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Thursday 9 June 2016

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Scottish Parliament

Thursday 9 June 2016

[The Presiding Officer opened the meeting at 11:40]

General Question Time

Transport Infrastructure (North Aberdeenshire)

1. **Peter Chapman (North East Scotland) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government what investment plans it has for transport infrastructure in north Aberdeenshire. (S5O-00021)

The Minister for Transport and the Islands (Humza Yousaf): The completion of the Aberdeen western peripheral route Balmedie to Tippetty project will provide a dual carriageway link to Ellon and bring significant travel benefits to communities and businesses north of Aberdeen. Construction work is well under way on that £745 million project, which is estimated to bring 14,000 jobs and £6 billion of benefits to the north-east over the next 30 years. We are also making a number of improvements to the Aberdeen to Inverness rail line and have given a clear commitment to dual the A96, which will mean delivery of approximately 86 miles of upgraded road between Inverness and Aberdeen by 2030.

Peter Chapman: We recognise that the AWPR is very important to the north-east, but the Scottish Government has succeeded in reannouncing previous manifesto commitments as new spending on north-east infrastructure on several occasions. Will the minister now make a substantial commitment to support the north-east economy and thousands of Aberdeenshire commuters by agreeing to extend the dualling of the A90 past Ellon through to Europe's largest whitefish market at Peterhead?

Humza Yousaf: Although I am only three weeks into the job, the member is being a little bit ungenerous about what the Scottish Government has done for the north-east. On top of what I have already mentioned, the member will know about the £170 million for improvements to the Aberdeen to Inverness rail link; the £200 million for improvement of the Aberdeen to the central belt rail link; the £24 million towards Laurencekirk; and the dualling of the A96; on top of the AWPR Balmedie to Tippetty project and the Haudagain roundabout. Also, £25,000 has been spent on the feasibility study for the link between Aberdeen, Fraserburgh and Peterhead.

All of that shows a commitment to the north and north-east of Scotland. On dualling the A90, as part of the city deal there is £5 million for an

appraisal and a strategic view of how we can improve road and rail infrastructure in the north and north-east.

If the member has specific ideas, he should work with the local authorities and with me, Transport Scotland and other stakeholders as we take forward the work that will commence this year as part of the city deal appraisal of transport links to the north and north-east.

Stewart Stevenson (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP): I very much welcome the work that is being done on the AWPR and the dualling of the road between Balmedie and Tippetty. In light of the importance of travel times to business and commuters, can the minister enlighten us on the specific benefit to travel times of the investments that the Government has made?

Humza Yousaf: Of course, that is a key benefit of the work that we are doing on the AWPR, which will cut journey times across Aberdeen by up to half at peak times and will provide much improved journey times—as well as improved reliability and facility—for public transport on local roads. The AWPR Balmedie to Tippetty project forms a core part of our commitment to improving transport in the north and the north-east.

Alongside that project is the Inveramsay bridge on the A96, which the member will know well and the improvements to the Haudagain roundabout that I mentioned earlier, as well as the proposals to dual the A96 between Aberdeen and Inverness. Taken with all the other projects that we are doing in the area, those projects will ensure that all Scotland's cities are connected by a high-quality transport system that will generate economic growth.

Aberdeen City Region Deal

2. **Ross Thomson (North East Scotland) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government whether the £254 million infrastructure investment that it announced in January 2016 will be included as part of the Aberdeen city region deal governance structure. (S5O-00022)

The Cabinet Secretary for Economy, Jobs and Fair Work (Keith Brown): The Scottish Government has demonstrated strong support for Aberdeen and the north-east by committing over the next 10 years up to £125 million, alongside £125 million from the United Kingdom Government, for an Aberdeen city region deal. Alongside that, we have committed to an additional investment of £254 million in transport, digital and housing to deliver a more significant step change to the economy of the north-east.

We sought to expand the city deal to include further investment, but that was not agreed to by the UK Government. Consequently, the further

investment by the Scottish Government does not form part of the city deal or its governance structure. However, I have asked my officials to work closely with the civic and business leaders of Aberdeen and Aberdeenshire to ensure that the regional partners are kept updated on the progress of the additional investments so that the new city region deal governance structures can maximise the impacts of the city deal investments.

Ross Thomson: I have here the papers for the Aberdeen city region deal joint committee, which meets tomorrow. On page 15, officials advise that

“An agreement on the additional £254m has yet to be ratified”.

Projects within the additional fund, such as the railway improvement from Aberdeen to Dundee, have been repackaged and reannounced since 2008, and the plans have not been able to progress to GRIP—guide to rail investment process—stage 1. It is crucial that the projects are subject to proper governance, to ensure delivery.

The heads of terms for the United Kingdom city region deal were signed back on 28 January. Will the minister confirm when the Scottish Government will stop dragging its feet and provide clarity on when the announced funding will be made available for the projects identified? Will both councils and Opportunity North East have any input into how the funds are spent?

Keith Brown: I am not sure whether Ross Thomson listened to the answer that I gave. He talked about reannouncements. Last week, his colleague reannounced to this Parliament that the city deal—£125 million from the UK Government and £125 million from the Scottish Government—was in fact a £250 million deal from the UK Government. That was a reannouncement—it was also not true.

The fact is that we tried to expand the city deal, but the UK Government said that it would not put in any more money. These investments are over and above that. Of course, there is an interest for the governance structures of the city deal, which will want to know when we are investing, to help inform their own investment decisions. I have undertaken to let them know that.

We have also said that the various projects—the rail work that Ross Thomson identified, the digital work and the housing work—will be undertaken in the same 10-year period as the city deal. We will keep the governance structures informed.

Let us be clear: it was additional investment from the Scottish Government, because the UK Government would not put in any more money.

Mairi Evans (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP): The Laurencekirk junction is vitally

important to my constituency. What is the timescale for delivery of the junction?

Keith Brown: I confirmed that £24 million would be made available for the provision of a grade-separated A90-A937 junction at Laurencekirk as part of the package of additional investment alongside the Aberdeen city region deal. The work will be undertaken over the course of the 10-year city deal period. Transport Scotland will progress the scheme to the next stage of design development and thereafter, through the relevant statutory procedures. I am sure that Mairi Evans understands that the possibility of inquiries means that we cannot be absolutely definitive at this stage. The delivery of the scheme will proceed once those procedures are completed satisfactorily.

Lewis Macdonald (North East Scotland) (Lab): The cabinet secretary will know that the railway project is perhaps the biggest item on the list of projects. What discussions has the Government or Transport Scotland had with Network Rail about the detailed plans? When can an announcement be expected?

Keith Brown: I had discussions with Network Rail on the day of the announcement. Discussions have continued between Transport Scotland and Network Rail. A feasibility study has to be undertaken first, but that work is under way as we speak.

Rural Public Transport

3. Bruce Crawford (Stirling) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what action it is taking to improve public transport in rural areas. (S50-00023)

The Minister for Transport and the Islands (Humza Yousaf): The Scottish Government is investing more than £1 billion annually in public transport and other sustainable transport options, to improve connectivity between communities and businesses, including in our rural, remote and island areas.

Bruce Crawford: Is the minister aware that First Bus intends to discontinue a number of services in my constituency, making an unsatisfactory public transport service even worse? I am due to meet the company shortly to discuss the matter. Is the minister prepared to engage in discussions with me about improving public transport services in places in the north of my constituency, such as Killin, Tyndrum and Crianlarich, and in the west, such as Drymen and Croftamie, to improve connectivity for local people?

Humza Yousaf: I am deeply concerned about the impact of First East's proposals. As soon as I heard about them, I met First East as a matter of

urgency. Of course I will meet Bruce Crawford to discuss what the impacts will be.

Because of legislation that we passed, there is an increased period for consultation between the operator and local authorities and other stakeholders, to see what can be done. In my meeting with First East last week, I urged it to have that discussion with local authorities as a matter of urgency.

It is my hope that other bus service operators may well step in to provide the services if they are reduced or indeed withdrawn. However, I am deeply concerned. Of course I will meet the member; I will also seek to meet other MSPs and bring them together with stakeholders. I have tasked Transport Scotland to look into how we can do that as a matter of urgency.

Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP): The minister has had a meeting with First East so he will be aware of a proposal to cut entirely dedicated bus services to Borders College in Galashiels. Could the minister or perhaps a colleague advise whether there is any scope to support those services from the closing the attainment gap fund? We can hardly close the attainment gap if people cannot get to the college.

Humza Yousaf: I will of course have that discussion with my education colleagues. I am entirely aware of the impact that cutting those services would have. I will talk to the member herself and I will bring together MSPs from across the affected areas so that we can have that conversation.

My hope is that other bus operators will step in where there are gaps, as I said in my previous answer. I hope that those discussions will move things forward. I will have a discussion with the education minister and I will update the member on that discussion.

The Presiding Officer (Ken Macintosh): Question 4 is from Rona Mackay. She is not in the chamber so we will move to question 5.

Trunk Roads (Noise Levels)

5. Gordon MacDonald (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what noise level monitoring it carries out on the trunk road network. (S5O-00025)

The Minister for Transport and the Islands (Humza Yousaf): There is no routine programme of monitoring of noise levels on the trunk road network. Before a project starts and once it is complete, road scheme-specific before-and-after noise monitoring is undertaken if the environmental statement identifies noise as a potentially significant environmental issue.

Construction noise is also monitored on the same basis. Noise monitoring near the trunk road network is also undertaken by Transport Scotland in certain specific cases.

Gordon MacDonald: A number of my constituents who live near the A720 Edinburgh city bypass complain of excessive traffic noise. Could the Government consider measures such as reducing the speed limit, low-noise surfacing or barriers to reduce the noise level for my constituents who are affected by the problem?

Humza Yousaf: I will meet the member to discuss where exactly along the A720 Edinburgh city bypass the affected constituents live. A number of site-specific noise monitoring exercises have taken place since 2006. Noise monitoring took place in Gillespie Road in Colinton in 2011, and Jacobs undertook a week-long noise survey in Gillespie Road in 2015. In addition, Atkins has undertaken a noise survey at Monkton house near Old Craighall. The issue has continued to be reviewed. Traffic on the A720 has been found to have increased by less than 5 per cent, which should not have a significant impact on noise levels. However, I am happy to meet the member to get more detail on where those constituents live and to discuss the issue.

Maurice Golden (West Scotland) (Con): A Danish study has found that, for every 10 decibel increase in the volume of road traffic noise exposure, there is a 12 per cent increase in the risk of heart attacks. What is the Scottish Government doing to ensure that homes that are near busy roads—or, indeed, under busy flight paths—are insulated against that noise pollution?

Humza Yousaf: I point the member in the direction of the current legislation. The Noise Insulation (Scotland) Regulations 1975 set out a noise limit threshold of 68 decibels for new projects. I am not aware of the study that the member mentioned, but I am happy to discuss it with him. If he sends me the study, I can also discuss it with Transport Scotland.

We already carry out noise monitoring before any significant infrastructure projects take place, but if there is more information that the member thinks we should be looking at, of course I am open minded about exploring that information, regardless of where it comes from—or who it comes from across the chamber.

Curriculum for Excellence (Implementation)

6. Jeremy Balfour (Lothian) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what recent discussions it has had with Education Scotland and the Scottish Qualifications Authority regarding the implementation of the curriculum for excellence. (S5O-00026)

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (John Swinney): The Scottish Government discusses the implementation of curriculum for excellence with Education Scotland and the Scottish Qualifications Authority regularly.

Jeremy Balfour: The cabinet secretary will be aware of the growing concern about the subject choices that are available in different schools. Some schools offer seven national 5s; some offer six; and others offer five. Does he agree that many parents and children are concerned about the impact of that on pupils' ability to choose subjects at higher and advanced higher level? What does he intend to do about the situation?

John Swinney: Mr Balfour raises significant and serious issues that I am actively looking at. One advantage of curriculum for excellence is that it provides greater autonomy and flexibility to enable the teaching profession to determine the best way to proceed with the delivery of the curriculum. The decisions to which Mr Balfour refers are taken in individual schools and local authorities.

We must be mindful that young people must be able to secure, through curriculum for excellence, a broad general education, but they should then be able to make the appropriate choices on which they can found substantive parts of their working lives.

I assure Mr Balfour that those issues are very much on my agenda in my discussions with the SQA and Education Scotland. As the Government sets out its further thinking on the delivery plan for improving attainment, we will reflect further on the points that Mr Balfour has raised with me today.

Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green): On the subject of discussions with the SQA, can the cabinet secretary confirm, in light of the issues with this year's national 5 computing science paper, what discussions have taken place to ensure that such mistakes are not made again, and what reassurances have been sought that students will not be adversely affected by something that is outwith their control?

John Swinney: I have written to the chief examiner expressing my discontent at the fact that there were errors—they have been confirmed by the Scottish Qualifications Authority—in the computer science exam. Frankly, that is not good enough—the papers should be checked properly, and there is adequate opportunity for that to be done. I have made clear my discontent to the chief examiner in that respect.

The errors are typographical, but I accept that they should not have been there in the first place. As part of the process of assessment of

examination performance, the SQA will take into account any impact arising from the issue.

Clyde Gateway (Funding)

7. Clare Haughey (Rutherglen) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government whether the Clyde Gateway project will continue to receive core funding. (S5O-00027)

The Minister for Local Government and Housing (Kevin Stewart): Yes—the Scottish Government has agreed to provide £3 million of funding to Clyde Gateway over the current financial year. Further support is being considered as part of the current spending review.

Clare Haughey: I thank the cabinet secretary for his answer.

Contaminated land is an unwelcome legacy in my constituency because of the area's industrial past. Can the cabinet secretary give an assurance that the Clyde Gateway project will receive funding to allow it to continue its land decontamination work in the Shawfield area of Rutherglen?

Kevin Stewart: I thank Ms Haughey for the promotion to cabinet secretary, but I think that such a further promotion in just a few weeks is highly unlikely. [*Laughter.*]

Since 2006, South Lanarkshire Council, which is a key partner in the Clyde Gateway project, has benefited from more than £17 million in funding through the vacant and derelict land fund. The council has allocated more than £5 million of that funding to Clyde Gateway to support the remediation of the Shawfield site in Rutherglen.

Officials are currently assessing South Lanarkshire Council's proposals for allocating its share of the vacant and derelict land fund in 2016-17, and a decision will be issued in due course. Officials are also working closely with Clyde Gateway to seek further investment and funding opportunities to support the project's activities.

Schools (Additional Support for Learning)

8. Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green): To ask the Scottish Government how it supports the provision of additional support for learning posts in schools. (S5O-00028)

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (John Swinney): Local authorities employ all additional support for learning staff in schools and are responsible for all provision. Local authorities make provision in light of local circumstances and priorities, including their requirement to meet duties under the Education (Additional Support for Learning) (Scotland) Act 2004.

Ross Greer: A recent Enable Scotland survey reported that many additional support needs pupils are feeling severely undersupported due to a lack of staff time. Will the Scottish Government consider making support for learning a promoted post, thereby keeping the most skilled teachers in the classroom for the benefit of pupils who need them the most?

John Swinney: It is important that we ensure that the needs of young people are met most effectively. I am focused on the need to ensure that young people who have additional support needs are given adequate and appropriate support that is commensurate with their circumstances and conditions. The Government will continue to take that approach, consistent with the content of the 2004 act.

First Minister's Question Time

12:00

Engagements

1. Ruth Davidson (Edinburgh Central) (Con): To ask the First Minister what engagements she has planned for the rest of the day. (S5F-00038)

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): Engagements to take forward the Government's programme for Scotland.

Ruth Davidson: We know the problems that our national health service is facing: an ageing population, increasing demand, and a Scottish Government that has quite simply failed to keep up with the need to recruit and retain the staff who are required.

Earlier this week, we discovered that £157 million of the NHS budget is spent on bringing in agency nurses because of staff shortages. We therefore know that there is a problem with nurse recruitment, but can the First Minister tell me how many vacant NHS consultant positions have been lying unfilled for more than six months?

The First Minister: The position with NHS vacancies now is in some cases better than it was when we took office and in other cases almost the same.

What people across Scotland will be particularly interested in is the fact that today we have record-high staffing in the NHS. Compared with when the Scottish National Party took office, there are today almost 11,400 whole-time equivalent additional staff working in our NHS: qualified nurses and midwives are up by nearly 6 per cent; doctors are up by more than 26 per cent; and medical and dental consultants are now at a record high, up by 42.9 per cent.

That is the reality of the workforce in our NHS. All of those doctors, nurses and supporting staff are working hard to make sure that patients are seen quickly and that they get world-class treatment when they do so—all of us owe them an enormous debt of gratitude for that.

Ruth Davidson: The First Minister is pretty keen to give us every single number—apart from the one that I asked for.

Let me give the First Minister that answer: there are 162 unfilled consultant posts. That is up 14 per cent in just three months, and up by more than 300 per cent since 2011. Dr Nikki Thompson of the British Medical Association's Scottish consultants committee says:

“The Scottish Government must recognise that they have a major recruitment and retention problem, and take action”.

Does the First Minister recognise that in the way that Dr Nikki Thompson wants her to, and will she prioritise that action without delay?

The First Minister: We are prioritising action to make sure that we recruit and retain staff in our NHS.

Ruth Davidson speaks specifically about the consultant vacancy rate. The consultant vacancy rate in our NHS today is lower than it was when this Government took office: it was 7 per cent when we took office and it is now 6.5 per cent. That is a percentage of a total number of consultants working in our NHS that is much higher than it was when we took office. Therefore, however we cut it and however we look at the statistics, there are more people—including more doctors and nurses—working in our NHS today than was the case when the SNP took office.

I think that that is a record to be proud of, but I know that we must continue to improve our NHS so that it continues to provide good-quality care for people across Scotland. That is why we set out at the election, in the manifesto that we were elected on, plans not only to invest record sums in our NHS—more than any other party proposed—but to make sure that we are reforming our NHS in the years to come to ensure that it continues to do the fantastic work that it already does.

Ruth Davidson: Let us look at the facts on the ground. I have here the latest NHS Lothian report into the on-going problems at St John’s paediatric unit in Livingston. The report says:

“There is continuing, heavy reliance on a small number of staff doing additional night and weekend shifts and prone to short notice collapse because of sickness or other unplanned absence.”

It adds that

“only four of the nine out of hours slots filled on a substantive basis.”

It continues:

“The middle grade medical rota ... remains unstable due to vacancies and on some occasions Advanced Nurse Practitioners ... or Paediatric Nurse Practitioners are required to fill rota gaps.”

In other words, the unit is backfilling for doctors because it cannot get the staff. That may be an exceptional case, but it is utterly unacceptable. The doctors say that we need action. Is that situation not the consequence of inaction from the Government?

The First Minister: There are challenges in paediatrics at St John’s hospital—I do not think that that comes as news to anybody—but it was exactly those challenges that prompted NHS

Lothian to commission an expert report on the paediatric unit’s future. NHS Lothian is considering that report, and I know that, with the Scottish Government’s support, it will take forward whatever actions require to be taken forward.

I should point out that, under the SNP, the situation in general at St John’s hospital is a lot more positive. The hospital is in a much stronger position than it was in when the Government took office. We provided funding for a new magnetic resonance imaging scanner and for a new short-stay elective surgery unit. We redesigned accident and emergency, and we refurbished the labour ward and the special care baby unit. A new laboratory medicine training school and a new regional eating disorders unit have opened. A range of improvements has been made at the hospital, and we are determined to do the same thing in paediatrics.

I will never stand in the chamber—for goodness’ sake, I am a former health secretary—and say that there are no challenges to overcome in our national health service. In that sense, Scotland is not unique. However, we have more staff in our NHS and we are investing record sums of money in our NHS. That is why many waiting times in Scotland are not just lower than those when we took office but considerably lower than those in other parts of the United Kingdom.

If we make a comparison with the situation in England, where the Tories are in government—*[Interruption.]* I know that the Tories do not like this. Junior doctors have been on strike in England but not in Scotland. We can look at A and E as just one example. Performance in our core A and E units in Scotland is 10 percentage points better than performance under the Tories in England. We will keep working to improve our national health service, but we will take no lectures from the Tories on how to do it.

Ruth Davidson: I know that the First Minister is off to London tonight for a debate, but we are talking about the Scottish NHS, which her Government has been in charge of for nine years. She is right to point out that the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health is about to publish a report on St John’s, but she did not mention that the SNP Government tried to push back the report’s publication until after the election because it was worried about what the report might say. She did not mention that that was against the wishes of health bosses in the area, who feared that a delay in publication would only add to uncertainty about the paediatric ward’s future.

We need a serious and honest debate about how we best create a sustainable NHS; we do not need an SNP spin operation that tries to bury bad news because it is politically inconvenient. We have gaps in nursing, gaps in consultants and

gaps in general practitioners. After nine years, is it not time that the SNP Government sorted that out?

The First Minister: I know that the Conservatives have replaced Labour as the official Opposition, but I did not appreciate that that meant that Ruth Davidson would recycle scare stories about St John's hospital from Neil Findlay. I thought that she might aspire to better than that, but that is clearly not the case. The fact is that decisions on the expert report, on its timing and on taking forward its recommendations will be for NHS Lothian, and the Scottish Government will support the board in that.

I say to Ruth Davidson that we are talking about the Scottish NHS, and I am talking about the improvements that we have seen in the Scottish NHS under this Government. All that I did was compare that with some respects in which the NHS, where the Tories are in charge of it, has gone backwards instead of forwards. We have had the sight of junior doctors out on strike because of the Tory Government's intransigence.

We will keep taking action to improve our health service. The Scottish Government has now been in office for nine years, and let me remind members of what we have seen in those nine years. We have record-high staffing levels—staffing numbers are up by more than 11,000. Nurse numbers are up, doctor numbers are up, consultant numbers are up, paramedic numbers are up and GP numbers are up. Incidentally, senior manager numbers are down, because we have more than met our target to reduce them. The NHS is in good hands, and we will ensure that it keeps moving in the right direction.

