including the National Trust for Scotland, Forestry Commission Scotland, John Muir Trust, Ardroy Outdoor Education Centre Trust Ltd and the support of the Heritage Lottery Fund and Scottish Natural Heritage; considers that the Celtic rainforest is a key feature of the West Coast Important Plant Area and is of significance because of the sheer diversity of species to be found there, including one of the largest lichens, the tree lungwort, which is an indicator of ancient woodland; recognises what it sees as the threats from habitat fragmentation and the impact of invasive *Rhododendron*, and notes calls to encourage schools, communities and visitors to support these activities.

17:02

Michael Russell (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): I am grateful to the Parliament for the cross-party support for my motion and for the chance to talk about and celebrate an important issue for Scotland.

The word "rain" and its reality are depressingly familiar to people in Scotland, particularly after what has been officially the wettest December on record, but most people will be more familiar with the term "rainforest" in connection with places somewhat more exotic and warmer than Scotland. It is only recently—as the excellent new book, "The Rainforests of Britain and Ireland: A Traveller's Guide" by the Edinburgh-based environmentalist Clifton Bain explains—that our own temperate rainforests, which are often rare and threatened habitats, have achieved formal conservation status.

Our rainforests support some of the oldest land plants on earth, which appeared long before the dinosaurs. The Celtic rainforests that line our Atlantic coast are also some of the most species-rich areas of plant and fungi in not only the United Kingdom but the world. For example, in my constituency, the forest at Knapdale is a rare and fertile treasure house, containing no less than 25 per cent of all recorded mosses and liverworts in Britain.

All along our north-western coast there are abundant, ancient, species-rich havens, which are home to oak, ash and hazel woodlands, all packed with a plethora of colourful lichen, moss, ferns and fungi.

The species that dot the forest floor and enjoy an epiphytic bond with the overhanging trees contain a joyous mix of names and uses, from yellow specklebelly to the stinky *Sticta* and from the deceptive featherwort to the slender mouse-tail moss. I will declare a favourite thanks to the excellent and imaginative charity Plantlife. I am the species champion of the tree lungwort, a large and verdantly green lichen that can be found in several of Scotland's rainforests.

John Gerard first documented the medicinal use of tree lungwort in 1597, although his prescription of the lichen to treat lung disease, which was based solely on its having a similar physical shape to a lung, might not be up to current diagnostic standards. More contemporary uses of the lichen include using extracts to treat the gastrointestinal system of rats.

I have to admit that I am no lichenologist, and I am no lichenometrist either. I am sure that you know, Presiding Officer, that a lichenometrist is one who calculates the age of rock by measuring the diameter of the lichen that covers it. Actually, I do not think anybody in the chamber knew that until this afternoon. However, I admit to being growingly aware of the rich variety of the lichens that we have as our heritage in Scotland, particularly in the Celtic rainforests, and growingly concerned at the very real threats to them. That is the primary reason why I sought this debate—to draw attention to those threats, to inspire action from parliamentarians and Government, and to celebrate the work that is already being done to protect and conserve the lichens.

There are two principal threats to our Celtic rainforests: habitat fragmentation and the intrusion of non-native invasive species, particularly *Rhododendron ponticum*. *Rhododendrons* were introduced to the UK from the Iberian peninsula in the late 18th century and supplemented by Himalayan imports thereafter. They have spread far and wide, and they threaten Celtic rainforests by their sheer vigour in an ideal habitat. They crowd out and overshadow everything else.

In recent years, Scotland rural development programme funding has been vital in beating back the challenge, and it is essential that that funding line continues. Great work has been done by bodies such as Scottish Natural Heritage and the Forestry Commission Scotland to assess and combat the spread of *rhododendrons* in key areas. Much of the work on the ground is being done by third sector bodies, community projects and volunteers. It is crucial that we not only value their work but give them the support that they need and deserve. The need for more trained and supported volunteers is flagged as a key outcome in the Government's 2020 challenge to develop understanding and awareness of nature.