Carers Scotland (Meetings)

2. **Kezia Dugdale (Lothian) (Lab):** To ask the First Minister when she will next meet Carers Scotland. (S5F-00070)

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): I hope that I will have the opportunity to meet Carers Scotland soon. The Minister for Public Health and Sport will meet Carers Scotland next week and, of course, as everyone in the chamber will be aware, this week is carers week, so I take this opportunity on behalf of all members to thank carers and young carers for everything that they do on our behalf.

Kezia Dugdale: Earlier this week, the First Minister was named as the 50th most powerful woman in the world. Today, a report by the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service confirmed that the number of students from poorer backgrounds going to university has dropped. When will the First Minister use some of her

immense power to improve the life chances of Scotland's young people?

The First Minister: Kezia Dugdale clearly pays more attention to those things than I do, but never mind. If she keeps trying, I am sure that she will get there eventually. *[Laughter.]*

However, on the important and serious matter that Kezia Dugdale rightly raises, I have studied the figures in some detail, as people would expect me to have done. They show that we are absolutely right to prioritise fair access to university, but it is also important and appropriate to look at the figures in the round. They come with the usual health warning that they do not include the substantial number of students in Scotland who enter higher education through college, but let us look specifically at what they do show.

If we look at 18-year-olds exclusively, we see that the numbers from our most deprived areas dropped slightly from 2014 to 2015, but are nevertheless up considerably compared with 2010. However, a more fundamental point is that not everybody who goes to university goes at 18, so when we look at the figures for people of all ages we see that the numbers from the most deprived areas who are both applying to university and being accepted are up in 2015 compared with 2014, in both cases by about 10 per cent. We have got work to do, and I have been clear about that. That is why implementing the widening access commission report is so important, but it is simply wrong to say that progress is not being made.

Kezia Dugdale: What I heard was three different excuses about why the numbers are wrong, rather than an explanation as to why the First Minister's Government has not done enough. The figures clearly show that there has been a drop in the number of people from poorer backgrounds applying to university, and that there has been an even bigger drop in the number of poorer people being accepted when they do apply. That is what happens when grants and bursaries are cut by a third. The Government recently tried to scrap a scheme that secured university places for the poorest students, and students are worried that the First Minister will try that again. She says that, by 2030, she wants 20 per cent of university students to come from the poorest backgrounds. Given that ambition, can she guarantee today that her Government will fully fund the scheme for the lifetime of this parliamentary session?

The First Minister: I have made it clear that we are determined to increase access and to do what is required to do that. I hope that Kezia Dugdale and I can find some agreement, because I did not say that the figures that she cited were wrong. On the contrary, I said that they were right. I simply pointed out what the figures actually say. What

Kezia Dugdale says they say is right for 18-year-olds entering university in this year, but the number of 18-year-olds from our most deprived communities entering university has gone up between 2010 and 2015. In terms of people of all ages going to university, whether they are applying to university or entering university, the numbers from our most deprived areas have gone up in 2015, both of them by 10 per cent. I am not saying that the figures are wrong. I am simply setting out factually for the chamber what the figures actually say. I think that that is the appropriate thing to do.

I have made it clear that, although we are making progress, I do not think that that progress is going far enough or fast enough. That is why I commissioned the widening access report and why I have committed to implementing all of its recommendations. We will shortly appoint a widening access commissioner, and if that commissioner tells us that universities are not doing enough we will use the statutory powers that we legislated for, and which Labour voted against, to ensure that universities do more. We are determined to do that, we are committed to doing it, and I would hope that Labour could get behind us.

Kezia Dugdale: Earlier this week, when the First Minister missed her health targets, she moved the goalposts. Today she is trying to move the goalposts again when it comes to the UCAS figures. It is simply a fact that when we look at the UCAS figures for 2015-16 we see that the situation is getting worse, not better.

Let us look at the overall picture. Poorer people are less likely to apply to university under this Government; when they do, they are less likely to be accepted; and when they get there, they are more likely to drop out because of the cuts that the Government has made to bursaries and grants. Labour's manifesto pledged to reverse the SNP Government's cuts to bursaries; surely, in light of today's news, the First Minister will pledge to do just that.

The First Minister: When we last made changes to the bursary threshold, it was the National Union of Students president—who, I accept, would like us to do more and who was of course a member of the widening access commission—who described them as “great news for Scottish students”.

One of the other things in our manifesto was a commitment to a review of student support, which we will take forward in the course of this parliamentary session.

I say again to Kezia Dugdale—and I will send her again for her information, because I know that she is genuinely interested in this, the statistics

that I have just been reading out—that she is wrong to say what she has said. I have not moved a single goalpost; I point out, in fairness, that I am simply saying what the figures actually show. She is right that in terms of 18-year-olds there has, for one year, been a slight decline, but since 2010, the figure is up.

However, the more fundamental point that I am making—and which Kezia Dugdale does not seem to grasp—is that if we look at people of all ages, whether we are talking about applications or entry to universities, we see that the numbers from our most deprived communities are up 10 per cent—up 10 per cent for applications and up 10 per cent for entries. That is simply a fact, and it is a fact that is in these figures.

Instead of arguing over the facts—and we cannot argue over these facts, because they are what they are—let us get behind the action that this Government has decided to take. I look forward to Labour having the gumption to get behind us and make sure that we can achieve what we have set out to achieve.

Cabinet (Meetings)

3. Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green): To ask the First Minister when the Cabinet will next meet. (S5F-00036)

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): Tuesday.

Patrick Harvie: Recent days have seen further revelations from businesses such as Sports Direct and BHS about the extent of deeply unethical business practices in this country, from exploitative zero-hours contracts to payments below the minimum wage, brutal disciplinary procedures and the intimidation, bullying and harassment of workers. Major names on our high street stand accused not only of paying poverty wages but of playing fast and loose with people's health and throwing their employees on the economic scrap heap on a whim, even while the owners line their own pockets. The First Minister and I agree that Scotland should be able to make more decisions about workplace and employment matters, just as the Scottish Trades Union Congress advocated, but does she agree that we need to use to the greatest extent possible the existing devolved powers and to push at the edge of those powers to ensure that unethical and exploitative business practices are driven out of the Scottish economy?

The First Minister: Yes, I do. What we heard this week in evidence down at Westminster from Mike Ashley about practices at Sports Direct was absolutely and utterly appalling, shameful and unacceptable, and every right-thinking person in this country should condemn that unequivocally.

As Patrick Harvie knows, we as a Government have established the business pledge, which is intended to promote good business practices. We are also absolutely clear that there should be zero tolerance of unethical business practices of the kind that we heard about this week, such as exploitative zero-hours contracts and companies not paying the minimum wage—although, of course, we want companies to go beyond the minimum wage and pay the living wage. Patrick Harvie and I have had discussions before on whether there should be more compulsion around the business pledge, and that is something that we will continue to consider.

Although, because of the purdah rules, I am not able to go into this in great detail here, one of the reasons why I am going to be in London tonight to take part in the debate on the European Union referendum is that I do not want to move to a position of having a completely deregulated labour market and people like Boris Johnson being able to rip up the workers' rights that the EU guarantees in this country.

Patrick Harvie: I certainly agree with those final comments. We have given the Government credit where credit is due for developing the fair work agenda and for promoting it by means of the business pledge.

The First Minister says that she is willing to consider compulsion. However, is it not abundantly clear, given the scale of the abuses that we know are taking place every day in our country, that we need to do more than just encourage the willing and that we need to make it clear to the unwilling that those deplorable practices will not be accepted? Will the First Minister ensure that the fair work agenda will in future have real consequences for the employers who exploit their workers, use tax havens, have poor environmental performance and exhibit the rest of the litany of bad practice, so that they will no longer have access to taxpayer-funded Government support, grants, loans and public sector business support services?

The First Minister: I am committed to ensuring that our fair work agenda, including the business pledge, has the ability to do what we want it to do.

I am broadly in agreement with what Patrick Harvie is saying. Some of the practices at Sports Direct that we heard about this week were not just unethical but illegal—not paying staff the minimum wage, and other practices that broke the law. When companies break the law in the way in which they treat their staff, they should be held to account not only in terms of the fair work agenda and how we distribute Government money but in terms of the law of the land. I hope that everyone in the chamber agrees with that.

Cancer Patient Experience Survey

4. Mairi Evans (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP): To ask the First Minister what the Scottish Government's position is on the publication of the cancer patient experience survey. (S5F-00066)

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): I welcome the results of the first ever Scottish cancer patient experience survey, which shows that 94 per cent of respondents were satisfied with their care. However, we know that there is more to be done, which is why, earlier this year, we announced our cancer strategy, which is supported by £100 million during this session of Parliament. That makes clear the importance of listening to what people with cancer are saying about what matters to them, and then acting on what they tell us.

Mairi Evans: Does the First Minister agree that, although our Scottish national health service is achieving world-class cancer outcomes, we cannot afford to be complacent? Can she outline how the Scottish Government's £100 million cancer strategy will help to ensure that we deliver the best cancer care for the people of Scotland?

The First Minister: Cancer services have come a long way in the past decade. For example, cancer mortality rates have fallen by 11 per cent over that period. However, Mairi Evans is right to say that there is more that we still need to do.

The £100 million cancer strategy that Mairi Evans asked about will be implemented in partnership with people with cancer; their clinicians; service providers; charitable organisations, which do a fantastic job; and, of course, other parties in the chamber. That money will be invested to ensure that we are doing more to support the prevention of cancer and the early diagnosis of cancer, and to ensure that, by taking advantage of advances in areas such as radiotherapy, we allow people access to the best possible treatment. In all of that, we will ensure that the other needs of people with cancer—their emotional needs, the financial needs that they often face and the needs of their family—are taken account of holistically. I am determined that we do that in order that we can continue to provide world-class cancer services for people who need them.

Anas Sarwar (Glasgow) (Lab): I thank Macmillan Cancer Support and the Scottish Government for the publication of the cancer patient experience survey. It contained some deeply disturbing statistics. For example, 49 per cent of patients who asked for information on financial support and benefits did not receive it; 66 per cent of patients did not receive a care plan; 32 per cent of patients said that they did not get adequate support from health and social care after their treatment; and one in five patients said that

they did not get an appointment soon enough after the suspicion that they had cancer arose. Given those statistics, and the on-going challenge of the fact that cancer is the biggest killer in Scotland, can the First Minister confirm that the current expectations on cancer treatment will not be included in her review of targets?

The First Minister: Earlier this week, the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Sport set out the purpose of the review and said how that will be taken forward. The review is backed by clinicians and organisations such as the British Medical Association, the Royal College of Nursing and many others. We have also said that there are certain access targets in the NHS that are vitally important to people with regard to giving them certainty about when they will be treated, and there is no intention whatsoever to undermine that.

Anas Sarwar is right to focus not only on the aspects of the cancer survey that were positive but on the ones that tell us that we have more work to do—finding out that information was the whole purpose of carrying out the survey. Many of those areas involve not only the clinical aspects of cancer care but the emotional ones. Those are some of the areas in which we have most work still to do.

I remember launching the first Macmillan financial advice service when I was health secretary. Those services do fantastic work, but the findings say that we have more work to do. We are focused on prevention, early diagnosis and speedy access to treatment, but also on the wider support that patients, in the survey, tell us that they want and need.

Oil and Gas Industry (Government Support)

5. Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): To ask the First Minister, in light of the findings of the latest Bank of Scotland research series report on oil and gas, what support the Scottish Government will offer the industry. (S5F-00040)

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): The oil price has increased since that survey was conducted, but the report undoubtedly highlights the challenges that the industry and its workforce face. Keith Brown and Paul Wheelhouse visited Aberdeen last week, where they reiterated our commitment to securing a long-term future for the sector. We continue to provide practical support to the workforce and industry through, for example, the transition training fund, the energy jobs task force and our enterprise agencies.

The United Kingdom Government retains control of the key taxation levers that affect the sector. A clear conclusion from the report is that more action must be taken on that front, with around half of all

companies wanting to see a basin-wide fiscal stimulus for exploration. We continue to press the UK Government to support exploration and to deliver on its commitment to consider loan guarantees for offshore infrastructure.

Murdo Fraser: I remind members that there is a briefing in committee room 2 immediately after First Minister's question time from Bank of Scotland on the report.

One helpful thing that the report tells us is that a majority of large companies see the opportunity to diversify into shale gas. Sadly, the opportunities—and the jobs that will be created—will be located outside Scotland due to the Government's moratorium on fracking. The First Minister says that we need to listen to the science on the issue, but she should know what the science is already, because her Government commissioned a report on unconventional oil and gas from an independent expert scientific panel. The report, which was published nearly two years ago in July 2014, concludes:

"The technology exists to allow the safe extraction of such reserves, subject to robust regulation being in place".

Why is the First Minister not listening to her Government's own scientists on the matter? Why is she holding back the vital oil and gas industry?

The First Minister: That is complete nonsense. The moratorium on fracking has been introduced so that we can carefully study all the different aspects before coming to a decision that is guided by and based on evidence, and also takes into account public opinion—the opinion of members of the public who would have to live in areas affected by such technology. That is absolutely the right thing to do.

Interestingly, when it comes to diversification, Murdo Fraser did not quote the report fully, because the companies that talked about the opportunities of diversification also talked about the opportunities of diversification into renewables. I wonder why a Tory member of the Scottish Parliament did not want to mention renewables. It is because—against all the evidence, against the wishes of people the length and breadth of this country, and against some of the investment decisions of our companies—the Tory UK Government is currently destroying our renewables potential by the wrong-headed decisions that it is taking. Perhaps Murdo Fraser would be better advised to get on the phone to his colleagues in the UK Government and ask for support for renewables before he comes to this chamber to talk about fracking.

Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab): On 21 January, the First Minister was asked when she would provide an updated "Oil and Gas Analytical Bulletin". She did not answer then, but I am

persistent, so I am giving her a second opportunity.

Given the severe challenges facing the oil and gas industry, outlined starkly in the Aberdeen and Grampian Chamber of Commerce survey in May, will the First Minister now publish a revised oil and gas bulletin? When will we see it?

The First Minister: A revised oil and gas bulletin will be published in due course, and I will make sure that Jackie Baillie is one of the first to know when it is due out.

However, I say to Jackie Baillie in all seriousness that, although it is important that we publish such publications routinely—we will continue to do so—we do not need a revised oil and gas bulletin to tell us about the challenges that the sector faces right now. We know about those from our discussions and engagements with the industry and from reports such as the one that we are talking about today.

Yes, we will publish the revised bulletin in due course but, in the meantime, we will continue to get on with the job of supporting the industry, providing practical support on the ground and calling on the UK Government to do the right thing as well.

Tavish Scott (Shetland Islands) (LD): The First Minister will be aware that the decommissioning industry could be very important to Scotland and the UK in the coming decades. When she meets Amber Rudd, the Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change, tonight—although for different reasons—will she make the point that tax relief should be used to ensure that the jobs in that industry are retained here, in Scotland, rather than taken overseas to Norway or other European countries?

The First Minister: Yes, I can give the commitment that we will make that case—I will do my best to do so tonight—on an on-going basis, because the matter is important. Although we do not want to see premature decommissioning in the North Sea, decommissioning nevertheless is a massive economic opportunity for us and we want to make sure that the benefit of that opportunity is enjoyed here in Scotland and not elsewhere. Part of what we need to do to secure that is, of course, what Tavish Scott says—to make sure that the tax incentives and the tax environment in place are the right ones. We will continue to argue that case very strongly.

Science and Computing (Women Students)

6. **Iain Gray (East Lothian) (Lab):** To ask the First Minister what the Scottish Government is doing to reverse the reported fall in women studying key subjects in science and computing at higher level since 2007. (S5F-00049)

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): Interestingly, Iain Gray talks about the “reported fall”, because it is not an actual fall in most cases. The figures that he released to the media over the weekend are simply wrong. Every subject that he named, with the exception of computing, has seen rises not falls in the number of girls studying them. Physics, chemistry, biology and human biology—every one is up. Even when computing is included, the total number of entries is up 10 per cent from 2007.

Members might be asking, “How come the figures are so wrong?” I will tell them. Iain Gray arrived at his figures by counting only the old higher that was in the process of being replaced and he excluded both the revised and the new highers. I think that the question is whether Iain Gray did that deliberately, or whether the Labour education spokesman did not know that highers were being reformed. Frankly, I am not sure which would be worse.

In contrast, the Scottish Government will get on with encouraging young people into science, technology, engineering and maths, because those subjects are vital to their future and to Scotland’s economic future.

Iain Gray: Perhaps the First Minister and I can argue about the numbers another time. [*Interruption.*] However, I think we agree that we need more women to choose science.

I want to use this opportunity to congratulate the First Minister on the appointment of Professor Sheila Rowan as chief scientific adviser for Scotland. That is a great appointment; she is also a fantastic role model, who will encourage more girls and young women into science. Like me, she is a physicist, which is always good.

When Anne Glover was appointed as the first chief scientific adviser for Scotland, she had direct, open-door access to the then First Minister. In recent years, the adviser has not had such access. It would be another welcome and powerful signal if the First Minister were to re-establish that access. Will she consider doing so?

The First Minister: I will consider everything that will help us in that regard. I thank Iain Gray for his comments about yesterday’s appointment; I agree that it is a very positive appointment. However, we cannot just gloss over the issue that he raised. I suppose that the matter goes back to my exchange with Kezia Dugdale. I hope that Labour and the Scottish National Party can be allies on the education agenda, but we must have a debate based on facts, not on distortions.

Let me underline what Labour did at the weekend. It compared the numbers of girls going into STEM subjects in 2007 with the figures for 2015. It took 2007 as the baseline, when young

people sat only highers. It then went to 2015 and counted only the old highers; it did not include the new highers or the revised highers that are replacing the old highers. Labour then went to the media on the basis of that information and said that there was a fall in the number of girls studying those science subjects. That was flatly wrong; it was a distortion of the reality. Frankly, it was a disgrace.

If we are going to move forward and build consensus and alliances on improving education for our young people—as I am determined to do—and if Labour wants to be part of that, let us stop the distortion and do that on the basis of facts.

Linda Fabiani (East Kilbride) (SNP): An all-girls' team from St Andrew's and St Bride's high school in East Kilbride recently reached the final of the Go4SET equal engineering challenge, which is run by the Engineering Development Trust. Does the First Minister agree that, to ensure the on-going success of the Scottish Government's strategies in the engineering field, it would be worth while to consider targeting such initiatives, on a local and national basis, specifically at girls and young women?

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): Yes, I do. I congratulate the girls from St Andrew's and St Bride's high school in Linda Fabiani's constituency on their success. I understand that a team from Govan high school, which was in my previous constituency, was also successful. I congratulate all the teams involved.

I also agree with Linda Fabiani about the work of the Go4SET scheme. Such initiatives have a huge role to play in inspiring young people and helping them to develop their skills and an awareness of the world of work. They often help us to tackle outdated stereotypes about so-called boys' jobs and so-called girls' jobs. Therefore, we have been pleased to support schemes of a similar nature and will continue to do so.

I congratulate again all the teams that took part in the Go4SET scheme. I should, of course, remember the team from Kirkcaldy high school, which ultimately won the Scottish final.

Queensferry Crossing

7. Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh Western) (LD): To ask the First Minister on what date the new Queensferry crossing will open. (S5F-00058)

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): As the Cabinet Secretary for Economy, Jobs and Fair Work announced in Parliament yesterday, the Queensferry crossing is expected to be open to traffic by mid-May, which, of course, is ahead of the contractual completion date of June 2017.

Alex Cole-Hamilton: Many people will find it hard to understand why 25 days lost to adverse weather can lead to a five-month delay in opening the crossing. Indeed, it has been an open secret in my constituency that the delay was inevitable. I learned in January that the facility in Rosyth that makes concrete road decks did not have capacity to meet the target.

Does the First Minister really believe that Parliament and my constituents believe that the first that ministers knew of the delay was just after the election and that they knew nothing about the problem with the road decks?

The First Minister: If Alex Cole-Hamilton has any evidence to the contrary, he should, in all fairness, bring it forward. What the cabinet secretary said yesterday is absolutely the case. Ministers were informed on 26 May that the Forth crossing bridge constructors consortium was examining weather impacts. On 1 June, the FCBC board ratified the revised programme. Since then, ministers have been making sure that Transport Scotland subjected that revised programme to rigorous scrutiny.

I met the contractors on Tuesday this week to satisfy myself that everything possible was being done to accelerate progress. In that meeting, we took the decision—rightly—that Parliament should be informed at the earliest possible opportunity.

Those are the facts of the matter, and I hope that all members accept that. The delay and its implications were set out clearly by Keith Brown yesterday. The constructors now believe that deck installation will take two to three months longer than originally expected. That creates a knock-on effect for subsequent activities such as road surfacing and the installation of wind barriers, which will now take place in the winter months. That is the reason for the timescale that has now been set out.

The bridge will not be late. The contractual completion date is June 2017. The December target date, which was six months ahead of schedule, will not be met but the bridge will still open ahead of schedule. It is one of the most wonderful and complex construction projects that is being undertaken anywhere in the world and we should all be proud of it and the people who are building it.

Alex Johnstone (North East Scotland) (Con): Given the timescales, which have now proven to be wildly optimistic, and the previous attempts to project short timescales for the repairs of the old bridge, would it not be wise for the First Minister to generate a little bit more wriggle room?

The First Minister: I am not sure that I quite understand the question. We are putting forward the estimated completion date based on the

rigorous assessment and modelling that the contractors we pay to build the bridge have given us. I say to Alex Johnstone that that is not for me as First Minister. I know that Kezia Dugdale praised me earlier for being so powerful in the global context, but I am not a bridge engineer and I do not have expertise in building bridges—other than the ones that I build across the chamber all the time. *[Laughter.]* I prefer to take my advice on the timescales and on the details of the construction of this fantastic new bridge from the experts we are paying to build it. That is the sensible thing to do. Incidentally, it is also the thing that ensures that we do what matters more than anything else: protect the safety of the brave people who are building the Forth crossing.

Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab): The First Minister mentioned timescales from experts. We can all understand why weather might delay a complicated civil engineering project such as the new Forth crossing. However, any complicated project will have contingency built into the project timeline. At what point did the Scottish Government know that that contingency had been used up? Would it have been prudent for ministers to continue to claim that the December 2016 date was realistic if they already knew that that contingency had been used up?

The First Minister: Let me try to put this simply: if ministers had known what Keith Brown outlined to Parliament yesterday earlier, of course it would not have been prudent or appropriate for us still to say that the new crossing was going to be open to traffic in December. However, that is not the case. I have just set out what Keith Brown set out yesterday—that ministers became aware on 26 May that the contractors were looking at the weather impacts. I have also set out the timeline of what happened after that.

The fact of the matter is that, in such a complex project, there are challenges to be overcome all the time. The contractors have overcome those but, in doing so, they have eaten into the contingency time. Until May, they were still confident that, notwithstanding the worse-than-predicted weather, they could still meet the December 2016 date, which was six months ahead of the contractual completion date. They then revised that, because they realised that that was not possible. They informed ministers in the appropriate way, and ministers have informed Parliament in the appropriate way. That is what has happened.

Now, for goodness' sake, let us all get on with backing the people who are building the bridge, because we are all looking forward to it being open to traffic next year.

Scottish National Blood Transfusion Service

8. Miles Briggs (Lothian) (Con): To ask the First Minister what action the Scottish Government is taking to ensure that the Scottish National Blood Transfusion Service is adequately funded. (S5F-00063)

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): Well, £43 million is currently being invested in a new, purpose-built, state-of-the-art national centre that will deliver a first-rate service in the processing, testing and supply of, and research and development on, blood and human donor tissue and cells. The centre brings together several core activities of the Scottish National Blood Transfusion Service in one, purpose-built site.

NHS National Services Scotland, which is the parent organisation of SNBTS, has been provided with record levels of funding, including a baseline funding increase of £10 million in 2016-17, which is a 2 per cent real-terms increase.

Miles Briggs: I thank the First Minister for that answer, but Marc Turner, the medical director of the service, has warned that the Scottish Government's funding cuts are so severe that, over the course of this session of Parliament, the service will face serious cuts.

Does the First Minister believe that funding reductions on such a scale will help us to achieve the aim of increasing the number of blood donors in Scotland? Will she agree to reconsider the funding of the service over the course of the session?

The First Minister: We have pledged to provide above-inflation increases in funding to the health service over the course of the session.

I should point out that the Scottish Government does not directly fund SNBTS; we fund the parent organisation, which is NHS National Services Scotland. As I said, the funding for NHS National Services Scotland has increased by £10 million in this financial year, which is a 2 per cent real-terms increase.

I know how vitally important the work that SNBTS does is. When I was health secretary, I used to see that with my own eyes on a regular basis. It is an important and highly valued service, and we will continue to do everything that we can to support it.

My final point is about the new centre, the purpose of which is to bring all the services together in one, purpose-built site. As well as improving the quality of the work that SNBTS does over the years ahead, the centre will enable the service to provide its services in a more joined-up, effective and efficient way. That is why that capital investment is so important.

Treaty of Perth (750th Anniversary)

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Christine Grahame): The next item of business is a members' business debate on motion S5M-00193, in the name of Murdo Fraser, on the 750th anniversary of the treaty of Perth. The debate will be concluded without any question being put.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament welcomes the 750th anniversary of the Treaty of Perth; understands that the treaty, along with the Treaty of York set out much of the modern boundaries of Scotland; recognises that the treaty ended the military conflict between Magnus VI of Norway and Alexander III of Scotland over the sovereignty of the Hebrides and the Isle of Man; notes that Norway initially had control of the Hebrides and the Isle of Man after Edgar of Scotland signed them over to Norway; recognises that the Treaty of Perth was signed after Scottish victory at the Battle of Largs; believes that Norwegian envoys sailed up the River Tay to meet the Scottish King and the treaty was sealed on 2 July 1266 at Blackfriars monastery on the north side of the city; understands that visitors to Perth can see the earliest surviving text of the treaty, recorded in the "Black Book", at Perth museum; notes the various civic activities taking place on 21 August in Perth to recognise the treaty's importance, which include a mini tattoo, complete with the King's Guard of Norway, and hopes that the commemoration of the Treaty of Perth can help foster closer links between the Fair City and Norway and also act as a focal point for attracting visitors to the city over the summer.

12:45

Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I thank all members across the chamber who signed my motion to allow it to be debated.

Over the past couple of weeks, we have heard many maiden speeches from new MSPs, who have taken to the chamber to boast about their constituencies. There has been talk about the biggest, the most populous, the most diverse and the most scenic constituencies. Today, I thought that I would stake a claim for the most historic constituency.

From the battle of Bannockburn to the Protestant reformation, towns and cities across Mid Scotland and Fife have witnessed some of the most important events in Scottish history. Perth was once one of Scotland's most prosperous royal burghs, with established trade links to the continent via the River Tay. That trade brought wealth, status and power, and Perth was the de facto capital of Scotland, thanks to the presence of the royal court at Scone. The stone of destiny, on which Scotland crowned its kings, was also housed at Scone. That further enshrined Perth as a place of real importance during the later middle ages. As is famously known, James I, King of Scots, was murdered in Perth, and he is buried

there. I will not recount that whole story, but it is a salutary lesson on the fatal consequences of playing tennis.

This debate is designed to commemorate the treaty of Perth, which was signed some 750 years ago, in 1266. The treaty is important because it set forth the boundaries of much of what we call modern Scotland, with, of course, the exception of Orkney and Shetland, which joined subsequently. Despite the significance of the document, it is relatively unknown to most Scots. I hope that this debate can help to shed light on an important moment in our history.

Before the signing of the treaty of Perth, the Hebrides were controlled by various Norse and Gaelic rulers who owed their allegiance to the kings of Norway rather than the kings of Scots. Back then, Scotland was not the nation that we know today; rather, it was a collection of different regions, each with different allegiances, languages and kings. That would all change with the Scottish victory at the battle of Largs in 1263—I am sure that Kenneth Gibson will tell us more about that in his contribution. Victory over the Norwegians by the Scots ensured that the Western Isles and the Isle of Man would be Scotland's to control.

The story goes that, while King Alexander was banqueting in Perth for the feast of St John, the Norwegian king Magnus VI travelled up the Tay to meet him, and the treaty was duly signed at Blackfriars monastery on 2 July. In return for a payment of 4,000 marks and an annual tribute of 100 marks, the Norwegians surrendered sovereignty over the Hebrides and the Isle of Man. In some ways, that was Scotland's very own Louisiana purchase.

Although Scotland was still a country in its infancy, stereotypes that survive to this day might have been born from those incidents. Our reputation for thriftiness was clear, as the Norwegians not only had to wait several years for us to pay the full 4,000 marks but eventually stopped collecting the annual tribute of 100 marks, after we defaulted on paying the yearly dues. In the current financial climate, it is perhaps better to gloss over Scotland's defaulting on its debts.

A copy of the treaty can be seen in Perth museum. The earliest surviving text of the treaty is recorded in the "Black Book" and is on loan from the National Library of Scotland. The special display and exhibition will also form part of the commemorative celebrations. I encourage all history buffs and fair city residents to visit the museum to learn more about a document that was so important to Scotland's early years.

Now that we have established that modern Scotland was forged in Perth, we should hear a bit

more about what we are doing to commemorate the treaty, 750 years on.

Perth and Kinross Council has announced a number of special events, which are important for a number of reasons. VisitScotland's winning years strategy has shown the success of history in attracting tourists to Scotland, and I believe that Perth can benefit from that approach. In the past, Perth has often felt left behind when it comes to cashing in on its past. In 2014, its neighbour to the west, Stirling, enjoyed not only the battle of Bannockburn re-enactment celebrations but armed forces day, but Perth has been at the back of the queue when it comes to attracting high-profile events.

I was therefore delighted to learn that the Royal Edinburgh Military Tattoo will be performing a mini tattoo in Perth on 21 August to commemorate the treaty. The 600 performers at that event will be joined by the King's Guard of Norway, whose wonderfully choreographed marching routines not only are viral hits on YouTube but have entertained tattoo crowds around the world for many years. In addition to the tattoo, the council plans to host various medieval and Viking-themed events around the city on the same day. As well as those public events, there will be a private event marking the treaty at St John's kirk, which will welcome guests from Perth's twin cities and the honorary consul general of Norway.

To digress for a moment, the debate can serve another purpose, which is to highlight Perth's unique history in the year when it makes its bid to be United Kingdom city of culture. The events to mark the treaty anniversary underline just how strong Perth's bid is for the 2021 award. Perth is a city full of history, art and culture and I can think of no better expression of that than the events that are planned for this summer.

The treaty of Perth was hugely important to the first days of Scotland and, 750 years on, it can be equally important to Perth as a city. The celebrations can help to foster closer ties between Perth, our Norwegian neighbours and our twin cities around the world, and they can illustrate the depth of history and culture that we have in Perth. As I said, that is particularly important as we look to secure city of culture status. I wish the council all the best in its work to deliver the programme of events and I encourage people across Scotland to learn more about a document that is so important to our history.

In my research for the debate, I found a cutting from *The Glasgow Herald*, as it then was, from 1966. There was a letter on 27 January 1966 from John Mackechnie, of the department of Celtic at the University of Aberdeen, lamenting that nothing was planned to celebrate the 700th anniversary of the signing of the treaty of Perth, which was to

take place that year. I hope that Mr Mackechnie, should he still be with us, will accept that at least this year, which is the 750th anniversary, something is being done in the Parliament and in Perth to recognise this very important anniversary, and I hope that he will join us in celebrating it.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you, Mr Fraser—you have not let Perth down.

I have a little time in hand, so I can give members up to five minutes.

12:52

Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): I thank Murdo Fraser for securing time in the chamber for this debate. Mr Fraser has a proud record of submitting motions on matters relating to Scottish history, from the 700th anniversary of Bannockburn to the 450th anniversary of the reformation. However, I doubt that we will ever see a motion from him to commemorate the battle of the shirts in 1544, which was a catastrophic defeat for clan Fraser.

As someone who studied history for five years at secondary school in the 1970s, I consider it shameful that not a single minute of Scottish history was taught. We were not taught about the unification of Scotland in the four centuries or so to 1266, the wars of independence, the union of the Crowns and Parliaments, the enlightenment or the industrial revolution—nothing. It was Peterloo, poor law reform, chartists and the Tolpuddle martyrs. I trust that there has been an improvement since then. In 2002, when my son was nine, he was in a primary school play to commemorate the Queen's jubilee, which considered the salient events of the previous 50 years. Although the climbing of Everest, England's wholly contentious world cup win and Abba's Eurovision song contest victory were included, the reconvening of this Parliament in 1999 was not.

As Murdo Fraser pointed out, the treaty of Perth is not widely known about. Like Mr Fraser, I hope that the debate contributes towards changing that. Nevertheless, the treaty was vital to Scotland and followed the strategically decisive battle of Largs in 1263. Largs is in my constituency, and, even after 750 years, the battle still plays an important part in the town's culture. Now popular for water-based sports and especially with day trippers, Largs is famous for the battle, which continues to be commemorated to this day.

Although the Viking cinema, with its Viking ship prow, has sadly vanished, the battle of Largs monument—the pencil, as it is known—which was built in 1912 through public subscription and is a prominent part of the town's charm, remains a popular spot for many visitors. Largs recognises the importance of the battle and the treaty by

holding an annual Largs Viking festival for a week, beginning on the last Saturday in August. The festival focuses on the battle of Largs and Viking life, and involves a re-enactment of the battle, the burning of a longship, a beautiful fireworks display and a party at the pencil.

The festival is an excellent opportunity to have fun and enjoy numerous social and cultural events, while engaging with and educating people about the historic events that helped to shape Scotland. I warmly invite all members to come along. It brings together a wide variety of people from across the community and beyond, encouraging people of all ages to come together, be more active and take part in events in their town.

The battle of Largs and subsequent treaty of Perth, along with many rarely remembered battles, such as Nechtansmere in 685 and Athelstaneford in 832, determined forever Scotland's slow march towards nationhood, as Gaels, Picts, Britons, Angles and Vikings slowly fused into the nation that we now know as Scotland—like Fraser, Gibson is a name of Norse origin.

The treaty of Perth between Norway and Scotland returned the Hebrides and the Isle of Man to Scotland, and the islands of Arran and Cumbrae, in my constituency, were at last freed from Norse rule. Given Norway's high standard of living today, that could be considered to be a mixed blessing.

The treaty came just 29 years after the signing of the treaty of York, which more or less delineated the border between Scotland and England and was thus another vital cog in the creation of modern Scotland as we recognise it today.

I hope that this year many visitors from Norway will join us in Scotland to commemorate the anniversary. I look forward to August and the events and festivities in Perth that are planned to recognise the treaty's importance, which will play an important part in forging closer links and an even better relationship between Scotland and Norway. In Largs, links with Norway are strong and there is always Norwegian participation in the Viking festival.

The anniversary is an opportunity for people to commemorate, engage and learn more about the decisions and actions that created the Scotland that we know today. I wish all the events associated with it every success. I also hope that it contributes substantially to helping Perth to secure city of culture status in 2021. The treaty of Perth must be recognised for the key part that it plays in Scotland's history and our heritage, and I am delighted that Murdo Fraser brought the debate to the chamber today.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you, Mr Gibson. I now call Alexander Stewart. This is your first speech, I believe.

12:57

Alexander Stewart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I start by declaring an interest as a serving councillor on Perth and Kinross Council, and I direct members to my entry in the register of members' interests.

As someone who was born and raised in Perth and comes from a long line of residents of the fair city, I am delighted to have the opportunity to participate in today's members' business debate on the treaty of Perth, which is sponsored by my Mid Scotland and Fife colleague Murdo Fraser.

This year, 2016, marks the 750th anniversary of the sealing of the treaty, which was signed in Blackfriars monastery in July 1266. The treaty was the culmination of discussions between Norway and Scotland over a two-year period and saw Norway cede the Hebrides and the Isle of Man. The Scottish Crown took that on board while confirming—for the time being—Norwegian sovereignty of the islands of Orkney and Shetland. Thus ended the conflict between King Alexander III and his Norwegian counterpart, Magnus VI.

The people of Perth are proud that their fair city had the opportunity to be involved in such a momentous event, and I am delighted that Perth and Kinross Council is ensuring that a number of celebratory events take place.

The people of Perth will have the opportunity to see an exhibition in Perth museum and art gallery, which runs from 7 June until 28 August. A variety of related cultural activities will also be held in the museum during that period, to celebrate and inform people about the history of what happened 750 years ago in our fair city.

We are delighted to be welcoming the Royal Edinburgh Military Tattoo. A mini tattoo will take place on Sunday 21 August. More than 600 individuals will participate in that. It will be an enormous event for the city and I hope that the weather will be kind. The Norwegian consul general will attend the event.

In the spirit of the bilateral co-operation that was exemplified by the treaty of Perth, the mayors of Perth's twin towns across the world will have the opportunity to participate in the celebration and give it an international flavour. They will come from Aschaffenburg, Cognac, Bydgoszcz, Pskov, Perth in Ontario, and Haikou. It is a fantastic opportunity for us all to participate in the celebrations, which will culminate in a big dinner in the historic St John's kirk, where individuals will enjoy traditional

food and musical entertainment with a Scottish theme.

The treaty of Perth marks the end of a sustained conflict and centuries of battles between various nations. The whole point is to set that aside in favour of the theme of reconciliation. To that end, Perth will have the great privilege of hosting, at the award-winning Black Watch museum at Balhousie castle, the highly anticipated weeping window poppy display, which drew immense crowds when it was first installed at the Tower of London.

The treaty of Perth has played an important part in the stories of Perth and Scotland, and I am glad that we have the opportunity to mark its anniversary in the chamber today. I hope that many people will take the opportunity to visit the fair city during the celebrations. Perth has a fantastic past. Its present is a bit uncertain, but it has to have a future, and events of this nature will give it the impetus and give us the opportunity to secure that future. [*Applause.*]

13:01

Lewis Macdonald (North East Scotland (Lab)): I congratulate Murdo Fraser on securing the debate. He is right to note the historic importance of the treaty of Perth, especially the fact that it marked an end to long years of conflict between the kings of Norway and the kings of Scots. To commemorate the treaty is a good way to highlight the historic role of the city of Perth, and it also allows us to celebrate the rich diversity of Scotland's history and culture.

A treaty agreed at Perth is a reminder that power in the early years of the Scottish kingdom was dispersed, not concentrated. Momentous decisions were as likely to be taken on the banks of the Tay as within sight of the Forth. The mighty castles of Edinburgh and Stirling are recognised the world over, but it is important to celebrate other places of equal significance for their role in Scotland's rich history. Dunnottar, on the north-east coast, is an ancient and splendid place that still looks and feels like the stronghold that it once was. Dumbarton castle, on the Clyde, celebrated a thousand years of its history at the rock of ages event only last weekend.

Just as the treaty of Perth reflects how power within the medieval Scottish kingdom was dispersed, so it marks the expansion of that kingdom into neighbouring regions that added to the diversity of the Scotland we know today. Murdo Fraser rightly said that the way in which Scotland stands now was not how it stood then, and nor was it pre-ordained. It is easy to make the mistake of reading history backwards and assume that things that happened in the past were bound to produce the outcomes that we see now.

The end of Norwegian claims south of the Pentland firth might have been a likely outcome, but it was never a certain outcome. However, a claim to rule the Hebrides from the Scottish mainland was ultimately easier to sustain than a claim to sustain sovereignty from the other side of the North Sea. The truth is that the islands had resisted rule and claim from both Norway and mainland Scotland, and even after the treaty of Perth it took the kings of Scots another 200 years to overcome the political autonomy of the lordship of the isles. Indeed, as Kenneth Gibson reminded us, conflict continued thereafter, not least when the Macdonalds routed the Frasers at Blàr na Lèine in 1544. [*Laughter.*]

The Gaelic lordship in the Hebrides was not the only place to resist royal encroachment on local autonomy in medieval Scotland. Galloway too was a Gaelic lordship with a Norse heritage, and it was able to look across the Irish Sea for allies in opposing Scottish royal power. The lands bordering the Moray Firth produced their own claimants to the Scottish crown, most famously Macbeth, and when they lost the dynastic struggle they fought for centuries to maintain local autonomy.

As Murdo Fraser reminded us, Orkney and Shetland remained subject to the Norwegian and then the Danish crown for several generations after the treaty of Perth, while the borderlands between Scotland and England were contested over those same generations. For all those reasons, the early history of Scotland is about a lot more than simply the development of the Scottish state or the growth of the Scottish nation.

When we tell Scotland's story to our visitors and to our children—Kenneth Gibson is right to highlight the importance of telling Scotland's story in our schools as well as in the informal ways that it has always been told—it is important that we do not tell that story only from the centre. The treaty of Perth, for example, marks the addition of the Hebrides and, for a while, the Isle of Man to the Scottish kingdom, but it is also a chapter in the histories of all those islands—which the minister Alasdair Allan will know—and those are histories that are worth telling in their own right.

We should celebrate the history of the Scottish kingdom and commemorate its great events, as will happen in Perth this summer—as Mr Stewart so eloquently described. However, we should also celebrate all those other histories of people and places that asserted a different identity in historical times, because they too have contributed to the wealth and diversity of the Scotland that we know today.

13:06

Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I congratulate my good friend and colleague Alexander Stewart on his maiden speech. Alexander Stewart, Murdo Fraser and I have been on a long political journey over many years in Perthshire—not quite 750 years, but nonetheless it has been a long political journey—and it is so good, in light of our much better results in the recent election, that Alexander has been elected to this place. I am sure that he will be a great credit to this Parliament.

I also congratulate Murdo Fraser on bringing the issue to the chamber. I was a little relieved when he read out the letter that was in *The Herald* from the department of Celtic, because when I saw it first on his desk I thought that it was a communication from Celtic Football Club, which might have been a rather different issue.

As I was looking through the research on the topic of the debate, I was struck by the complex tapestry of the origins of Scotland. As Lewis Macdonald pointed out, the Scotland that was taking shape in the 13th century existed in a very embryonic form, and that shape has changed so many times in the centuries since.

One of the things that we have to recognise in Scotland and be immensely proud of is that tapestry that Murdo Fraser has described and the way that we have fashioned our culture, our social network and our economy around all of that.

When the treaty was signed, the various peoples of Scotland would have spoken very different languages: Gaelic—I expect that the minister will be delivering his speech in Gaelic; Old Norse; a mixture of the two in the Outer Hebrides; Middle English and Scots in Edinburgh and the Borders; and possibly also Cumbric in Dumfries and Galloway and in Clydeside.

Cumbric is now extinct. It would have been not dissimilar to the Welsh language. In fact, some of my colleagues on the Scottish National Party benches may be interested to know that their hero William Wallace, who was born around the time that the treaty was signed, could have been a Cumbric speaker himself. The name “Wallace” is a corruption of “Welsh” and his name would have meant “William the Welshman” or “William the Briton”.