The means of combating habitat fragmentation is less straightforward. Plantlife Scotland is doing a commendable job in working to identify zones of opportunity where there is the proper environment for species growth but in which there are not yet present all the species that would be able to flourish in that environment. It is working with land managers and teams of volunteers to identify the zones and make plans for how to manage them to ensure species growth. The bigger the area and especially the more contiguous areas there are in which Celtic rainforest species are able to grow, the more we can ensure the long-term survival of that unique and vital habitat and all that it contains.

The Celtic rainforest is the largest of Scotland's 43 important plant areas—IPAs—the criteria for which were established in the global strategy for plant conservation. Plantlife Scotland has committed to provide effective management for 75 per cent of Scotland's IPAs by 2020, and it is incumbent on all of us as environmentally concerned citizens to do everything in our power to help to achieve that task.

As everyone in the chamber is aware, awakening interest and then converting that interest into action is always a challenging task. Education is crucial, and we need to engage the widest possible audience. One way to do that is to ensure that we commend and celebrate those who are already hard at work.

In that regard, it is good to see the John Muir Trust, Plantlife Scotland, the Ardroy Outdoor Education Centre Trust in my constituency, the National Trust for Scotland and the Forestry Commission Scotland working together to create an award scheme that aims to recognise those who are building a deeper connection between people and groups of all ages and the outstanding natural environment in which we live and take our recreation.

Those organisations and many others work tirelessly to engage with communities, schools, families and landowners to build connections while undertaking the essential effective management of our wildness, wilderness and wetness, which are all parts of the archetypal Celtic rainforest. I am sure that the minister will want to join me in thanking them, and I look forward to hearing what more she and the Scottish Government are doing to take the care and conservation of our Celtic rainforests forward.

17:09

Claudia Beamish (South Scotland) (Lab): The Celtic rainforests in Scotland are fantastically beautiful by repute and they are globally significant. We should consider ourselves lucky to

play host to such an extraordinary variety of very rare species.

I welcome the conservation efforts of the organisations that my colleague Mike Russell has already highlighted, and I stress the support that the Scottish Government needs and how important the awards are for Plantlife Scotland, the National Trust for Scotland, the Forestry Commission Scotland, the John Muir Trust and the Ardroy Outdoor Education Centre Trust, which I am sure my colleague Mike Russell knows about. The Heritage Lottery Fund and the backing of Scottish Natural Heritage are also important in that context. I thank my colleague Mike Russell for his motion to highlight this important issue.

A number of my constituents in South Scotland have recently raised with me their concerns about deforestation and the loss of much of our native woodland as a result of human impact and the changing climate, which is indeed a tragedy. We parliamentarians must address that.

The Celtic rainforests ignite the imagination. For those who have not visited—me being one—the names alone paint a picture of an otherworldly habitat. I understand that we could explore Puck's glen or go on a hunt for blackberries and custard or octopus suckers. I am certainly looking forward to a visit, perhaps during the summer recess, if I am still here of course.

The balance of heavy rain and mild temperatures creates a vivid and humid environment that can nurture the lichens, mosses, liverworts, fungi and ferns that, in turn, help to maintain the humidity. Rarer than tropical rainforests, these ecosystems make an invaluable contribution to our biodiversity, supporting migratory birds and ancient flora and fauna. RSPB Scotland informs me that, although Scotland accounts for only 0.05 per cent of the world's land area, it is home to 5 per cent of moss species. The RSPB calls Scotland a global moss hotspot.

The aforementioned environmental organisations have laid out positive steps for protecting such habitats. As Mike Russell has highlighted, although it is attractive, *Rhododendron ponticum* spreads at a forceful rate. Having tried to pull out quite a lot of it as a volunteer, I know that it is quite a challenge and the volunteers who do such work ought to be commended. We need long-term plans to tackle it and other invasive species, and I welcome the control initiatives that the RSPB and Plantlife Scotland are working on. I am also pleased to see discussions about more effective deer management mechanisms, and I hope that the Land Reform (Scotland) Bill will assist with overgrazing.

Further difficulties can result from fragmentation. Small islands of habitat are far more vulnerable to weather disturbances and disease, and networks need to be built up. We have a responsibility to acknowledge that our activities mean that such habitats might not be able to sustain themselves as they once could.