Learning all that made me wonder how the average inhabitant of this nascent nation really thought of themselves—whether they identified as Gaels, Vikings, Scots or Britons or whether they even really knew or cared that they were part of the kingdom of Scotland at all and how that all came together.

It has always been one of the wonders of this country that it brings together so many people—perhaps Perth itself exemplifies that. Alexander Stewart referred to the fact that there has been a bit of a sticky patch for Perth and its surrounding communities in recent times, but he is right to say that it is a superb city. We need to bring everybody together to ensure that it is rebuilt and can look to the future in a way that makes us proud again and so that it can deliver on all the rich resources that are so much a part of what we love, as people who represent it.

Whether it is from an economic perspective or from the rich arts and cultural history in the city, or just from its presence at the centre of Scotland and its historical past, Perth has so much to offer, and I hope that it will continue to have that in the future. I thank Murdo Fraser for bringing the topic to the chamber, and I look forward to the minister's comments.

13:10

The Minister for International Development and Europe (Alasdair Allan): As the treaty of Perth is—as far as I can tell—a live international treaty, the happy task of responding to the debate on the Government's behalf falls to me as Minister for International Development and Europe. I refer members to my entry in the register of interests as a member of the Norwegian Scottish Association.

I congratulate Murdo Fraser on bringing to the chamber a debate that allows me to talk about two of my favourite countries, and more specifically the Hebrides—including my constituency—which are, as members have mentioned, the central subject of the treaty itself. Innse Gall, which is one of the Gaelic names for the Western Isles, means “the isles of the strangers”. It refers to the fact that the “strangers”—in this context, a euphemism for the Vikings—had exerted political control over the islands until the signing of the treaty that we are discussing today.

At this point, I sense that some members might be slightly anxious that I am going to break into Gaelic. However, in deference to our treaty partners—and to reassure Liz Smith—I will instead use the debate as the moment that I break cover and identify myself as an enthusiastic, if still very hesitant, learner of Norwegian.

The minister spoke in Norwegian.

[Applause.]

The minister repeated the remarks in English:

When King Magnus VI of Norway and Alexander III, King of Scots, made their treaty in Perth, they may have ended Norse rule over the Hebrides but—as Lewis Macdonald pointed out—they did not end the many cultural connections between

the Hebrides and Norway. Those connections are most obviously exemplified in the islands' Norse place names and in the famous Lewis chessmen. The national importance of the treaty, especially when taken together with the 1237 treaty of York, is significant. As Murdo Fraser and other members have pointed out, those two treaties essentially created the borders of Scotland that we know today—even if it is to be hoped that, as members have mentioned, Norway has forgotten that Scotland has long stopped paying it the 100 merks a year that the treaty requires.

The minister continued in English:

It is perhaps—

Kenneth Gibson: Will the minister take an intervention?

Dr Allan: Yes.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: In Norwegian, please, Mr Gibson. [*Laughter.*]

Kenneth Gibson: The obligation to pay the 100 merks per year was actually cancelled following a marriage agreement with the daughter of the king of Denmark some five centuries ago.

Dr Allan: Kenneth Gibson is of course right, and I was only joking, but nonetheless my comments point to what is in the treaty, some of which, as Mr Gibson mentions, has changed.

It is worth reflecting briefly on the human dimension of the treaty, which specifically ensures that

“if in the said islands under the dominion of the said lord the King of Scotland they wish to remain, they”

—the Norwegians—

“may stay in the land freely and in peace, and if they wish to leave they may depart with their goods freely and in complete peace”.

This exemplary foresight did much to guarantee the peaceful coexistence between the two peoples. We still see the deep friendship between Scotland and Norway today, as Scotland pursues co-operation with Nordic countries as part of our Nordic Baltic policy statement.

In addition to the events mentioned by Mr Stewart, I welcome the academic conference taking place in Perth on 27 and 28 August, which is jointly organised by the Scottish Society for Northern Studies and Perth Society of Natural Science. I am sure that it will be a very rewarding way to recognise how much the fair city of Perth—just as much as Largs—affected for ever the fates of Scotland, Norway and, indeed, the Isle of Man. To return to the point made earlier by Mr Gibson, I hope that such events are also evidence of our increased willingness as a nation to celebrate and teach our own history.

The anniversary is an opportunity not just to look back at the middle ages but to think about the on-going connections between Norway and Scotland in our own age.

The minister spoke in Norwegian and repeated the remarks in English:

Norway and Scotland are much more than allies; they are firm friends, as witnessed by the frequent presence of King Haakon VII and the Norwegian armed forces in Scotland during the second world war, and—looking to the future—by the many on-going economic and cultural ties that bind us now.

The minister continued in English:

I leave it to others to work out when Norwegian—beyond the word “ombudsman”—was last spoken in this Parliament, but I hope that the act is not as politically charged as it might have been a few centuries ago.

I take this chance to thank Mr Fraser and all others who have contributed to this very welcome opportunity to celebrate the long, productive and—at least since the treaty of Perth—very amicable relationship between Scotland and Norway.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Takk skal du ha, minister—thank you. That concludes the debate.

13:17

Meeting suspended.

14:30

On resuming—

Dignity, Fairness and Respect in Disability Benefits

The Presiding Officer (Ken Macintosh): Good afternoon. The first item of business is a debate on motion S5M-00374, in the name of Angela Constance, on dignity, fairness and respect in disability benefits. It gives me great pleasure to call Jeane Tomkins to give her first opening speech in the Parliament. I am sorry—I meant Jeane Freeman. I am marrying her off to the Conservative Opposition spokesperson.

The Minister for Social Security (Jeane Freeman): Thank you very much, Presiding Officer—if not for the marriage that you just entered me into.

I am delighted to be here to open a debate for the first time as Scotland's first Minister for Social Security. I know that members have already debated and discussed the new powers, and I look forward to working with parliamentarians in the chamber and in the new committee. Our shared task is to lay the foundations of a social security system that we can all be proud of.

Given that this is also my first speech in the chamber, I hope that members will permit me to make two brief points. First, of course, I thank the voters of Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley, where I was born and raised, for the trust that they have placed in me. Secondly, I pay rightful and due tribute to Adam Ingram, who served the constituency, the South of Scotland and the Parliament so well in the past 17 years, and to Margaret Burgess, in particular for her role in setting up the Parliament's first social security powers. *[Applause.]* I very much hope to emulate their examples of putting people first, of hard work, and of total commitment to doing the best possible job.

I am particularly pleased to have the opportunity to open this debate during carers week. This morning, I visited Voice of Carers Across Lothian and heard at first hand about the important work that that organisation does. It is important that I heard direct from carers themselves about the challenges that they face. I was able to let them know of the Government's absolute commitment to make the best use that we can of the new powers to recognise the contributions that carers make to the quality of life of all of us. Those new powers present us with an enormous opportunity to take a different path from that of the United Kingdom Government and to harness the powers to our values so that we support people, tackle inequalities and build a fairer society.

A year after the UK Government introduced its Welfare Reform Act 2012, the chief executive of the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, Julia Unwin, spoke about it. She said that the system

“is loathed by those who depend upon it and criticised by those who understand it”

and that there is

“a public media discourse that demonises poor people and equates poverty with wickedness or hopelessness.”

Like many in the chamber, I have heard from disabled people who have been worried and distressed by the cuts that are being imposed and by the way that they are treated by the Tory welfare system. I have heard that the system, which is supposed to help and support those people, is actually doing them harm. There are delays and backlogs, lengthy, disjointed and complicated forms and processes, and inconsistencies in assessment decisions. Driving all of that are calculated and planned UK Government cuts to a lifeline support that is needed by many of our most vulnerable citizens. There are cuts in the name of austerity to provide a so-called fix for an economic crisis that those people did not create, but for which they are now paying a terrible price.

UK Government welfare spend is forecast to fall by 1.5 per cent of gross domestic product between 2015-16 and 2020-21 to reach its lowest percentage level in 30 years. There are systematic spending cuts at a UK level to housing benefit, incapacity benefit, state pensions and employment and support allowance, and the introduction of a benefit cap.

As 85 per cent of benefits remain at Westminster, we do not have the powers to redress all that unfairness, but we can and will do better with the new powers that we will have. With a fairer and more transparent approach to social security, we intend to rebuild the trust that has been eroded and build in equality, fairness and respect. Social security is an investment to support people; it is an investment in people and communities. It is there for any one of us when we need it, and without blame or stigma.

The Government has already achieved a great deal with the powers that we currently have. We have protected and invested in the independent living fund. Through the self-directed support strategy and the legislation that underpins it, we have shown our commitment to enabling individuals, carers and their families to have flexibility, choice and control over the support services that they receive. We have fully mitigated the effects of the bedroom tax, providing over £35 million in discretionary housing payments and protecting 72,000 households—80 per cent of which have a disabled adult—from the terrible

anxiety that comes when someone is told that they need to pay more for their home simply because they have one bedroom too many.

However, with more than half a million people in Scotland receiving carer and disability benefits, our new powers give us the opportunity to do more. I will outline to the Parliament the steps that we are taking to build a fairer and more transparent approach to disability benefits, making real the principles of dignity and respect. We have already committed to maintaining the level of disability benefits and making sure that they will not be means tested.

We have heard many times that the assessment process is not working. Just last year, through the work of the Welfare Reform Committee, the Parliament was told of some harrowing experiences of disabled people. I pay tribute to the committee and its work, which provided invaluable evidence and insight. We were told of a process that is unable or unwilling to understand and take account of fluctuating conditions, when a person can have good days and bad days. One woman, who some days cannot walk or brush her teeth, said that the process makes her feel like “a nuisance” and “a fraud”. How utterly appalling to live with a Tory system that makes someone feel like that.

We will reform the assessment procedures to ensure that they work for the people who claim disability benefits. The process of applying for and receiving benefits should be easy for everyone to understand, and people should be supported through it. We will set clear timeframes for assessments, decisions and appeals and we will ensure that information is accessible for those who need it. If someone has an existing long-term condition that is unlikely to change, they should not be repeatedly reassessed. Therefore, we will stop the revolving door of assessments for those with long-term illnesses, disabilities or conditions and introduce longer-term awards that are based on individual circumstances and needs. To provide more certainty and reduce stress to thousands of families while the transfer of benefits takes place, any child in receipt of disability living allowance will continue to receive that award to the age of 18 if they so wish.

We will do more. We will build into our system a consistent approach that treats every person with compassion, dignity, fairness and respect—nothing less will be tolerated.

Research by Contact a Family has shown that higher heating and utility bills are the top extra costs for families with disabled children. In 2014, an estimated 34 per cent of families with disabled children were going without heating. It is simply unacceptable that a parent should be forced into making a choice about whether to heat their home.

That is why we will extend eligibility for the winter fuel payment to families with children in receipt of the highest care component of the disability living allowance.

Earlier I mentioned the immense contribution that is made by Scotland’s 745,000 unpaid adult carers and 44,000 young carers. Carers are motivated by love and compassion and, for many, caring is a rewarding and positive experience. That does not mean that it cannot have a negative impact on a carer’s physical and mental wellbeing and financial security. Some carers are forced into making difficult choices between work and caring, or between studying and caring. Others take lower-paid or less-skilled jobs to fit in with their caring duties. There are fewer opportunities for carers to do the simple things that we take for granted such as meeting friends, going to the cinema or taking exercise—time just for themselves.

That is why it is crucial that we support carers to have a life alongside caring. It is unfair that support in the form of the carers allowance is the lowest of all working-age benefits. That is why we have committed to increasing it to the level of the jobseekers allowance, which is an additional £600 a year or an approximate 18 per cent increase. We have also won the argument with the UK Government to make sure that any carer who is in receipt of another low-income benefit such as income support will remain entitled to that benefit.

On 25 May, the First Minister announced in her speech outlining the priorities for the Government that we will ask our carer advisory groups for their views on how we might make progress on

“a young carers allowance to provide extra support for young people with significant caring responsibilities.”—*[Official Report, 25 May 2016; c 7.]*

The suggestion came from the Green Party and I am delighted that we can show in practice our commitment as a Government to listen and act on good ideas wherever they come from. I know that the Greens wanted to amend our motion calling on us to consider that, and I would have welcomed that amendment, as I welcome the idea.

The devolution of social security powers and how we use them is one of the most complex tasks that has been undertaken since the Scottish Parliament was re-established. It is a huge challenge and one that should not be underestimated. It involves delivering a range of sometimes complex benefits that are worth around £2.7 billion. Our first priority, therefore, is to ensure a smooth transition for people who receive benefits, particularly disabled people and their carers. I am confident that, with shared effort, we can meet the challenge of delivering those benefits safely and securely.

An undertaking on such a scale will take time to get right in its technicalities and in the approach that we take to translating our founding principles into attitudes and behaviours that exemplify fairness, dignity and respect. As we progress over the next few years, we will engage in extensive consultation with the Parliament, our partners and, importantly, with our communities and the people who have direct experience of the benefits to be devolved, to ensure that we make the most of the opportunity to create a fair social security system.

We have a huge opportunity to do things differently and better in Scotland. With that opportunity comes the responsibility to make sure that what we deliver plays its part in tackling inequality and making life fairer for the people who claim disability benefits, their carers and their families. Together we can build a stronger Scotland, where every person has the opportunity to achieve their potential, now and in future generations. I am pleased to move the motion in the cabinet secretary's name.

I move,

That the Parliament welcomes Carers Week 2016 and thanks carers for their invaluable contribution to society and recognises the vital role that they play caring for family, friends and neighbours; supports the Scottish Government's plan to increase carers allowance, extend winter fuel allowance to children on higher rate disability living allowance and ensure that disability benefits are not means tested and that assessments are fair and transparent; believes that carer and disability benefits, once devolved, will help achieve the Scottish Government's wider goal of supporting disabled people and their carers to participate in society, fulfilling their potential in life; believes that the UK Government's cuts to disability benefits are unfair and have caused unnecessary stress and financial hardship; urges the UK Government to make no further cuts to disability benefits; agrees that disability benefits are an investment in the people of Scotland and that they should support disabled people and those with long-term conditions and illnesses in a fair way; believes that, when the powers over disability and ill-health benefits are devolved, smooth transfer and transition is a priority, and considers that disabled people, carers and their representative groups should be fully involved in the development of the Scottish benefits, which should have dignity and respect at their heart.

14:43

Adam Tomkins (Glasgow) (Con): We join the Scottish Government and other parties across the chamber in welcoming carers week. Carers make an invaluable contribution to our society and play a vital role in caring for family, friends, and neighbours. As my amendment makes plain, we welcome the Scottish Government's commitment to implement our proposal to align the carers allowance with jobseekers allowance, because that will support more than 60,000 carers in Scotland.

The Cabinet Secretary for Communities, Social Security and Equalities (Angela Constance): Could I point out as a matter of accuracy that our commitment to increase the carers allowance was in our 2015 manifesto, whereas the Tories' commitment came six months later?

Adam Tomkins: The cabinet secretary makes an unfortunate intervention. There has been a lot of discussion of consensus in this parliamentary session. This is a subject on which we agree with the Scottish Government and I would have thought that that agreement would be welcomed rather than criticised.

I thank the Scottish campaign for welfare reform for the event that it held in the Parliament yesterday evening, which I attended with a number of other MSPs, including Oliver Mundell, Ivan McKee, Sandra White and Alison Johnstone. I thank Patrick Harvie for hosting the event. The Scottish campaign for welfare reform, the Child Poverty Action Group, the Poverty Alliance, Inclusion Scotland and many such organisations play an essential role in not only Scottish public life but Scottish parliamentary life. For example, they bring the stories of those who rely on our social security system directly to our attention as MSPs. I express my personal thanks to all those who spoke to us yesterday evening.

In last week's debate on a fairer Scotland, I said that we want a social security system that supports the most vulnerable, is focused on giving those who can work the opportunities and support to do so, and is flexible and personalised. I explained that we have two core aims—

The Minister for Local Government and Housing (Kevin Stewart): Mr Tomkins has once again talked about supporting people to get into work. Why, then, has the Tory Government cut work programme moneys by 87 per cent? Will he explain its reasoning for that and how that will get folk into work?

Adam Tomkins: As the minister knows, the work programme is one aspect of the UK social security system that is being devolved in full to this Parliament—

Kevin Stewart: With an 87 per cent cut.

Adam Tomkins: Whether the Scottish Government likes it or not, the fact is that in the UK 152,000 disabled people are in employment now who were not in employment a year ago.

I explained last week that we have two core aims for the benefits system: we want to be supportive of those who cannot work, and we want to be effective at getting those who are able to work into employment. Those aims apply to both

social security generally and the support that we give to people with disabilities.

Like every other member in this chamber, we believe that the whole of our social security system should be operated so as to accord to everyone respect and dignity. There is no difference between Conservatives and anyone else in this Parliament on that essential starting point. Some members, however, speak about respect and dignity as if they are new ideas, unique to them, which they are bringing to the table for the first time.

Kevin Stewart: Will Mr Tomkins give way?

Adam Tomkins: I have already given way to the minister once. I will give way to him one more time, after I have made a bit of progress, if he will forgive me.

The ideas of respect and dignity are not new. Indeed, they are already written into Scots social security law, as they have been written into administrative law in the UK since the 1960s. When the Scottish ministers proclaim that they want a social security system based on dignity and respect, they are saying something that we all agree with, they are saying nothing new, and they are saying nothing that is not already reflected and enshrined in our law.

Kevin Stewart: In which case, would Mr Tomkins join me in condemning those folks on the Tory benches at Westminster, who talk of things such as “strivers” and “skivers”? Does he feel that such comments give dignity to and show respect for people?

Adam Tomkins: I will choose my own words. I am not using those words, and the minister and everybody else in this Parliament can draw their own conclusions from the words that I use, rather than the words that anyone else uses in a different Parliament. I am more interested in focusing on the social security powers that this Parliament has than in shouting from the rooftops about what happens 400 miles from here.

Working-age benefits perform two different functions in the British welfare state: they support people with very low incomes, and they support people with additional needs. Most of the former will be rolled up into the new single benefit: universal credit. For people with disabilities, the most important source of income support comes from employment and support allowance. The main sources of support for the extra costs associated with disability are disability living allowance, personal independence payments and attendance allowance. All three of those are to be devolved in full.

As I said in my speech last week, our approach to welfare and indeed to disability is to say that the

dignity of the pay packet is to be preferred to the indignity of a social security system that assumes people are somehow not fit for work. That approach is working, as more and more people are moving off benefits and into work. However, at the same time, our financial support for people with disabilities has increased. It grew by £3 billion in the last session of the UK Parliament and, in this session of the UK Parliament, more than £50 billion will be spent on support for people with disabilities.

However, there is still more to do. The disability employment gap remains too big. That is why we are committed to halving it. We have had some success—the disability employment rate has increased from 39 to 44 per cent. Welcome as that is, that rate is still some 43 percentage points below the employment rate for those who do not have a work-limiting health condition. That is the gap that we want to close.

There is a lot of understandable concern about sanctions. First, it is important to understand that those who cannot work are not sanctioned. Claimants for ESA who are assessed as being unable to work are not required to undertake any activities in order to continue to receive the benefit. Only those who are able to undertake work-related activities are expected to do so. Even there, any requirement must be reasonable, taking into account the person’s circumstances, and claimants cannot be required to apply for a job, to undertake work or to submit to medical treatment. The requirements that may be imposed include activities such as skills training, job search support, drawing up a CV and work experience.

The former Secretary of State for Work and Pensions accepted in August last year that improvements could be made to the practical operation of the scheme. He said that it should be reformed to focus

“on what a claimant can do and the support they’ll need, and not just on what they can’t.”

That is precisely the sort of change that can be effected by the move to universal credit, which is based throughout on a more personalised approach.

Just a few weeks ago Stephen Crabb, the new work and pensions secretary, echoed those remarks when he said:

“I want to start a new conversation with disabled people, their representatives, healthcare professionals and employers. I want the welfare system to work better with the health and social care systems. Together we can do so much better for disabled people.”—[*Official Report, House of Commons*, 21 March 2016; Vol 607, c 1269.]

Those comments were welcomed by Liz Sayce, the chief executive of Disability Rights UK—

Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh Western) (LD): Will the member give way?

Adam Tomkins: I have already given way three times, Mr Cole-Hamilton. Shall I give way once more? Go on, then.

Alex Cole-Hamilton: I am grateful to the member for giving way. It seems that it is convenient to the member to be proud of his colleagues at Westminster in certain parts of his speech but not proud of his colleagues at Westminster in the rest of his speech. Can he clarify?

Adam Tomkins: I am not quoting colleagues at Westminster, Mr Cole-Hamilton; I am quoting the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions and I am quoting, in particular, the chief executive of Disability Rights UK, who agreed with the work and pensions secretary that

“we need practical, sensible and effective policies which help disabled people to be able to work if they can, enjoy family life and be part of the communities they live in—the same kinds of things that most people aspire to, disabled or not”.

I turn now to DLA and PIP. The personal independence payment, which was introduced in the Welfare Reform Act 2012, is a non-means-tested, non-taxable benefit, payable whether the claimant is in or out of work, to help with the extra costs arising from ill health or disability. It consists of two components—a mobility component and a daily living component. Entitlement is determined by a fair, objective assessment of individual need to ensure that support is targeted at those individuals whose health condition or impairment has the greatest impact on their day-to-day lives.

In comparison with DLA, PIP targets support more closely on those who are most in need; is more responsive as claimants' circumstances change; is based on a fairer, more transparent and consistent assessment of need; and is designed to be easier for claimants and their representatives to understand.

After some widely acknowledged implementation difficulties in its first years, which resulted in unacceptable delays in some cases, the Government has worked hard to reduce the backlog. By the beginning of this year, the average clearance time for new PIP claims had fallen to 13 weeks—and to six working days under the special rules for people with a terminal illness.

What should the Scottish Government do when PIP is devolved? PIP is based on the right principle—it is a significant improvement over the old DLA. It is designed to provide more personalised support to claimants and to target that support where it is needed most.

It ensures that the support that we give is suited to the needs of the individual, which is a pretty good working definition of dignity and respect. It is highly unlikely to be in the public interest for Scotland to go through yet another complex redesign of a system that is now starting to work well.

I close with four questions for the Scottish ministers that perhaps the minister winding up for the Government could address. First, do they support our ambition to halve the disability employment gap? Secondly, when will they tell the Parliament what their proposed timetable is for the transfer of devolved welfare powers to Scotland? I wrote to the cabinet secretary a week ago about the matter and my letter has not yet received an acknowledgment, never mind a response. Thirdly, when powers over DLA and PIP are transferred, will the Scottish Government commit to maintaining the more targeted, responsive and consistent scheme we see in PIP, or will disabled people in Scotland face yet another costly social security reorganisation? Finally, what roles do ministers see local authorities and health boards playing in the administration of devolved social security for disabled people in Scotland?

I move amendment S5M-00374.2, to leave out from “supports” to end and insert:

“further welcomes the Scottish Government's commitment to implement the Scottish Conservatives' proposal to align carers allowance with jobseeker's allowance, which will support over 60,000 carers in Scotland; recognises the positive impact that the delivery of short breaks for carers, secured by the Scottish Conservatives in the last parliamentary session, will have in providing crucial respite from their caring roles; acknowledges that disability benefits are not means tested under the current UK government and that benefits related to the additional costs of disability have been uprated every year; understands that the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions has confirmed that there are no plans for further welfare savings over and above those already announced; agrees that the devolution of most disability benefits to the Scottish Parliament will allow Scotland to take a different path if it chooses to, rather than laying blame on the UK Government, and urges the Scottish Government to ensure the smooth transfer of powers for disability benefits and to work collaboratively with other parties and stakeholders to develop a disability benefits system that puts opportunity at its heart, working to reduce the disability employment gap and exploring a new, personalised and integrated approach that supports the most vulnerable in society.”

14:54

Mark Griffin (Central Scotland) (Lab): The Government motion that is before us today has—with a small but significant change—the enthusiastic support of members on the Labour side of the chamber.

The Parliament will break new ground simply by setting the level of support for our carers. It will be unprecedented when we begin to take charge of

the help that is provided to our disabled, and it will be historic when a social security bill is debated and—I hope—passed by members who are present here today. Ground breaking, unprecedented and historic—those words will be at the forefront of the message to the public on the changes in the coming months and years.

Three words—dignity, fairness and respect—have opened the door of the heroic possibilities that lie before us, but politicians must tread carefully with our language. At this time, we should and must be humbled by the challenge that lies ahead of us. It will be outcomes that matter, and it will be substance on which we are judged. In seeking to amend the Government motion today, we seek to add substance.

The content of our amendment was an SNP manifesto commitment in 2015, and it is a position that the Scottish Labour Party supports. It is a simple amendment, which seeks to ensure that the financial assistance that we provide keeps pace with the cost of living. It starts a debate on the provision that we will make for those who need a little extra help.

We begin that debate by asking ourselves what kind of society we wish to see for our children and grandchildren and what support is required to help to create it. In this place, a majority of members have campaigned and worked against cuts in mobility support. We have here politicians of all stripes who have fought to build the work chances of our disabled. We have the drive that keeps us awake at night wondering how we can better help those who devote their lives to caring for our loved ones.

As a young man I am grateful to those who have got us to where we are today: for the battles for recognition waged and won; for the prejudices challenged and beaten back; for the perceptions changed in our communities and workplaces; and for the expectations raised, met and exceeded.

Rightly, expectation is building in our communities once again, in the light of the challenges that disabled people still face today and which campaigners are fighting against every day. Those campaigners will be watching closely to see how we approach the new powers.

It is an expectation not just for those who are directly affected by the powers that we will hold but for the country as a whole. It is an expectation of a system that does not tie up disabled people and carers in red tape, but a system that preserves people's independence and provides not just a safety net to allow them to survive but a springboard towards enabling them to play a full part in society.

It is an expectation of a system that moves beyond the idea of social protection into a new

dawn of social enhancement. It is an expectation of full social engagement that includes people participating in education and employment as well as being able to volunteer and to care for their kids, and simply being able to enjoy and live their lives.

The sentiment expressed in the Government motion suggests that there is a consensus to be found with those of us in the labour movement. That leaves options for the minister who spoke so passionately this afternoon. I ask her to look back at the history of the labour movement and social security—a movement that she knows well.

So secure were the intellectual underpinnings of the welfare revolution, so self-evident are the cultural values of the movement that delivered it, and so enduring has the settlement been for half a century that I am proud to stand here as a Labour member today.

Jeane Freeman: I am pleased to advise the member on behalf of the Government that we welcome and will accept the Labour amendment.

Mark Griffin: I thank the minister. I am grateful for that support, and I know that disabled people throughout the country will be even more grateful.

That support will be needed to create the changes that we need, and the choice for the minister is clear. She can look to those who have overseen the precipitous decline of Government help, or to those who seek to raise the bar still further. She can look to those who have marginalised our most vulnerable people, or to those who seek to uplift them. She can look to those who restrict the support for those facing challenges, or to those who seek to enhance it.

That is because we in the labour movement have a long-standing belief that, when barriers block the path of one, that path is blocked for all of us—that when one person is left behind we cannot advance together.

If this Government decides to bring about meaningful change to build a system that will enhance the lives of our disabled citizens, a system that ensures that our carers are provided with the support they deserve, and a system that reflects the language in today's motion of dignity, fairness and respect, the minister will have our support and that of the labour movement.

I say to colleagues across the chamber that the future of social security in this country requires us to work together, not with our eyes clouded by political grievance but with our focus firmly fixed on the expectation of a nation: an expectation that reflects a society that we want to see, based on dignity, fairness and respect.

There are times in this country when we as individuals go about our own business, enjoying

the opportunities that we have been blessed with. There are times when, as political parties and activists, we campaign tirelessly on the issues we hold close to our hearts. Then there are times when we must come together, inspired by the dignity of the individual and united by a collective impulse to build and shape a shared future. We in the labour movement believe that this is one of those times.

I move amendment S5M-00374.3, after first “disability benefits” to insert:

“are increased at least in line with inflation to ensure that they cover the cost of living.”.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Linda Fabiani): We move to open speeches of up to six minutes—I remind members that generally that means fewer than six minutes. I call Gillian Martin, to be followed by Jeremy Balfour.

15:02

Gillian Martin (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP): With the welfare powers that are coming to Scotland, we have the opportunity not just to do things differently but to learn from the mistakes of the UK Government in the treatment of people in Scotland with disabilities.

I am conscious of the fact that I have a life that has not had the type of challenges that people who have disabilities face. I spent the past week canvassing opinion in my constituency of Aberdeenshire East from people who have disabilities and those who care for them on the issues that they face living in a rural setting. With a very low number of members in the chamber who are disabled, it is incumbent on us all to do that every time we debate how to improve the lives of those who are disabled. Even better, each of the parties should look at what we can all do to give more people with disabilities access to the public positions that we are in. We could then have first-hand experience as we debate the issues.

Last week, the Tory spokesperson on social security lectured us on what he saw as the overuse of the word “dignity” when welfare and disability are discussed. One thing is for sure: to the people whom I spoke to last week in preparation for the debate, “dignity” is not a word to be used with disdain. It is something that every one of them wanted and rightly deserves, and something that has been sadly missing from their treatment by the UK’s Department for Work and Pensions. In the emails that I received from disabled constituents, the word “dignity” had top billing, alongside the word “independence”. That was more keenly felt by people in areas that did not have the public amenities that urban environments have.

In the past, many of my constituents have had to travel for work capability assessments. Given where some may live, doing that independently is not an option, particularly if public transport is not as frequent or as suitable as it is in urban areas. Many rely on their carers to get them to where they need to go.

As has been mentioned, this is carers week. On Monday, I made a point of visiting the young carers facility at Quarriers in Inverurie. During that visit, I spoke to some young carers and was struck by their stories, which added another dimension to the issues that people with disabilities face—the impact on children when a system is not sympathetic to a person’s situation.

A substantial number of adults with illness and disabilities are cared for by their children. When a disabled parent faces an appointment at a time or in a location that does not take into account the rural location in which they live, that impacts not just on them but on their children. As we have all seen, under the UK system, if a person misses an appointment, or is even slightly late for one, sanctions are swift and often impossible to overturn.

In addition, when a young carer is involved, every assessment that must be attended could mean time off school. Young people who are not of driving age must rely on public transport or assistance from a voluntary support group or a family friend.

As we manage the welfare powers that are coming to the Scottish Government, we have the opportunity to use 21st century technology to make life easier for people with disabilities. A cessation of the unnecessary and often time-consuming visits to an urban location for assessments would make a great deal of difference to people with disabilities in rural areas and to their carers.

As we tackle the connectivity issues in rural areas—doing so is in the programme for government—we should also consider how we serve the disabled in rural locations for whom travel is an issue. We should consider how we use technology to help young carers manage their responsibilities.

My final point reaches across to the education portfolio and to reducing the attainment gap, which is a key priority of the Government. What we do to support young carers at a welfare level can also support their achievements at school and their progression into post-school education.

Getting welfare right can make the difference that allows young carers in rural areas to access their right to further and higher education and make the onward journey to contributing to Scotland’s economy. To that end, it is right that

young carers should not lose their allowances if they access further and higher education—allowances that they have lost under the UK system, even if they are undertaking full-time distance learning, as with the Open University.

We have the opportunity to enable our disabled citizens and the families who care for them not only to reach their potential but to live a life that is supported and not made more difficult by a system along the lines of the UK system that they have been subjected to. I hope that, before long, all welfare powers will be devolved to this place, so that we can take full responsibility and have fairness across the board.

15:07

Jeremy Balfour (Lothian) (Con): It is a great honour to be elected to the Parliament and an even greater honour to represent the area that I was born in and have spent most of my life in. Lothian is a great place in which to live, work, play and study, but the region faces challenges. I will seek to represent and lobby on behalf of all my constituents, who have put me here for a five-year term.

Ruth Davidson and the Conservatives appealed to a wide audience during the election campaign. In the constituency that I fought—Midlothian North and Musselburgh—the Conservative vote went up by 9 per cent. As I went from door to door, many people told me that they were voting Conservative for the first time because they were disillusioned with Labour and they wanted to hold the Government to account, which is what I and my colleagues will do over the next five years.

I thank previous members Gavin Brown and Cameron Buchanan and I record my gratitude to David McLetchie, who sadly passed away during the previous parliamentary session. I have been in politics since my university days and I saw David McLetchie as a role model for how people should conduct themselves.

I thank my family for their support. I also thank NHS Lothian. During the election campaign, I sadly had a heart problem, which meant that I ended up spending six days in Edinburgh royal infirmary, where I had superb care. I thank the staff there and all who helped me through that period.

I also thank the staff in the Parliament for the way in which they have made all the new members feel welcome.

When I entered this place, I was told that I would have to make difficult decisions and would sometimes have to compromise. I did not realise that that would happen so early in my time as an MSP. Only 16 days after I was elected, Hibs won

the Scottish cup. On the Monday after that, somebody lodged a motion that asked us to congratulate Hibs on their win. As a lifelong Hearts supporter, I had to make both a difficult decision and a compromise as I signed that motion.

I turn to this afternoon's debate. I fully support the amendment lodged by my colleague. I should declare two interests at this stage. For 22 years, up until 5 May, I worked as a disabled member on tribunals that heard DLA and PIP cases. Secondly, I am personally in receipt of PIP, and previously received DLA.

I am pleased that the powers have been devolved to this Parliament, and I hope that the Scottish Government will take those powers on as soon as possible, so that we can hold it accountable and can move on from where we are. The danger is that we keep looking back and blaming others. The powers are there. Let us take them and move forward, but as we move forward let us not just change for change's sake. PIP was a change for many people, with reassessment, tribunals and form filling, and to unsettle them with yet more change for the sake of it would be unhelpful for them and their families. Where alterations and changes need to take place, let us make them, but let us ensure that we do not throw the baby out with the bath water.

I think that PIP has bedded down and is working well. The majority of people are better off than they were under DLA. The beauty of PIP is that it focuses not on a diagnosis and not on a disability, but on how the individual's needs can be met. I will concentrate on two areas of PIP that we need to look at as we go forward.

Certain people, because of the nature of their disabilities, seem to be struggling to get renewed PIP. The first example is people who have epilepsy that is uncontrolled, which can have a devastating effect on their lives. The 50 per cent rule means that sometimes they miss out, and it would be worth the Government and the Parliament looking at that afresh.

The second area is how we define appliances. I do not know how many members put their socks or tights on by sitting on the bed this morning, but the interpretation of the upper tribunals is that that would be seen as using an aid and an appliance. That seems to me to be far too broad and not what people expected, so we need to look at such terms.

We all agree that we need disability benefits, but they should be focused on the individual and should always be there to help that person and their family be all that they can be and to flourish and experience life as much as possible. Disability benefits should not—as they are sometimes seen

as doing—hold people back and prevent them from being who they are meant to be.

15:13

Bob Doris (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP): In this debate on dignity and respect for those on disability benefits, I want to refer to a constituent of mine who came along to the Possilpark library, where I hold a parliamentary advice surgery, just last Saturday. I thank her for her permission to use her story to illustrate why it is vital not only that as many welfare and social security powers as possible sit in our Scottish Parliament, but that we do far better than a United Kingdom Tory Government that has demonised and victimised some of its most vulnerable citizens.

My constituent received contaminated blood in 1977 during a surgical procedure, although that did not come to light until 2000, when she was diagnosed with chronic hepatitis C and cirrhosis of the liver. It has a significant impact on her health and she will not recover, but Atos Healthcare and the Department for Work and Pensions continue to insist that she repeatedly be reassessed. My constituent was a victim when she received contaminated blood, she felt stigmatised when her diagnosis was confirmed, and now she feels targeted and victimised again each and every time she is reassessed for DLA.

As I said, my constituent will not recover or get better. Understandably, she has campaigned for many years to get answers to and justice on a variety of issues. Why does the UK Government continue to require repeated reassessments? There is no way to turn the clock back to before 1977, which was when she became a victim of contaminated blood.

Thank heavens, then, that our Scottish Government has signalled a different way of treating some of our most vulnerable citizens, and I look forward to the use of longer-term and, in certain circumstances, lifetime DLA and PIP awards for them and for the constituent I met in Possilpark library on Saturday. I ask that specific consideration be given to not just the physical wellbeing but the emotional wellbeing of people who find themselves in the same circumstances as my constituent, given that they feel victimised and traumatised every time a reassessment is required.

Because of time constraints, I will not mention my constituent's recent experience with Atos, which was why she had come to my surgery, although I found out the whole story. Needless to say, I believe that the organisation has never been fit for purpose and that significant problems continue.

The North Kelvin Sports Development Group is a wonderful local organisation in my Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn constituency. It provides an amazing social benefit by running nine young people's football teams across the constituency as well as a variety of courses to tackle sectarianism and other social issues in north Glasgow and beyond. With its off the bench course, which was funded by awards for all, it hoped to give encouragement to inactive individuals, particularly those released from prison, those recovering from addiction and the long-term unemployed. We might say that it was targeting ESA claimants in a positive way, and Jobcentre Plus locally was very enthusiastic and tried to develop a real partnership approach. However, the initiative was not successful; the main barrier was poor uptake by volunteers, as many were terrified that participation on the course would be used as a Trojan horse to withdraw their benefits. That is an example of good, honest and decent people in Jobcentre Plus trying to work at a local level in partnership with a community organisation but the system just not allowing it.

I mention that example because, when the limited powers that we are getting come to this Parliament, we will still not have powers to deal with such issues. This place will have power over only 15 per cent of all social security welfare payments. That is not the limit of my ambition; we have to get this Parliament the powers to transform the lives not just of the lady at Possilpark library—whom we will get the powers to help—but of the people who could have benefited in a productive way from the off the bench course. The UK system did not allow that to happen, because it is just not flexible enough.

On a more personal level, some members in the chamber will know that my father passed away on election day. He claimed disability benefits for a significant part of his life, and when I was younger, one of my main concerns was that he was sometimes worried about being well, because the system does not support people who think that they might be able to do a little bit more. As soon as the UK Government or the DWP gets a whiff that a person might be able to do a little bit more, they sanction them and withdraw their benefits, despite the fact that those with fluctuating health conditions can find themselves in bed the whole of the next day when they try to do that little bit more. The system dehumanises people, and it is not fit for purpose.

I am glad that the Parliament is getting some limited powers, and I have no doubt that the Scottish Government will do the right thing with them.

15:19

Johann Lamont (Glasgow) (Lab): It is fitting that it is in carers week that we are continuing the debate about how we ensure that there is dignity and respect in our welfare system. Carers, in particular, have punched well above their weight in this Parliament since it was created. Now, we must make a commitment to give them more than warm words in return and say that, rather than simply sharing their pain, we will make decisions that will make a difference to their lives. I know that respect for carers is felt across the Parliament, but I think that that is a particular challenge that we should rise to over the next period.

We should thank disability groups for their energy, as a consequence of which they deserve to shape political debate, policy and, critically, the spending choices that are made in this Parliament. I thank Inclusion Scotland, the Glasgow Disability Alliance, Disability Agenda Scotland and others that were active in ensuring that the issues of people with disabilities were highlighted during the election campaign. Of course, listening to campaigning groups is not just something that we should do on the election trail; it should be at the centre of, and be the focus of, what we do now with the powers that we have.

Much of the debate on social security and the impact of welfare changes has been profoundly damaged by the facile and cruel division of our population into workers and shirkers by people whose education and income should have meant that they were capable of much better analysis. That is a corrosive characterisation of our society that damages and stigmatises people and denies the reality of the inequality and injustice that is faced by too many disabled people, not only in Scotland, but across the United Kingdom.

It is right to ensure that people who cannot work are treated with dignity and respect and are supported to live as fulfilled a life as possible. That is part of being a decent society. My party and I want to play our full part in developing and funding those supports so that people do not have to fight for them throughout their lives. That struggle is an on-going feature of the lives of disabled people and their carers. Not only are their entitlements minimal but, in order to get them, they must fight against a system that seems to want to deny them.

Given that more than 50 per cent of the welfare reforms have fallen on the shoulders of disabled people, it is understandable that much of the debate that we are having is about the benefits system. However, there is a danger that, by focusing on benefits, we unintentionally reinforce a model of disabled people's helplessness and hopelessness and—as Bob Doris said—deny

people the opportunity to do a little better, because they will suffer if they try to do so.

My party has always sought to be the party of full employment. I am old enough to remember my mother's generation fighting for the right to work because of the independence that it brought. It is right that people with disabilities should have the right to work, too. We have to challenge the massive injustice of people with disabilities being denied the right to work when they are able to work, and being denied the opportunity to achieve their potential and fulfil their ambitions.

The statistics are stark. Young disabled people are up to three times more likely than their non-disabled peers not to be in education, employment or training. Disabled people are more than twice as likely as non-disabled people to have no qualifications. Less than half of working-age disabled people are in employment—the figure for non-disabled people is 80 per cent. Those statistics show the greater scandal at our hand. We build barriers against the employment of disabled people and then denounce and punish them for not working. That is shameful. The issue is one of equality and fairness, but it is also an economic issue. I therefore contend that the debate around social security must address not only investment in benefits—which it must do—but investment in action to overcome the barriers that are faced by people with disabilities.

The challenge for the Government is to ensure that it mainstreams its thinking on benefits and the needs of disabled people into its employment strategies. It cannot be right that, according to Inclusion Scotland, just 63 out of 25,691 modern apprenticeships in 2013 went to disabled people.

When we talk about the question of fairness and dignity, we must also talk about employment opportunities. What will the Government do in its business pledge to introduce an expectation that employers will provide opportunities to people with disabilities? In public procurement, are we asking those who seek the benefit of the public purse to provide more opportunities for people with disabilities? We know that the Scottish Government's policy is that every public body should have at least one contract with a supported business—I would welcome an update on that—but can we do more to ensure that the reservation of contracts creates further opportunities for people with disabilities?

In the area of employment and skills, what is our thinking on recognising the barriers for people with disabilities? What are we doing about stigma? What are we saying on the question of social care? I underline to the Government the importance of local government funding and the small bits of money that make it possible for people to secure and maintain work. That is not a

Government choice that has a minimal impact; it can be the difference between a fulfilled life and an unfulfilled life for too many in our communities.

The fundamental question that we have to address is how we use and focus the powers that we have—and we do not have all the powers. Can we increase resources through a fairer taxation system? If not, can we have a fairer redistribution of the existing resources? I am sure that many across the chamber will agree with me. This is not special pleading for us to do a favour to people with disabilities, but we must provide them with a level playing field, as the field is currently tipped very much against them. I look forward to working with the Government to ensure that that thinking, not just on benefits but on the rights of disabled people in employment, will be at the centre of its work.

15:26

Alison Johnstone (Lothian) (Green): With a range of new powers being devolved by the Scotland Act 2016, this session of Parliament has the potential to be the most transformative since the first, back in 1999. In particular, the transfer of power over some aspects of social security can enable us to give everyone in Scotland the basic security that we all deserve—and that could not come a moment too soon. Those of us at last night's meeting of the Scottish campaign on welfare reform heard from Ryan, who told us that disabled people were three times more likely to be sanctioned than they were to be found a job. That is at a time when a recent DWP-backed project found that every £1 cut from benefits reduces the likelihood of participants returning to work by 2 per cent.