In my region of South Scotland is the Mabie forest, where the species that I champion—the Forester moth—resides in dappled sunlight and moist open areas. That is a good example of habitat that is like the Celtic rainforest in that it needs careful management.

I am pleased to lend my support to raising awareness of these issues, and I echo the calls for schools, communities, businesses and local authorities to engage supportively in conservation work for the Celtic rainforests and across Scotland.

I am also inspired by the Girvan nectar network, which is an exemplary initiative on the Ayrshire coast that is tackling the issue of fragmentation for pollinators. The co-operation between local people, businesses and the local authority has made the initiative into something that could be rolled out across Scotland.

As shadow minister for environmental justice, I am delighted to see foresters, land managers and conservationists working together to preserve our Scottish rainforests. The Royal Botanic Gardens Edinburgh has developed an innovative programme to calculate how best to manage a habitat within the big picture of climate change. I suppose that some of us will not be here then but, looking to 2080, the tool can be used by forest managers to consider different development ideas. With a co-operative and science-based approach, I hope that these environments will thrive long beyond that and will not be reduced to a myth.

17:14

Jamie McGrigor (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I congratulate Mike Russell on securing this member's debate, and I thank Plantlife Scotland for its useful briefing.

As it suggests, the Celtic rainforest, which is the temperate woodland that is found along Scotland's Atlantic coast and is based on sessile oak, downy birch and hazel, is often overlooked. Indeed, I suspect that a number of members were quite surprised to hear that Scotland has its own rainforests—albeit that they are certainly not tropical. They are an important and globally rare natural resource and are valuable for the diversity of species that they support, including the rare mosses, liverworts and lichens to which Mike Russell referred. I am told that a typical forest ravine in Argyll can contain as many as 200

species of moss and liverwort. Mike Russell also mentioned the woodland in Knapdale that contains 25 per cent of Britain's entire mosses and liverworts, including a species—which I do not think he mentioned—known as the prickly featherwort, and rare filmy ferns, which are so called because of their translucent-looking fronds.

It is no wonder that the Celtic rainforest has been described as “a lichenologist's Mecca”. I hope that we can encourage more lichenologists and lovers of rare plant species to visit our Celtic rainforest, because such extra wildlife tourism could be a welcome boost to local economies in the countryside.

I remember once visiting a rainforest in New Zealand and eating part of a cabbage tree. I do not know what bush tucker can be found in Scotland's rainforests, but I am told by my eldest daughter Sibylla that wild garlic makes very good pesto.

I agree with what the motion says about the impact of the invasive *Rhododendron ponticum*. Indeed, I have spoken about the effect of such invasive non-native species on a number of occasions in the chamber. My late father, Charles McGrigor, was an expert collector of hybrid rhododendrons, which I readily accept produce wonderful colourful blooms in botanic and private gardens. Rhododendron and azalea gardens in Argyll in May are something to behold in their magnificence, but unchecked in the wild, *Rhododendron ponticum* can spread readily and snuff out other plant species in its wake, as can Japanese knotweed and Himalayan balsam. We need to see sustained action to prevent their spread from harming our biodiversity. I commend SNH for its continued good work in that regard and I hope that the Scottish rural development programme grants will continue to help volunteers and others to take care of our biodiversity, because the spread of *Rhododendron ponticum* is a great threat to our Atlantic woodlands.

I join Mike Russell and others in welcoming organisations' efforts to educate young people about the forests in their communities. I encourage constituents to consider supporting schemes such as the flora guardian scheme, whereby individuals can volunteer to help to monitor and to conserve some of the special plants in our woodlands. One note of caution to volunteers is that if they are visiting a Celtic rainforest in summer, they should be sure to take a midge net.

The woodlands are also useful because they give shelter to roe deer, red deer, sheep and many native and migratory birds, including the woodcock, which comes in the winter.

I welcome today's debate and hope that it will help to raise awareness and understanding of the

important Celtic forest habitat that we are fortunate enough to have in Argyll and the west Highlands generally, and whose long-term future we should all aim to secure. It has been there through changing centuries; I hope that it will be there for many more to come.