In recent years, there has been an unprecedented attack on the support relied on by the people who need help most. The Centre for Welfare Reform estimates that almost 30 per cent of the benefit cuts between 2010 and 2015 targeted disabled people. The figures for the most severely disabled people are even worse. A wealth of research into cuts to disability benefits has shown that the recent changes have made it less, not more, likely that claimants will be able to get into work.

The current benefits system not only lacks the financial support that people need, but people feel lost and powerless in a system that sometimes seems determined to defeat them. It is not a supportive system; sometimes it feels like an ordeal. Too many people face appeals that drag on for months, have their files lost, or are not able to speak to anyone with the power to help them. We know that that causes claimants a huge amount of stress and yet can leave them without the basics of life. The Trussell Trust estimates that

benefit changes and delays—many of them avoidable errors in benefits delivery—accounted for 44 per cent of all referrals to food banks.

We must do better, and with the new powers of the Parliament, we can do better. Scottish Greens believe that now is the time to radically refound the benefits system in Scotland to begin the necessary culture change. The new powers offer us a chance to chart a different course from that pursued by Westminster. We can have a social security system that does just that—provides security; and not just security of income, but a set of clear, defined rights that people in need can rely on and that enables them not to feel that they are subject to the whims of the benefit authorities. That is why my amendment, which was not selected today, asked Parliament to recognise that rights, as well as respect and dignity, should be at the core of social security.

We can use the new powers to help Scotland's young carers in particular. We all agree that unpaid care work makes a hugely valuable contribution to our society. Three out of five of us will become carers at some stage in our lives, and one in 10 of us is already fulfilling some sort of caring role. As we have heard, there are around 745,000 carers in Scotland, 44,000 of whom are young carers under the age of 16—some studies put the figure as high as 100,000, which is one in 10 of the school-age population. Gillian Martin was right to point out that supporting those young people is an important part of closing the attainment gap.

Unpaid care in Scotland has an estimated total value of £10.3 billion. That means that, even at a conservative estimate, young carers provide free care that is worth over £600 million a year. Yet, carers of all ages face huge challenges. A third are struggling to pay utility bills, 47 per cent have been in debt and half are struggling to make ends meet and are cutting back on food and heating as a result.

Young carers face additional challenges: most care for someone with a physical health problem, but they also often give emotional as well as practical and personal care; one in 10 cares for more than one person; and about 50 per cent care for more than 10 hours—all of that when the average age of a young carer is 12.

Clearly, carers of all ages, and young carers in particular, need and deserve better support. We now have the opportunity to give that. The new Scotland Act 2016 devolves power over carers allowance, so we can now use the benefits system to show that we value unpaid care.

I was proud to stand on a manifesto that put recognising and valuing care work front and centre. We called for a significant increase in the

carers allowance to £93.15 a week and, echoing a call made three years ago by members of the Scottish Youth Parliament in a petition to Parliament, for a young carer's grant to recognise the care work that so many young people do every day.

Lauren King MSYP spoke about the difficulty that young carers have in accessing financial support, due in part to the fact that carers under the age of 16 cannot access carers allowance. The Scottish Greens welcome the progress made in the Scottish Government's "Getting it Right for Young Carers" strategy, but let us act now to make sure that young carers are protected from poverty.

I was pleased to hear that the Government has picked up on our Green manifesto commitment to a young carers allowance. I welcome the minister's positive and supportive words this afternoon and I warmly welcome the opportunity to work with her and the Government on developing that policy.

This Parliament is now presented with the chance and the imperative to create a new, fairer, empowering and rights-based social security system and to reject the increasingly unfair and dysfunctional system that has resulted from Westminster welfare reform. The Scottish Greens welcome the Scottish Government moves so far towards that, and we look forward to working across the chamber to achieve that vision.

Young Ryan, who spoke so eloquently at last night's meeting, said that the Scottish Parliament has a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to design disability benefits that work. I agree wholeheartedly with him, so let us not waste that opportunity.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I remind members that those who go over their allotted time penalise their colleagues, so I ask for brevity from now on, please.

15:32

Sandra White (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP): I welcome the minister to her new role. I am sure that she will very much enjoy the post. As a member of the newly formed Social Security Committee, I look forward to working with the minister and the Cabinet Secretary for Communities, Social Security and Equalities.

I will start by citing the Scottish Association for Mental Health. In its briefing, under the heading "The Problem", it says:

"The current social security system is failing people with mental health problems".

It then cites figures from its own research, saying:

"98% of respondents' mental health had suffered due to welfare reform; 79 per cent of service users had reduced income; 48% of service users were less able to pursue leisure and social activities".

Most horrific of all, I was startled to read that

"6 suicide interventions were undertaken during the period of research"

by SAMH that were linked to welfare cuts. That is astounding. We should all be ashamed that that should happen on anyone's watch, whether ours or anyone else's.

I turn to the Scottish Government's motion, particularly its commitment to involve

"disabled people, carers and their representative groups ... in the development"

of the Scottish benefit system. That is tremendously important.

Alison Johnstone mentioned last night's meeting, where the view was expressed that people were not being involved, matters were not transparent enough and people did not know what the next step would be. The involvement mentioned in the motion is an important aspect of the new system, and those people and groups should be at the heart of any decisions, because we know that those decisions will have an impact on the daily lives of people who access benefits.

As the motion states, "dignity and respect" go to the heart of what we are doing here in this Parliament in the commitment that we are making to the people of Scotland on the new social security system. If my recollection is correct, I believe that they were also in one of the Christie commission recommendations, which we have also adopted. That is important.

Cuts in benefits and PIP are being raised with me more and more in constituency cases and I am sure that it is the same for all members. I was at Flourish House last Monday and PIP was raised on numerous occasions. People had presented themselves for assessment to be told that they no longer met the criteria for any payments.

The work that agencies do to help people with mental health problems to recover is being set back because people who may appear to be leading a normal life are told at assessment panels that they do not meet the criteria, as if everything is fine. That has a devastating effect on such people—I met a number of them at Flourish House. All the good work that the agencies that work with them have done is set back and, as my quotation from SAMH says, other problems come with that. Basically, the valuable work that agencies carry out with people with disabilities and mental health problems stops when people go to panels. That is why it is important that we consider the assessment procedures and reform them to

stop the revolving door of assessments and appeals, which contributes directly to increased stress and anxiety among people who are left in limbo and do not know where else to go.

I welcome the introduction of a long-term award for existing long-term conditions, which Bob Doris mentioned. I hope that, regardless of the politics in the chamber, all parties will support those proposals.

I note that the Scottish Conservatives have put in their amendment something about working “collaboratively with other parties”. I appreciate that, but I say to Mr Tomkins that it would be more helpful if the truth was told that the cuts come from the Conservative party at Westminster.

I urge the Scottish Conservatives in the Parliament to speak to the Tory Government at Westminster to ensure that no more cuts are forthcoming for anyone, not only in Scotland but throughout the UK. People have had enough. The SAMH statistics that I mentioned about people attempting to commit suicide are shameful. I hope that the Conservatives will take up my genuine suggestion that they speak to their counterparts at Westminster.

I will finish with some quotations from Enable, which show that we really need to do something—and we will in the Scottish Parliament. The first is:

“Claiming DLA is difficult—the forms are horrendous and it is so upsetting having to justify every bit of support your child needs and having to write in minute detail”

exactly what is wrong with your child. Another is:

“Someone from the local authority came to fill out the DLA claim form—she was very insensitive and handed me a leaflet”

and said “Just tick these boxes”.

We have to ensure that those things do not happen in the Scottish social security system. We owe that to people and I am sure that, if we all work together, we can ensure that that is the case.

15:38

Liam Kerr (North East Scotland) (Con): I will make three points in support of our amendment to the motion.

The first is a caution. This is an important debate. Powers will be devolved to this legislature that give unprecedented ability to provide disability benefits in particular. To echo Sandra White’s point, in receiving those powers, we have an opportunity to look forward and work collaboratively using all parties’ best abilities to ensure fairness to all stakeholders. However, that can be achieved only if we ensure that none of us falls into making the basic error of demonising—to use Mr Doris’s word—any of the contributors to

the debate or the wider continuing discussions. In a debate such as this, it would be easy constantly to hark back to Westminster policies in particular and evil Tories, but to do so would be as unconstructive as it would be unproductive.

Sandra White: I do not think that I talked about demonising anyone. Does Liam Kerr think that what Westminster did in cutting the monies to disability claimants was the right thing to do?

Liam Kerr: My understanding is that the funding has gone up and we have devolved the matter. If Sandra White will allow me to develop my argument, she will hear more on that.

I was encouraged to hear Jeane Freeman talk about listening and acting on good ideas, wherever they come from. Let us not alienate anyone without reason. If Scotland chooses to take a different path from the one that is being taken by the rest of the UK, that will be its prerogative, so let us look forward and decide what is the best path without making unedifying attacks that do not do anything to move the debate forward.

Johann Lamont: I recognise the Scottish Parliament’s responsibility to do the best that it can with the existing powers and to build consensus, but does Liam Kerr agree that it was profoundly unhelpful to define this debate—as some of his colleagues did—as being between shirkers and workers, and that such language should be left elsewhere?

Liam Kerr: No members of the Scottish Conservatives have used those terms. We have had an election; this is a new session of Parliament, with new members.

Jeane Freeman: Will the member take an intervention?

Liam Kerr: I am afraid that I just cannot; I have taken two and I have only six minutes.

Let us look at what underpins the Conservative amendment. The implementation of a disability benefits system for the vulnerable, the distressed and the disabled that is empowering, that facilitates participation and that recognises everyone’s contribution and value to society is one that we can all support. We can all agree that any social security system should provide a safety net, with the ultimate ethos—to use Citizen’s Advice Scotland’s wording—of creating

“a more equal and socially just society”.

In practice, I would suggest that that means enabling those who require disability benefits to achieve an appropriate standard of living, while promoting independence, participation and equality.

It is clear that Scotland cannot simply offer benefits to anyone who demands them. If we accept that as a premise, it must also be accepted that there is a line to be drawn, beyond which people do not have an entitlement: on one side of the line, a person is in the category of being disabled and will receive benefits; on the other, they are not in that category and will not. Drawing that line will be one of the great challenges. It must be done very carefully and only after much objective, reasoned scrutiny and investigation.

If members agree that there has to be a line, they must also agree that it is vital that appropriate experts make the assessment about the side of that line on which individuals fall, and that they use objective, clear and unambiguous criteria that are applied in a manner that fully respects the individuals involved and ensures that all stakeholders, including those who are being assessed, have confidence in the system. We should not be restricted in deciding which people from which professions are best placed to make the assessment or be involved in the process.

Some members have made it clear that they feel that the UK Government's system is too harsh or makes inappropriate judgments. I do not challenge the strength of their feeling, but we have an opportunity to design a bespoke system for Scotland, and simply pointing at the UK Government and saying, "You've got it wrong," will do nothing to advance this opportunity.

Quite the contrary is the case. Whatever members' view of the UK Government's system is, there are lessons to be learned. As Adam Tomkins and Jeremy Balfour said, and as the Child Poverty Action Group accepts, the personal independence payment is based on the right principles, it has improved on the DLA system and it provides support that is more geared to the needs of the individual. It is unlikely to be in the public interest for Scotland to go through a comprehensive redesign of the system for political expediency. Therefore, the task for this Parliament will be to draw the line appropriately, following objective debate and the selection of appropriate experts.

That leads me on to my final point. There is a fundamental risk of category error in any such debate, in so far as it is very easy to categorise a group as "the disabled" and to leave it at that. Our amendment makes it clear that the category of "person in receipt of disability benefits" is not fixed, nor is membership of that category an end in itself, with the person remaining in that group or being ascribed other characteristics automatically.

Having a disability and/or being in receipt of a disability benefit is not and should not be a barrier to work. Many people in receipt of disability benefits cannot work and must not be stigmatised or suffer any prejudice for that reality, but many

disabled people can and want to work and need our support to get into work.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Could you close now, please?

Liam Kerr: Of course.

We look forward to the powers over disability benefits coming to this Parliament, and the Conservative Party will play its part in designing a system that is targeted, appropriate and fair.

I commend our amendment to the chamber.

15:44

George Adam (Paisley) (SNP): I take on board much of what all the members in the chamber have said and the point that the Tories want to talk about how we can deal with the powers that we now have, but they cannot get away from the heartache that has been caused in communities throughout Scotland by their so-called welfare reforms, no matter how they try to dress that up. They cannot just say, "This is day 1. This is the new beginning." They have to take responsibility for some of the things that they have done.

Adam Tomkins: Does the member accept that disability living allowance and PIP have gone up every year since the Conservatives became the Government in 2010?

George Adam: What I will accept is that the Tories have put families through disability tests, with people having to prove how disabled they are—their condition is not assessed—and that of the people who failed to get their PIP, some 80 per cent end up getting it on appeal anyway. The Tories have made the situation an absolute farce, and they cannot dress it up or kid on that they are the good guys in the whole scenario.

Having respect for individuals at the very heart of everything that the Scottish Government intends to do on disability benefits will be a welcome change to many people and families who live with disabilities. The Westminster Tory Government has treated disabled people with no respect, offered them no dignity and made them feel that their disability is their fault through its attacks on their benefits, which provide the very money that gives them and their families the opportunity to get by.

Many members will be aware that I work with the Renfrewshire access panel and that I am a patron of the Scottish Disability Equality Forum. Through that work, I have seen the heartache and devastation that the Tory Administration in Westminster has caused. It is only right that the Scottish Government challenges itself to treat disabled people with dignity and respect.

As this is carers week, I should declare an interest as a carer. Many members will know my wife Stacey. I am her primary carer—although she has done not a bad job in the past 20 years of keeping me on the straight and narrow. Today is our 20th wedding anniversary, and I would like to use our experience of dealing with multiple sclerosis as an example of the challenges.

I have seen how a disability can affect someone in their life. I have seen the young woman who walked down the aisle 20 years ago—I say to Mr Tomkins that, if she did that now, she would probably fail her PIP assessment—become a woman who now has to adapt how she lives her life to deal with her disability.

Scotland is full of such stories, of families who are struggling to deal with life's many challenges with the added disadvantage of dealing with a lifelong condition. When we work with those families in their time of need, we need to ensure that the state does not become one of their extra problems, which is exactly what is currently happening with the Tories' so-called welfare reforms—Conservative double-talk for making the poor and disabled poorer and less able.

I want to discuss two elements of the debate that are extremely important to me: the role of carers and people who live with long-term conditions. As I stated, I am Stacey's primary carer. However, I am lucky enough to have the support of a family who can ensure that I can go out and try to achieve everything for our family. Others do not have that opportunity and support. The Government needs to ensure that that type of support can be offered to carers so that they get the opportunity to do that. Many carers cannot work—they would be the sole earners, but they cannot work because they have so much to do with their caring work.

Obviously, MS is a condition that I have to live with. When I say that I have to live with MS, I mean that I have to live with Stacey dealing with it. She supports me and her family supports us to ensure that we can deal with it.

The MS Society Scotland recently asked us all to "Make welfare make sense". That is not a strange request, because the current system does not help with long-term conditions such as multiple sclerosis. We need to find a way to ensure that we can make that easier. The society said:

"The welfare system in Scotland must not threaten the financial security of people affected by MS through unmanageable assessment processes and short-term awards, but instead show a greater understanding of the complexity of the condition."

We must take into account the conditions that individuals have and what people have to deal with. One of the key findings of a recent MS

Society survey was that most people who are diagnosed with MS are between 20 and 30 years old. Those are the key years in people's working and educational lives, but 80 per cent of people who are diagnosed with MS end up not working within 15 years of being diagnosed. That shows the challenges, which exist with many other long-term conditions, too.

It is good that the Scottish Government continues to talk about respect and dignity in the debate but, as someone once said, "Let's not count the days; let's make the days count." Let us make sure that we get this right and support families throughout Scotland who have to deal with long-term conditions and disabilities.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Following the next speech, speeches in the open debate must be restricted to five minutes—I am sorry about that.

Mr Cole-Hamilton, you have six minutes.

15:50

Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh Western) (LD): During my first speech in the chamber, which was in a debate on Europe, I talked about my delight with the consensus that had been forged across the benches and the parties on that issue. Today, I rise to deliver a speech in the same vein. Throughout the election campaign, the Liberal Democrats fought on common ground with the Government, the Labour Party and the Greens on the need to improve the lives of and the quality of support that is available to families who are affected by disability. I am therefore delighted that the Government has brought the motion before the Parliament, and we will support it and the Labour amendment.

We meet at the height of carers week, to which many members have referred. It is right that they should do so, because the army of carers that our society relies on are the unsung heroes of the care sector. Without their support and without the love that we as a country arguably exploit, the cost to the care sector would be doubled many times over. In many cases, people are just one late-night hospital dash away from surrender but, because they love their families, they keep going and going.

As other members have done, I make special reference to the needs of young carers, because we often forget that they are more than just young carers—they are children and young people as well. They care for siblings or parents who have profound disabilities, but they still have to sit exams and have a meaningful childhood. Given the powers that we now have at our disposal, it is incumbent on us to ensure that they have as normal and as happy a childhood as possible.

Public policy is a vehicle through which we can extend help and comfort not just to those who are affected by disability but to the people around them, and my remarks will focus on both those groups. I will speak about three particular issues: first, getting help at the point of need; secondly, ensuring that our society is geared up and that we remove any systemic or bureaucratic barriers whenever we find them; and finally, ensuring that political rhetoric is matched by reality.

As we know, in many cases, disability first becomes manifest and is detected in childhood or infancy. It is often a terrible and life-changing moment for families when they realise that they will be forever affected by a particular disability. However, detection is not always immediate and disability is not always visible. In the fairer Scotland debate, I spoke of the case of my constituent who has been fighting for the best part of a year for her daughter to be diagnosed as being on the autistic spectrum, and I mentioned the waiting lists that she has had to contend with for child and adolescent mental health services. That is an immediate barrier to getting people to the starting line for state support. Although we can all agree on what a dignified and wholly humane Scottish system of social security should look like, we need to look at the peripheral barriers that prevent people from getting to the starting line.

Diagnosis is not the only barrier to people getting state support; awareness is a big problem as well. When I was working for a children's charity that specialises in delivering services for families who are affected by disability, I met a family whose daughter was diagnosed at birth with a lifelong condition that she would have to contend with. She is a profoundly disabled child, but it was only at her two-year check-up, when the family met another family whose child had a similar condition, that they were made aware that they were entitled to any form of state support or assistance. We have to do better at making families aware of the support that is available to them.

As we have heard, there are many barriers and traps for people once they get support. Throughout their lives in modern Scotland, they have to face tests and sanctions from an unfair and undignified testing regime. We must form a progressive alliance across the chamber to unpick and dismantle those, and I congratulate the Government on the work that it did immediately prior to the Scottish elections on ending the manifestly unfair removal of the disability living allowance for children who went into hospital for a protracted hospital stay. There was the assumption that because someone's child is in hospital, they no longer have caring responsibility for them, but ask any carer and they will tell you how manifestly untrue that is.

We need to talk about how we marry up political rhetoric with the actions that we, as the political class, take. Talk is often cheap in this area and, for those who are affected, action matters most. We can look right across the history of devolution at the fact that there are still people today who are fighting for justice after the contaminated blood disaster and recognise the challenges that they still face. We are finally reaching a marriage between political rhetoric and reality there, but there is still a long way to go.

In 2008, the UK Government came up with the aiming high for children with disabilities strategy, and that was met with £36 million of Barnett consequential that came north, but we are still waiting for a strategy for children who have disabilities. Indeed, we need to make sure that our local authorities are delivering on their political commitments under the single outcome agreements that they set but which so seldom reference the needs of people with disabilities.

I am grateful to colleagues from across the chamber for the respect that they have shown one another. We do everyone a disservice who is affected by disability—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Would you close please, Mr Cole-Hamilton?

Alex Cole-Hamilton: I applaud the Government for bringing forward the motion. It can rest assured that the Liberal Democrats will support it.

15:56

Maree Todd (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): For the past 20 years, I have worked as a clinical pharmacist specialising in psychiatry. Mental ill health is the leading cause of chronic illness and it represents up to 23 per cent of all ill health in the UK. It is the largest single cause of disability.

Mental health problems often affect people of working age; they are very common. We have heard that one in every four of us will suffer a diagnosable condition.

One of the reasons why I came into politics was that I witnessed every day the unfair effect of the welfare system on the patients with whom I was working. Medication can really help people with such illnesses, but no medication can overcome the effects of poverty or isolation.

I have seen at first hand the effect of the Westminster attitude to welfare. I have seen a patient with treatment-resistant schizophrenia wrongly declared fit to work and consequently losing her benefits. I watched her try to cope with the threat of homelessness and the stress of the appeal process, and I watched her illness deteriorate to the point at which she needed to be admitted to hospital for several months. It is a

barbaric way to treat our most vulnerable citizens. It is also expensive. In-patient care in a psychiatric hospital costs almost £3,000 per week. That is truly a false economy.

I have also worked with people who have attempted suicide because they lost all hope after losing their benefits. Any one of us in the chamber would struggle to remain healthy if we felt that we were the victim of blind economic forces over which we had no control, or if we felt that we had no say in shaping or determining our destinies.

Many people who have mental health problems can work and want to work. We need to support them to work where they are able. However, the current welfare system does not do that. It is mistrusted, it causes anxiety, and it lacks sufficient flexibility to measure the impact of mental health conditions on a person's ability to sustain employment. That is not just my opinion; there is now a substantial body of evidence that demonstrates that the welfare reforms that were introduced by the coalition Government in Westminster were not fit for purpose for people who are experiencing mental health problems. The Royal College of Psychiatrists, the Samaritans and the Scottish Association for Mental Health, along with many others, all raised concerns.