17:18

Rob Gibson (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP): Mike Russell is due considerable congratulations on bringing this important debate to the chamber. At the beginning of a year in which climate change is in many people's minds, we are discussing issues that affect the Celtic rainforest, which stretches from the far north of my constituency at Loch Eriboll down to Mike Russell's constituency in Argyll, and which is one of the treasures of our country for various reasons. It is a barometer and a thermometer—a measure of how our natural habitats on the edge of the Atlantic are coping with the weather that we face.

The situation in the Celtic rainforest at Ardvar in Assynt was one of the reasons why the Rural Affairs, Climate Change and Environment Committee got involved in looking at one of the problems that are faced by the Celtic woodlands that we are discussing today.

Ardvar and Loch a'Mhuilinn, at about 58.25° north and consisting of 805.99 hectares, is a complex of old sessile oak woods and birch-dominated woods with oak throughout. For many such areas, the way in which they are managed allows us to see whether they are regenerating. There is broad-leaved deciduous woodland in 32 per cent of Ardvar and there is heath, scrub and so on in 33 per cent. I have seen with my own eyes the effects of overgrazing—there should be a lot more deciduous woodland and a lot less scrub.

SNH is a partner in the Celtic rainforest approach. It does so as the lead body to advise the Government, but there are many other partners. I wonder whether the policies on deer culling of one of those partners, the John Muir Trust, will aid the recovery of the Celtic rainforest, because I have been very worried to read that its culling policy has left deer to rot on the hill. I would like to know whether SNH feels that that is a good way for the John Muir Trust to behave. There is also an issue about whether the local estates next to the John Muir Trust's land in Assynt, near Ardvar, can manage their deer. It has been suggested that there is deep culling, the detail of which the public does not know.

In discussing whether the Celtic rainforest can regenerate we might question whether all the partners are doing their best to help it to do so. The Ardvar example led the Rural Affairs, Climate Change and Environment Committee to

investigate deer management throughout Scotland, and to ministerial intervention to protect native woodlands such as the Celtic rainforest. The debate allows us to see the issue in considerable context. That is important, because RSPB Scotland has suggested that the Celtic rainforest is under real and present threat, part of which is about wrong levels of grazing. The production of strategic local deer management plans, which are widely seen as a positive step in protecting native habitats from overgrazing, is essential for the Celtic rainforest's future.

I have sat at the exposed point of Sleat in the Isle of Skye, where 6-inch high oaks nestle in the heather, stunted by the prevailing gales and overgrazing pressure. There are many more potential Celtic rainforests out there, if we get right the balance between tree growth and deer management. That is why, as Mike Russell proposes, we must celebrate and encourage the conservation of the Celtic rainforest.

17:23

The Minister for Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform (Aileen McLeod): I, too, thank my colleague Michael Russell for bringing his motion on the Celtic rainforest to the chamber. I share his enthusiasm for that important part of Scotland's natural environment. I am especially grateful to the members who have taken part in this evening's debate for their support.

As we have heard, the Celtic rainforest thrives on rainy and misty conditions, high humidity and minimal fluctuations in temperature. That creates an important habitat that consists of numerous common and rare species of mosses, liverworts and lichens. An exceptional number of plants grow on or hang from trees and the ground is often ankle deep in a blanket of mosses and liverworts. As a Scottish Environment LINK MSP species champion, Mr Russell already lends his support to the tree lungwort—a green leafy lichen that grows in Scotland's woodland along the west coast.

It is not an exaggeration to highlight the international importance of the Celtic rainforest. As other members have indicated, as well as being a habitat for mosses, liverworts and a rich array of lichens, the Celtic rainforest provides a home to many rare and important fauna, such as the pied flycatcher and the chequered skipper butterfly.

The Celtic rainforests might not be as well known as, for example, the tropical rainforests of Amazonia, so I am delighted that this debate has given us the opportunity to recognise their value and explore opportunities for their enhancement. Although the Celtic rainforest stretches along much of our Atlantic coast, Argyll is its heartland in

Scotland, with many iconic sites, such as Glen Creran, Glen Nant and the western shore of Loch Awe.

We should not forget the cultural and tourism importance of the forest, which other members have spoken about. It should be no surprise that the forest attracts visitors from far afield, who come to enjoy the ancient green scenery and the incredible wildlife. A recent publication by Clifton Bain, "The Rainforests of Britain and Ireland: A Traveller's Guide", highlights the uniqueness of these habitats and encourages people to explore such woodlands and understand their value to the environment and to society.

As Mike Russell and others have pointed out, there are—unfortunately—threats to the iconic forests from, in particular, invasive and non-native plants, browsing pressure and climate change. However, there is good news—I cannot tell members how much I need good news right now. Actions are being taken to protect and improve the habitat's condition. That can be fully effective only with co-ordinated effort and long-term commitment from a wide range of organisations. For example, Forestry Commission Scotland is finalising its long-term strategy for rhododendron control, which encourages landscape-scale partnership work, specifically in designated sites. That will be published some time in the spring. Further, the RSPB and Plantlife Scotland are working hard to develop a project to restore Atlantic woodland, which includes the removal of rhododendron. That will focus on four special areas of conservation: Onich to north Ballachulish woods, Morvern woods, Sunart and Loch Lomond woods.

On the national forest estate, the expansion of the Celtic rainforest is being achieved by the efforts of Forest Enterprise Scotland through the removal of non-native trees from plantations on ancient woodland sites. I understand that there are plans for up to 40 sites to be cleared over the next two years, including a large area of spruce in Knapdale forest.

Forestry Commission Scotland's native woodland survey of Scotland recorded that a high level of grazing by deer and sheep contributes to the poor condition of many woodland habitats, including the Celtic rainforests. I take the points that Rob Gibson made in that regard. However, as he is aware, we are dealing with deer management in the Land Reform (Scotland) Bill. Under the Scottish Government's biodiversity route map to 2020, one area on which we aim to focus effort is the reduction of browsing pressure.

Jamie McGrigor: Overgrazing by sheep and deer has been mentioned. Will there be a formula that can be used to work out what a sensible grazing level is?

Aileen McLeod: That will be part and parcel of some issues that we are considering in relation to

the Land Reform (Scotland) Bill. As I said, one area on which our route map to 2020 will focus attention is the reduction of such browsing pressure, because we know how special our Celtic rainforests are and believe that they need to be protected.

The secrets of the Celtic rainforest project, which has been mentioned, is managed by Plantlife Scotland, which is working with land managers and communities across Scotland's west coast to deliver an improved condition of woodland. That work is to be commended. I also thank Plantlife Scotland for the helpful briefing that it provided for today's debate.

There are many designated sites in the Celtic rainforest. Grant support for them is available under the current Scottish rural development programme, which demonstrates our commitment to protecting and improving important habitats.

In the longer term, climate change-induced pressure may pose other threats. Research indicates that the potential for future loss of biodiversity and species in our Atlantic woodlands is high. The smaller and more isolated the woodland, the more vulnerable it is to such losses. That is why we are helping the forests to adapt to future changes through actions that encourage regeneration and expansion and so build greater resilience and adaptability. All that work is part of the Scottish Government's prioritised plan, in our route map to 2020, for meeting the international Aichi targets.

I thank Michael Russell again for bringing this important motion on the Celtic rainforests to the chamber. I very much welcome the considerable attention that it has given to those important habitats. I support the motion, recognise the importance of that woodland and the threats that it faces and commend the efforts of all the people who are involved in its conservation, including all the volunteers. I am particularly pleased to learn that groups such as Ardroy Outdoor Education Centre are helping to engage and educate local schoolchildren and communities, because such education is crucial. Indeed, embedding an understanding and awareness of such important places in communities and young people is close to my heart.

The Celtic rainforests are truly special places that deserve special care, conservation and management. They provide a living link to our natural and cultural heritage. Therefore, we must all do our utmost to ensure that they are properly protected so that we can secure their long-term future, as my colleague Jamie McGrigor said. I encourage more people to visit our Celtic rainforests, which are magnificent and unique.

Meeting closed at 17:31.

This is the final edition of the *Official Report* for this meeting. It is part of the Scottish Parliament *Official Report* archive and has been sent for legal deposit.

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