The devolution of parts of the social security system provides an excellent opportunity for us to redefine the narrative around what we want the system to achieve. We have to be clear that it should be about empowering citizens, facilitating participation and recognising everyone's contribution and value to society.

So what needs to change? The people undertaking assessments of an individual's ability to work must have an adequate knowledge and understanding of mental health. We must acknowledge that stress and anxiety are having an adverse effect on the mental health of those being assessed, reassessed and then reassessed again. Many people are being refused payments or are having their benefits cut or withdrawn, only to have them reinstated on appeal. We have to make the system work more effectively and we must remove the fear factor.

The patients with whom I worked suffered a double stigma: first, from having a mental health problem, and secondly, from being on benefits. We need a social security system that does not stigmatise or punish people who receive benefits.

The assessment of an individual's ability to work must be based on the person's day-to-day abilities and not on an isolated instance. One of the main criticisms of the current system is the lack of sensitivity to illnesses that vary in severity from day to day or week to week. We must recognise that, for some individuals with chronic illnesses,

where there is less chance of a significant, sustained improvement or even of an ability to live independently, repeat assessments are unnecessary.

Let us look at the evidence, and let us work with the service users and with the professionals who work with them to design more effective policies and services. By working together, we can make sure that we design a system that is better equipped to meet people's needs.

The Scottish Government has a proven record of taking action to protect the vulnerable, through our commitment to universal services—

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Christine Grahame): Could you wind up quickly?

Maree Todd: —our establishment of the Scottish welfare fund, and our ensuring that no one in Scotland is impacted by the bedroom tax. With dignity, fairness and respect at the centre—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: No, I must stop you there. Sorry—we are very tight for time.

16:02

Elaine Smith (Central Scotland) (Lab): I welcome the minister to her role.

In November 1942, the Beveridge report was presented by its author, Sir William Beveridge, to the British Parliament. It provided a summary of principles necessary to banish poverty and want from Britain and it proposed a system of social security that would be operated by the state. In 1945, Clement Attlee's Labour Government announced the introduction of the welfare state, as contained in the Beveridge report. It included the establishment in 1948 of a national health service with free medical treatment for all at the point of need. A national system of benefits was also introduced to provide social security, so that the population would be protected from the cradle to the grave. It was the foundation of the modern welfare state and those of us in the Labour Party are very proud of that.

Like the minister, I hope that we can have a Scottish social security system that we are proud of. I cannot imagine that Clem Attlee or Nye Bevan, who was the founder of the NHS, would have considered that, some 70 years after the introduction of their system to make people socially secure, we would have to debate dignity, fairness and respect in relation to disability benefits. However, it is obvious that we do.

Cuts to disability benefits are unfair, as the Government's motion points out, and they cause stress and financial hardship, which have a major impact on health and wellbeing. When researching her book, Kayleigh Garthwaite worked in a food

bank. She found that the impact of welfare reform was a major reason for people to use food banks, along with issues such as ill health, caring responsibilities and redundancy. She gives an example of a food bank user, Martin, who shows how undignified people can feel when they are on benefits and have to rely on food banks. He had no electricity, as he could not afford to feed the meter, so he was given a box of cold foods. When asked if he wanted tinned fish, he said:

“Salmon on benefits? Don't let the government hear you're giving out luxuries like that”.

Kayleigh points out how that shows the ingrained stigmatisation of people who use food banks.

Another example is a woman called Sally, who has ME, fibromyalgia and bipolar disorder. She was forced to use her local food bank because of benefit changes. She said:

“Although the staff at the food bank are very respectful, being forced to use the food bank and having to rely on such little money has made me feel less of a human being. I wish the government would stop and realise we are human beings not second class citizens.”

With the devolution of some benefits, specifically disability benefits, to this Parliament, the Scottish Government has an opportunity to treat people like human beings.

Although much of what has been said today could apply to the whole of social security, there is an emphasis in the motion on disability benefits, which definitely require a more sympathetic approach. As the helpful Health and Social Care Alliance Scotland briefing tells us, benefits must be underpinned by a human rights approach. That means a shift in perspective in relation to people who are entitled to benefits and a change in the language that is used when referring to them. The Alliance also recommends advocacy support during the assessment process and I am pleased that the Scottish Government intends to make assessments fair and transparent.

Many people, particularly elderly people, do not get the benefits that they are due. Sometimes, they do not know where to start applying, they are too proud or they take no for an answer in the first place and they just do not appeal. They need help to access what is rightfully theirs and it is good that the Government has recognised that.

The Parliament now has the powers to do things differently and to treat people with kindness, compassion and respect. The transfer of welfare powers and tax powers gives the Parliament the most power and responsibility that it has had in its history. Over the years, those were the powers that were most often mentioned as the ones that people wanted to be devolved. However, to paraphrase my friend the late Jimmy Reid, powers without principles or purpose are hardly worth

having. The people demanding those powers undoubtedly believed that if welfare and further tax powers were devolved, Scotland would make different, more compassionate choices than those of the Tories at Westminster. To do that, the Government and the Parliament need to be ambitious and invest more in this sector. Just changing priorities will not be enough.

In “Class, Nation and Socialism: The Red Paper on Scotland 2014”, Katy Clark points out that, in Scotland,

“Those choices that have already been taken, on prescriptions, tuition fees and on free personal care, have simply been taken at the expense of other areas of social and welfare policy—the cake has been divided differently perhaps, but has not been made bigger.”

As members who know me will be aware, I supported all those policies when it was not politically fashionable to do so. However, I do not think that we have to choose between good policies.

It was the norm in previous decades for any politician calling themselves left of centre to make the argument for progressive taxation on the understanding that to get decent public services and a fair society, we all need to pay fair tax. If the Parliament is really to come of age and if its make-up is really a majority left of centre, I believe that we must use the new tax powers to make the cake bigger so that we can provide dignity, fairness and respect in disability benefits and provide better public services.

I will finish by quoting Nye Bevan, who said in his book “In Place of Fear” when talking about the NHS and welfare:

“To call it something for nothing is absurd because everything has to be paid for in some way or another”.

Unless it is taken from somewhere else in the public purse that cannot afford to lose it, a better, more just system of benefits and public services must be paid for. I suggest that it should be paid for through fair and progressive taxation.

16:07

Maurice Corry (West Scotland) (Con): I welcome the minister in her new role. I wish to speak about the armed forces servicemen and women and their need for dignity, fairness and respect with reference to the welfare benefits system.

Since world war two, we have seen our armed forces deployed overseas in several campaigns, from Korea and Suez in the 1950s and onwards to the present day. Our men and women of the armed forces take up the call of duty as ordered and they go to those theatres of operation in the knowledge that they could make the ultimate

sacrifice. Those who very sadly are killed on operations leave behind their loved ones and dependants whose lives have been turned upside down. If servicemen and women receive life-changing injuries, it can have a similar impact on loved ones and families in their lives ahead and on the serviceperson who is living with a disability.

As members will recall, in my first speech in the chamber, I spoke about the armed forces community covenant and its purpose when it was implemented in May 2011. It is precisely the purpose of the covenant to help and support our sailors, soldiers, airmen and women, reservists and veterans who find themselves in the situations that I have already described.

The covenant brings together our national Government, our local authorities and our communities, those serving in the armed forces and our veterans. In looking further at ensuring that our serving armed forces personnel are fairly treated by the welfare system, I think that there are varying levels of experience when they and our veterans are dealing with social welfare benefits.

Kevin Stewart: I responded to Mr Corry's initial speech in this place by saying that the Ministry of Defence could do more to help folks with mental health problems when they leave the armed forces. It is all fair and well that we have a social security system that deals with all cases, but I think that the MOD has a role to play. Does the member agree with that?

Maurice Corry: I fully agree with that—in fact, I have been dealing with that issue in my role as shadow spokesperson for veterans' affairs.

Various organisations that provide support to veterans in Scotland have experience of some of the issues that I have highlighted. Veterans generally lack knowledge of the welfare benefits system, while some of their civilian counterparts have a greater awareness of the system through family members who receive benefits. There are, sadly, areas of Scotland in which generations of families have never had employment—unfortunately—and as such those families are able to understand the welfare system and how it can help them. Meanwhile, veterans are likely to have little specific awareness of the recent changes to the benefits system, such as PIP. Veterans are, in the main, reluctant to seek assistance from the benefits system, citing a feeling of personal failure, and it is felt that welfare benefits staff generally lack awareness of the needs of the veteran client group. Myths and misconceptions abound with regard to what a veteran is, following on from similar myths about what it is to be a member of Her Majesty's armed forces.

Communicating with welfare benefits staff can be difficult and frustrating for the veteran. There is evidence that, despite having the veteran's consent, the staff will not discuss a client without that client being present. Veterans frequently comment that they feel that the welfare benefits system does not take cognisance of their service of their country or the military covenant.

Many of those points have been evidenced by organisations such as Glasgow's helping heroes; Veterans Scotland; SSAFA—the Soldiers, Sailors, Airmen and Families Association; Shelter Scotland; Scottish Veterans Residences; Erskine Hospital; and the Royal British Legion Scotland, to name but a few.

My research and experience have shown over the past few years since the implementation of the military covenant in 2011 that several key elements of welfare benefits are now firmly in place for our armed forces, both for serving personnel and for veterans. Those include child benefits, statutory sick pay, the armed forces independence payment, PIP, the sure start maternity grant, job allowances, tax credits, childcare costs, council tax relief when on military operations and social housing.

With regard to social housing allocation, it took some considerable time to bring about fair treatment for our armed forces personnel when they leave the services and their Ministry of Defence house. For many years, there was no recognition by local authorities and housing associations of the many years that our armed forces personnel had spent living in MOD housing, and therefore they went to the bottom of the pile as they did not have enough points on the housing scale. Realising that unfairness—I take on board Kevin Stewart's point in that respect—the UK Government encouraged change among local authorities. Councils now recognise the time that personnel have spent living in MOD housing and give them parity with those in civilian housing.

Since the implementation of the 2011 military covenant in the UK, which was signed by a Conservative Prime Minister, things have come a long way for the members of our armed forces—both men and women—and for the 260,000 veterans who are now resident in Scotland. Nevertheless, there is still some way to go before we reach the levels of recognition and support for veterans that we see in the USA and Canada and in some western European countries.

I am sure that we can achieve that in Scotland. To get there, we must build on the successes that have been achieved so far by listening to the needs of our armed forces services—both men and women—and our veterans throughout Scotland for dignity, fairness and respect in our welfare benefits system.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The member can stop right there; that is a good place to stop.

16:13

Christina McKelvie (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP): Under the Human Rights Act 1998 and the European convention on human rights, disabled people have a fundamental right to be treated with dignity and respect. The UK Government and the Scottish Government also have a duty progressively to realise the rights that are contained in the United Nations convention on the rights of persons with disabilities, which includes the right to an adequate income and the right to be fully included in social and community life. That means the right to safety and security, and the right to live life—or, in some cases, what is left of that life—free from the worry of being unable to afford to heat or eat.

I thank Inclusion Scotland for its briefing, which tells us that disabled people are being robbed of their dignity and respect, of an adequate income and sometimes even of their lives by the current benefits system. It tells us that sanctions are being imposed unfairly and disproportionately on disabled people, especially those with learning disabilities and mental health issues. It notes that the combination of welfare reforms, the work capability assessment, mandatory reconsideration and sanctions are pushing an increasing number of disabled people into poverty and destitution, and that one in five—one in five!—JSA sanctions is applied against disabled people.

Let us look at one aspect of the current regime: PIP. Adam Tomkins attempted to convince us that PIP was working well, so I will highlight the reality for a current claimant. A person with motor neurone disease has been asked to undertake his PIP reassessment by questionnaire, more than a year in advance of the date on which his current claim ends. Let us not forget that the prognosis for someone with motor neurone disease is 14 very short months. He received a questionnaire in February this year, when the award runs until May 2017—a whole 15 months away. Fifteen months: when someone may have only 14 months left of their life, much of that with decreasing quality and independence. Renewal forms usually go out between three and six months before the renewal date—so what is that all about?

He has been asked on the questionnaire to state how his disability affects him now. Anybody who knows about motor neurone disease will know that, with its rapid progression, it can change from day to day but progressively always gets worse. That assessment would give a snapshot of the illness as it is now and would have little bearing on how the illness progresses or how it

might affect him next May—should he actually make it until then.

That has caused stress and anxiety for the gentleman, who may be given a lower PIP award than he might require next year—so he may need to be reassessed again. That stress and anxiety could rob him of his confidence and, more important, the precious little time he has left. He has also been made aware that he could be called up to face reassessment—not only the stress of all of that, but a reassessment.

The gentleman contacted the MND Scotland welfare and benefits officer; after much to-ing and fro-ing and stress and anxiety, they recently managed to resolve the situation. Should he have needed to go through that whole process? I say, no, he should not. The stress that he has been through in trying to deal with the DWP and get a commonsense approach to his renewal process has had an adverse impact on his life and is neither a fair nor dignified way to deal with people who have a terminal progressive illness.

Adam Tomkins: Will Christina McKelvie, for the reasons that she has outlined in her speech, support the Scottish Conservatives in pressing the Government to transfer those powers to this Parliament as soon as possible?

Christina McKelvie: The committee that dealt with the devolution of powers did that very well on its own. What we need are the budgets transferred with the powers—so Mr Tomkins can take his part in the process and I will take my part.

I agree with MND Scotland, which believes that people with the illness should be exempt from assessment, as used to happen under the incapacity benefit that pre-dated the employment support allowance.

I also agree with MND Scotland that, for as long as a PIP is in place, people with MND should receive a lifetime award of higher-level PIP so that they do not need to contend with a renewal process in the first place.

Next week, I will host an MND exhibition; I suggest that Mr Tomkins and his colleagues go to speak to the people who will be there and perhaps they will get a better picture.

If we truly want to ensure that we put dignity and respect at the heart of the new system, we need to ensure as quickly as possible that we protect people with MND and other life-limiting disabilities from the culture of a system that does not treat them with dignity and respect.

I believe that this Government has the will to do that. Early talks with people who are affected will ensure that the Government will live up to that promise.

16:18

Clare Adamson (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): I had the pleasure on Monday this week of attending the North Lanarkshire Carers Together annual general meeting. It was a fantastic event with more than 250 attendees, many of whom were carers from across the North Lanarkshire area. It is a fantastic organisation under Elizabeth Seaton, the chair, who has been a formidable, tireless and passionate campaigner for carers for many years, born out of her own caring responsibilities. The organisation has been going since 2001, when it was formally constituted, and has contributed hugely to the lives of carers in my area. It is a force for change: it has raised the profile of carers issues; it influences policy decisions at a local and national level; and it really makes a difference every day for carers in my area.

We have a massive effort ahead to make the new powers work. Increasing carers allowance by £600 a year—18 per cent—will make a huge difference to the lives of carers, and I hugely welcome the initiative about young carers allowances and look forward to seeing progress with that. We have done so much in the Carers (Scotland) Act 2016; the right to a carers assessment is instituted in law and we also looked at such things as the 84-day rule, which will be abolished by this Government.

We have a huge task ahead, however, that will rely on working in conjunction with the UK Government. It remains to be seen how some issues that were discussed when we considered the bill, such as local eligibility criteria not leading to a postcode lottery, will work in the future.

I have been fascinated by some of this afternoon's speeches. The contribution of Maree Todd as a mental health professional was wonderful and informed the whole chamber about the issues.

Enable Scotland said in its briefing that

"a specific medical assessment is rarely the best way to assess any claimant's disability and that it is in fact particularly unsuited to assessing those with a learning disability who can be particularly vulnerable to negative decisions in any process which involves communicating their difficulties. Benefit specific medical assessments tend to produce snap shots of a claimant's life rather than a long term picture".

How many conditions could those comments apply to? They could apply to MS, which George Adam mentioned, to MND, to chronic pain and to mental health conditions. We must get the system right and not continue down the line where a snapshot defines a person's future and their economic situation.

I very much understand why the Tories want to draw a line under their history. If I were a Tory, I

would want to do that and forget about it, too. Unfortunately, life is not like that. The language of shirkers and strivers that Johann Lamont and others have mentioned, is not new.

I am old enough to remember Peter Lilley's appalling address to the 1992 Conservative Party conference, in which he absolutely attacked the benefits system. I would therefore like to say that I have a little list. It is a list of Tory austerity practices that the SNP Government will be rooting out—and they will not be missed. Repeat assessments of terminally ill patients should go—as the minister said, they create a revolving door of reassessment. Remote assessment centres, which my colleague Gillian Martin mentioned, make life much more difficult for people. Meaningless assessment criteria for fluctuating conditions, which have been mentioned, should go. Assessments that leave people humiliated and threatened should go. Mandatory reconsideration before appeals can happen just delays the process and puts people in economic and emotional turmoil. Expert medical opinion has been ignored, but why on earth would we not listen to our general practitioners and other people who know patients and clients better than anyone else? Oh yes—I have a little list, and I trust that the SNP Government will not miss a single one of those practices.

16:22

Alex Johnstone (North East Scotland) (Con): During the previous five-year parliamentary session, welfare-related issues rose quickly up the agenda. By the end of the session, they were near the top. Much of the debate that happened in those five years was characterised by what can best be described as an unedifying scramble for the moral high ground. Welfare was an easy target with which to hit the Conservative Government.

In today's opening speeches, we heard again that—apparently—Conservative welfare reform drove the issue. However, if we look back, we see that the reality is that the welfare reform programme started before the Conservatives were in government and was necessary a generation back.

The first great attempt to reform welfare happened back in 1997, when Frank Field was the welfare minister. Perhaps members will notice from graphs that that was the last time that sanctions reached a peak.

The reality is that the Conservatives in this Parliament have taken and continue to take a constructive and engaged approach. A number of speakers—Kevin Stewart, Johann Lamont and Clare Adamson—have chosen to introduce what I can best describe as pejorative language in an

attempt to denigrate the Conservatives and their position, but I assure members that those speakers did not and will not hear such language from Conservatives in this chamber.

Kevin Stewart: Will the member give way?

Alex Johnstone: I will not.

It is a tribute to the work that Conservative members have done that we will not go down such a road. Other members have to introduce such language to support their arguments.

The truth is that we have a different attitude, but we are the party that in Government—and yes, I will claim credit for what happened at Westminster—devolved the powers over welfare for the disabled to this Parliament in the Scotland Act 2016. We have a tremendous opportunity, but there are dangers of which we must be aware.

Jeane Freeman: Will the member take an intervention?

Alex Johnstone: No, thank you.

Over the past five years, we have seen the gradual transfer of some welfare powers, such as the welfare funds. When the schemes were wound up and replaced by alternative schemes, there was a widespread view that those schemes had been abolished and that the money was no longer available, when in fact the schemes existed in a different form and the money was still available, although people were unaware of that.

As we make changes, we must be careful not to change too quickly. There are good signs that PIP is working, and we have heard today from my colleague Jeremy Balfour about his experience of that scheme. We have also heard that additional resource is moving into a number of other areas, and although some members seek to portray those changes as cuts, the truth is that the money is actually increasing in many areas.

We need to work together constructively, and I am delighted that so many people in this debate have sought to engage constructively. I hope that that is a change of direction and one that we can take forward, because I agree with the statement that was made by Jeane Freeman at the very start of the debate, that we need a social security system that we can all be proud of and that, thanks to the decision to devolve powers over disability benefits, we can take a different path from the rest of the UK. That is an opportunity that we should grasp and during the next five-year period of government we must have the courage to work together on that.

There are also those in this debate who have asked for further devolution of welfare responsibilities. Those who would like to see the devolution of pensions, for example, must start

telling us how they might go about paying for their promises should they ever come to that conclusion. We must be courageous. We on this side of the chamber have new faces, new ideas and new energy to take us forward in this task. I hope that the Government will show maturity greater than that shown by some others and by some of its back benchers, by realising that there is an opportunity to put the past behind us and make things better for the people who require our support.

16:28

Neil Findlay (Lothian) (Lab): This debate is key to how we see ourselves as a society. It is a cliché to say that we judge a society by how it treats its most vulnerable people, but just because it is a cliché does not mean that there is no truth in it. The current UK Government most certainly is not caring compassionately for our disabled neighbours, friends and relatives, because low-income families, the elderly, the vulnerable or the needy, and 100,000 Scottish disabled people have lost out as a result of ideologically driven cuts to disability benefits. Hundreds of thousands of low-income families across the UK, many of them working families who are poor as a result of low pay and wage restraint, have been affected by cuts to housing benefit and tax credits.

There is a big list of social security cuts that have been introduced by Cameron and Osborne since 2010. Child trust funds have been abolished in England, education maintenance allowance has been abolished, working and child tax credits have been reduced, the health in pregnancy grant is gone, housing benefit has been cut, and child benefit has been frozen and ended for some claimants. There have been council tax benefit cuts, and replacing DLA with PIP has saved £1 billion a year, and of course there is the grotesque bedroom tax. The list goes on and on and on, with more than 40 benefits cut, including all benefits for lone parents, the disabled and families, affecting the poorest and most needy people in our communities.

What I find offensive about all that is the relish and glee with which it is done. Time after time, as Osborne has announced his latest budgetary assault on the welfare state, we have witnessed Tory MPs cheering and braying as they condemn another family to the food bank and another young person to a future devoid of hope and opportunity or strip another disabled person of the mobility car that is their link to the outside world.

I find it truly sickening when I see a Prime Minister and a chancellor in a cabinet of millionaires with an estimated combined wealth in excess of £100 million cut their own taxes and those of their friends in the corporate world while

at the same time they remove the safety net from those most in need of our help.

Adam Tomkins: Will the member give way?

Neil Findlay: No, thanks.

This Parliament was not established to be a conveyer belt for bad policy, no matter from where or from whom it emanates. In the last parliamentary session, a Labour member's bill on the bedroom tax forced the Government to act. That shows what we can do when there is the political will to act. As a result, with the new powers that are coming over a number of areas of social security, we have an opportunity to do things in a very different way.

Having sat on the Welfare Reform Committee in the last session, I think that a large majority in the Parliament supports the creation of a more humane, fairer and supportive social security system that is designed to help people into employment, gives those who, for whatever reason, are unable to work support in their lives and gets us away from a system based on suspicion, on the language of strivers and skivers that Johann Lamont referred to and on a set of political beliefs that sees the state as some tyrannical enemy of freedom. Indeed, that is how the Tories see it. According to that philosophy, the welfare state is a barrier to the operation of the free market. It intervenes in the economy and the labour market, it attempts to universalise life chances and—heaven forbid—it redistributes wealth.

That ethos underpins the Tory attack on the social security system and, like the Tory amendment, the Tory speakers today have not acknowledged the untold misery that they have inflicted upon people. Two and a half thousand people have died after being declared fit for work, but there has been not a word of remorse from Mr Tomkins. Indeed, how would we ever expect a word of remorse from Mr Johnstone?

Let us build a different system, one that, for example, supports the army of carers who look after their family and friends. In that respect, we should not celebrate the fact that carers allowance will be increased to the level of JSA; that will hardly lead to a life of luxury for people. It should be the minimum that we provide, and we should be looking to move much further on as the system develops. We need a system that allows disabled people to live fulfilling independent lives and which helps rather than hinders them. Finally, we need a system that provides a safety net to ensure that any of us who require help can be helped.

We have the chance to do that, and the test for any of us who claim to be progressives is whether we want to take that chance.

16:33

Ben Macpherson (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP): In carers week, I want to take this opportunity to express my thanks to and deep admiration for carers across Scotland and those in my constituency in particular—I think of the work of the north west carers centre in the north of the city and Cornerstone Community Care's in your corner initiative, which supports young adult carers in north-east Edinburgh. I also pay tribute to the remarkable third sector organisations across Scotland that work in day in, day out to help mitigate the negative impacts of UK Government welfare reform, such as the citizens advice bureau in Leith, which I visited on Monday, and the Granton information centre in my constituency.

Behind the wording of the Government motion sits a fundamental question about how we can better support our society's weakest members through different, wiser and more compassionate choices than those of the current UK Government wherever and whenever this Parliament has the power to do so. On the issue of assisting those who need our assistance most, Adam Tomkins last week made the valid point that although Westminster sets the floor we in this Parliament will, with new powers, soon have some opportunity to—in his words—raise the ceiling.

However, the challenge for us in Scotland, which Mr Tomkins did not mention, is not just how we improve our social security system but how we do so with only 15 per cent of social security powers, and how we can make progress from a financial and policy position in which the floor that Westminster sets, to use Adam Tomkins's analogy, is steadily falling, cut by cut and year by year.

The circumstances that face the most vulnerable people in our society are, of course, difficult and challenging. Therefore, the role of Government should be to assist them, not to judge; and to support, not to distress. For those reasons, I believe in the Scottish Government's commitment, which the minister outlined, to create a social security system with dignity and respect at its heart, and to use our new powers to make a meaningful difference. I particularly support the Scottish Government's proposals to ensure that disability benefits are not means tested and that, instead, assessments are fair and transparent.

The UK Government's cuts to disability benefits are often unfair, and they have caused unnecessary and unacceptable stress and financial hardship. For example, as Sandra White mentioned, a survey by SAMH revealed that the mental health of 98 per cent of the relevant respondents had suffered due to welfare reform. Another example is revealed by Inclusion Scotland's research, which shows that 45 per cent

of disabled people with mobility vehicles have lost their cars following the transfer to PIP.

My points are based not just on reporting and analysis but on the experience of many of my constituents who have contacted me in states of unnecessary distress, discomfort and genuine suffering, due in particular to the PIP assessment process. One constituent recently wrote to me about being transferred from DLA to PIP, with a significant reduction in the award for mobility. They wrote:

“This has turned my life upside down ... I’m now at the point where I have to go to appeal and quite honestly I’m not sure how much fight I have left. This has just floored me. It’s like having my legs taken away. Help.”

That is an upsetting account, as are others that I have received that use similar words. What is more upsetting is that they are just some of many similar stories from those affected throughout Scotland.

The UK Government’s approach to social security has too often caused instances of injustice. It has lacked generosity and it has been mean-spirited. That is why this Parliament must and will make different and better choices with the social security powers that are coming to this institution, as the minister outlined.

I welcome the Scottish Government’s commitment to dignity, fairness and respect in disability benefits, and I look forward to the positive change that lies ahead.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We move to the winding-up speeches. I call Pauline McNeill to wind up for Labour—you have six minutes or thereabouts.

16:38

Pauline McNeill (Glasgow) (Lab): In carers week, we recognise the selfless and necessary role that carers play in society; more important, we can show the action that we can take in this Parliament. As the minister, Jeane Freeman, said, the goal is to ensure that

“carers have a life alongside caring.”

It is testament to the hard work of carers groups that carers have a high priority in the Parliament’s agenda. Carers week also reminds us that, without carers, our society simply could not function, and that any of us may be called on to be a carer at any point in our lives.

The main purpose of the motion for debate is to ensure dignity and respect in our social security system, which should be the heart of a fairer Scotland. Adam Tomkins says that no party should have a monopoly on bringing that issue to the table. I agree. That is the ground on which the

new Scottish social security system should be founded. As Ben Macpherson and others have said, we need to take the social security system in a new direction.

There is anger out there and in here about the fact that aspects of our welfare system, to date, have not given people—and disabled people in particular—a dignified life. As a citizen, I have never felt so angry and powerless as when I saw the reforms and cuts to benefits that were made on the back of the austerity measures in 2012. It was not just that there was an attack on living standards by a reduction in benefits and allowances; as others have alluded to, the very system has left many vulnerable people in despair. Maree Todd made an excellent speech in which she said that the system gave people no say in determining their own destiny. In some ways, the feeling that someone can do nothing is worse than a financial cut.

In some societies around the world, such conditions have led to revolution and the overthrow of Governments. We have the opportunity, perhaps, to have our own quiet revolution to change what has been, to some extent, an inhumane system. Christina McKelvie rightly quoted an excellent briefing by Inclusion Scotland, which says that disabled people have been “robbed of their dignity”. There are many stark figures in the briefing: the figure that one in five jobseekers allowance sanctions is applied against disabled people is really shocking.

There is nothing dignified about some aspects of our current system, as Neil Findlay said. On work capability assessments and the so-called appeal system, has it not occurred to the person who designed that system that someone might have to wait for the benefit that they have applied for? How are they meant to live during the weeks in between? Sixty per cent of employment and support allowance sanctions are against claimants with mental and behavioural disorders.

Adam Tomkins: Does the member recognise that the employment and support allowance was introduced not by the Conservatives, but by the previous Labour Government, and that it was the previous Labour Government that signed the contract with Atos Healthcare to undertake work capability assessments?

Pauline McNeill: The criteria changed. Mr Tomkins and Mr Johnstone are on the side of the chamber that wants to have consensus in this debate. There is much for the Conservatives to defend here, as there are huge financial losses, and I did not hear one word from members on the Tory benches about the thousands of people who will lose out in the transfer to PIP. Inclusion Scotland says that 47 per cent of DLA claimants who were awarded the higher mobility rate will

lose their entitlement to the enhanced rate when they are reassessed. What do the Conservatives have to say about the 45 per cent of disabled people with mobility vehicles who are losing their cars?

We need to have a discussion with ministers and the new Social Security Committee about the transitional arrangements as, by the time we have the powers, a lot of the transfers will have taken place.

Johann Lamont made the crucial point that not enough action is being taken to overcome the barriers to disabled people going into employment. That is perhaps the greater scandal. The figures that she quoted on modern apprenticeships are a scandal, and the Parliament needs to address them. Making progress in that area would mean making real progress in giving people dignity and respect. The phrase “achieving your full potential” should mean something to everyone.

Alison Johnstone talked about the new powers that are coming to the Parliament. We are getting those powers at a crucial time, and we have a chance to design a new system that will put dignity back. I think that we can work across the parties to achieve that and that the Parliament will show that it can do something with those powers.

16:44

Annie Wells (Glasgow) (Con): I congratulate Jeane Freeman on her appointment and on her maiden speech, which was very good. I also congratulate Jeremy Balfour on his maiden speech.

I am glad to have the opportunity to close the debate as the new welfare reform and equality spokesperson for the Scottish Conservative Party. I, too, add my thanks in support of carers week, which is taking place up and down the country. I also offer my personal thanks to the many carers who provide an invaluable service to families and communities in Scotland.

I am very proud of the Scottish Conservatives’ manifesto pledge to bring carers allowance into line with jobseekers allowance, a move that will support more than 60,000 carers, and I welcome the Scottish Government’s commitment to implement the proposal.

With spending worth £1.5 billion being devolved to the Scottish Parliament—that is the entirety of the disability living allowance or the personal independence payment—it is now in the Scottish Government’s hands and its responsibility to ensure that it delivers the new system of disability benefits. As I said in last week’s debate, it is clear that, now that we have those new powers, blaming the UK Government is no longer appropriate or

acceptable. The devolution of the powers allows us all to have a rigorous discussion about how we support some of the most vulnerable people in our society. Again, the issue is so important in part because, if we do not design Scotland’s social security system properly, we will be letting down the most vulnerable people in our society.

As Adam Tomkins said, we want our social security system to have some basic principles at its heart: it should primarily support the most vulnerable in our society, it should be flexible and personalised, and it should give those who can and want to work the opportunities and support to do just that.

We should start the process with a positive outlook. We should not imply things that are untrue about the current system such as, for example, that disability benefits are means tested under the UK Government. Creating that confusion is not helpful for anyone and serves only to score political points. As Jeremy Balfour said, although there are problems, PIP is in essence a constructive system and a marked improvement on the DLA; and, as Adam Tomkins said, benefits relating to the additional costs of disability have been increased every year. We are asking for constructive innovation, not a complete upheaval.

Any social security system worth its salt should serve to support the most vulnerable in society. If an individual is unable to work, it is fundamental that our social security system is able to support them in a fair, dignified and respectful manner at all times.

I believe that it is necessary to take measures to ensure that our social security system is personalised, responsive and flexible. It is, of course, important that the individual’s needs should always be borne in mind, and an effective and efficient social security system should be able to respond to differing and often complex personal circumstances. We should do our best to ensure that the administration of our social security system is not overly burdensome. Similarly, we should be mindful that Scotland’s social security system does not simply involve a revolving door of assessments and too much paperwork. We should also make better use of medical evidence and information sharing. We, too, want innovation and, as Liam Kerr pointed out, the Scottish Conservatives have our own vision. We must all look to the future.

Jeane Freeman: Will the member accept that, in the context where 15 per cent of the benefit powers are devolved to us and 85 per cent of the powers remain at Westminster, the reality is not that we are looking to the past but that we are looking to the present? If she really wants assistance for those who want to go into employment, she and her colleagues will turn to

the UK Government of which they are so proud and remind it not to cut benefits and support to the long-term unemployed and to people with disabilities who want to be employed. The Conservatives need to stop believing and trying to make others believe that, somehow, we are backward looking while her party is forward looking, because that is far from the truth.

Annie Wells: The Scottish Government will have control over some top-up benefits. I am trying to say that we need to work together in this chamber to deliver the best for the people of Scotland.

With the integration of health and social care, we should explore whether attendance allowance and DLA and PIP should be a part of a similarly integrated system, by devolving control further to local authorities and health boards or to the new health and social care partnerships. Indeed, on that subject, the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities has said:

“Full devolution of the disability and carers benefits to Scottish local authorities could be used to develop more rounded personal budgets to enhance health and well-being outcomes and improve personal independence.”

That option could allow a more localised, personalised and flexible disability benefits system. I instinctively believe that decisions are best taken as close to those who are affected by them as possible. Such innovations could result not only in a more effective social security system but in a fairer and more engaged one that focuses on people as individuals rather than on physical disabilities. In short, we should work to ensure that people are supported to achieve personal independence holistically.

That brings me to an important point: in striving for dignity and personal independence for disabled people, we should always strive to help into employment those who can and want to work. For an individual to be supported to find work and for that individual to work and contribute to society is surely also a dignified and fair outcome. I welcome Johann Lamont’s comments in her speech about supporting people to get into work and keeping them in work.

Thinking about fairness for people who have a disability, do we think that it is fair that employment rates for disabled people are currently 43 per cent lower than for those who are not classed as disabled? Of course it is not fair. We need to do more to help those who are looking for work. Whether that means developing skills and boosting confidence or more practical support and advice, it is vital that the support is ready and available for people who are looking for work.

Many disabled people can work, want to work, and need some support to get into work. I am

whole-heartedly committed to ensuring that all disabled people who want to work have the opportunities and support that they need to get and keep a job. The words “dignity” and “respect” imply empowerment and opportunity as much as protection and security.

In short, we have two core aims when it comes to the disability benefits system: we want to be supportive of people who cannot work and we want to be effective at helping those who want to work.

I welcome the proposed plan to increase the carers allowance, which is in line with our policy.

16:52

The Cabinet Secretary for Communities, Social Security and Equalities (Angela Constance): I congratulate Jeremy Balfour on his maiden speech. I listened to it with interest—particularly the parts about his experience of serving as a tribunal member. I hope that the Tories have had the good sense to place him on the Social Security Committee.

I will talk about mental health and mental illness, which have been a feature of the debate. Sandra White spoke about mental health and Maree Todd spoke powerfully about the impact of hopelessness on people’s mental health. Mental health issues have also been a thread throughout many of the debates that we have had over the past two weeks as we have begun the new parliamentary session, not least thanks to Alex Cole-Hamilton.

As a consequence of that, I have recalled the words of my old social work boss when he tried to support and comfort me as a newly qualified mental health officer when a young woman with whom I had been working went on to commit suicide. He said: “Angela, you have to remember that mental illness is sometimes terminal.” He meant that mental illness, like physical illness, can be life limiting and, at times, fatal; and it can be invisible. There are people going about their lives and their business in our communities day by day and week by week who, as a result of a wide range of mental health issues, go through invisible turmoil and torment, which we neither see nor understand.

I mention that because it is important for anyone who works with or for people with vulnerabilities or difficulties of any description and for those of us who are charged with the responsibility of designing, building and providing a new service such as the Scottish social security agency, which is the largest-scale project in the Parliament’s history.

Here I agree with Mark Griffin. We will have to have the insight, understanding and humility to know how hard we will all have to work to get this right, and to get it right from the start. Dignity, fairness and respect will be built in with the bricks of the new agency.

Johann Lamont was right. We need more than warm words. We will proceed in a spirit of co-production and will work with those who have lived experience of the benefits system. At all times, we will think about how it feels to someone when the person who is doing the assessment wants to examine their stomach, although the problem is that they cannot get out of their bed in the morning because they have been crying constantly as a result of depression; or how it feels when someone reads a report that has been written about them in which they are described as "it". We should not underestimate the need to ensure that the correct culture and values are at the heart of the new agency.

Mr Tomkins spoke about timescales. Make no mistake: we want to get the new powers as soon as is practical—indeed, we wanted more powers—and we want to make different choices. However, our number 1 priority and responsibility must be the powers' safe and secure transfer. That means that we must work as part of the joint ministerial working group on welfare to ensure that the powers and resources are transferred appropriately. I hope that Mr Tomkins is relieved that I did receive his letter—an acknowledgement was sent to him yesterday. The joint ministerial working group on welfare will meet for the first time after the election next week, and I have had constructive discussions with David Mundell and Stephen Crabb, but I must emphasise the practicalities. Folk rely on their benefits, and we will not be bullied into unrealistic timescales. Despite our eagerness, we have to get this right.

Adam Tomkins: Could the cabinet secretary give even a hint of a suggestion as to the sort of timetable—in months and years—for when we can expect the powers in question to be transferred to the Scottish Parliament?

Angela Constance: As Mr Tomkins acknowledged in his letter to me,

"the implementation dates for welfare will be agreed by the Joint Ministerial Working Group on Welfare".

As he also knows, over the summer months the Scottish Government will undertake a pre-legislative consultation on the new Scottish social security agency. We are proceeding with a wealth of detailed work. We will proceed as fast as we can, but we will take great care and be very cautious in doing so. We will not compromise on getting the new system right, because people

depend on us, and they depend on receiving the right amount of the right benefit at the right time.

I turn my attention to the Conservative amendment. Many members have picked up on the fact that the Conservatives have conflated some of the disability issues with employment issues, which, covertly, feeds into a nasty narrative about the deserving and the undeserving poor. We must remember that we do not have all the powers to support people into work. I regret that deeply, but we will ensure that we use the powers that we have to maximum impact. It would be remiss of me not to reiterate that, before they were devolved and the associated resources were transferred, employment services received a whopping 87 per cent cut.

We must question the Conservatives on some of their practices, because 100 per cent of the welfare state remains with them. When we get the new powers, we will have 15 per cent of it. We must question how people losing their Motability vehicle helps them to get to work. That makes a sham of the Conservatives' claim to be ambitious about reducing the disability employment gap. How does making people fight for what should be theirs by right help them? How does that increase their confidence and assist them into the workplace?

We will continue to oppose all attacks from the UK Government on social security for disabled people. It is imperative that expenditure is protected not just for the benefits that are to be devolved to Scotland, but for benefits that will remain reserved, and that includes the ESA.

Today, we have heard Tories appeal against unwarranted attacks on Westminster. As Pauline McNeill said, what about the unwarranted attacks on the poor? I have not heard any Tory member today stand up for the poorest in our society. We have to remember that £6 billion has been taken from welfare expenditure in Scotland and that £1 billion of that is from our children.

We have heard an appeal for consensus. If Mr Tomkins thinks that he can come to the chamber and appeal for consensus when the Tories are cutting £30 a week from the employment and support allowance or to defend a sanctions system that is not fit for purpose, he can get "on his bike", to quote an infamous Tory.

If the Tories were really serious about consensus, they would vote with the far more progressive voices in a range of parties. They would vote against the £12 billion of cuts that have still to come on top of the £21 billion that has already been taken out of welfare throughout the UK.

Finally, I know that the Tories like to vote no. So why do they not vote with us, stand up to

Westminster, and vote no to welfare cuts along with the rest of the members in the chamber?

Decision Time

17:01

The Presiding Officer (Ken Macintosh): The next item of business is decision time. There are three questions to be put as a result of today's business. I remind members that, if the amendment in the name of Adam Tomkins is agreed to, the amendment in the name of Mark Griffin will fall.

The first question is, that amendment S5M-00374.2, in the name of Adam Tomkins, which seeks to amend motion S5M-00374, in the name of Angela Constance, on dignity, fairness and respect in disability benefits, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

For

Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Con)
 Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)
 Burnett, Alexander (Aberdeenshire West) (Con)
 Cameron, Donald (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Carlaw, Jackson (Eastwood) (Con)
 Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
 Chapman, Peter (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Corry, Maurice (West Scotland) (Con)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Golden, Maurice (West Scotland) (Con)
 Greene, Jamie (West Scotland) (Con)
 Hamilton, Rachael (South Scotland) (Con)
 Johnstone, Alex (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Lamont, John (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 Lindhurst, Gordon (Lothian) (Con)
 Lockhart, Dean (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Mitchell, Margaret (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Mountain, Edward (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Mundell, Oliver (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
 Ross, Douglas (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Scott, John (Ayr) (Con)
 Simpson, Graham (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Thomson, Ross (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Tomkins, Adam (Glasgow) (Con)
 Wells, Annie (Glasgow) (Con)
 Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)

Against

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
 Adamson, Clare (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)
 Allan, Dr Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
 Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire South) (SNP)
 Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
 Campbell, Aileen (Clydesdale) (SNP)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
 Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh Western) (LD)
 Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
 Crawford, Bruce (Stirling) (SNP)
 Cunningham, Roseanna (Perthshire South and Kinross-

shire) (SNP)
 Denham, Ash (Edinburgh Eastern) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)
 Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)
 Evans, Mairi (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
 Ewing, Annabelle (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP)
 Fabiani, Linda (East Kilbride) (SNP)
 Fee, Mary (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Findlay, Neil (Lothian) (Lab)
 Finnie, John (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee City West) (SNP)
 Forbes, Kate (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP)
 Freeman, Jeane (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)
 Grahame, Christine (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
 Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen) (SNP)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
 Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
 Johnstone, Alison (Lothian) (Green)
 Kelly, James (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
 Lamont, Johann (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Lennon, Monica (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 Lyle, Richard (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)
 MacDonald, Angus (Falkirk East) (SNP)
 MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
 MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
 Mackay, Derek (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP)
 Mackay, Rona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)
 Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP)
 Maguire, Ruth (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
 Marra, Jenny (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 McAlpine, Joan (South Scotland) (SNP)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
 McDonald, Mark (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
 McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Provan) (SNP)
 McKelvie, Christina (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP)
 McMillan, Stuart (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Neil, Alex (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
 Paterson, Gil (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
 Rennie, Willie (North East Fife) (LD)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
 Ross, Gail (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
 Rumbles, Mike (North East Scotland) (LD)
 Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
 Russell, Michael (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Sarwar, Anas (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Scott, Tavish (Shetland Islands) (LD)
 Smith, Elaine (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Smyth, Colin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
 Stevenson, Stewart (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
 Stewart, David (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
 Todd, Maree (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)

Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
 Watt, Maureen (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)
 Wheelhouse, Paul (South Scotland) (SNP)
 White, Sandra (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)
 Wightman, Andy (Lothian) (Green)
 Yousaf, Humza (Glasgow Pollok) (SNP)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 29, Against 88, Abstentions 0.

Amendment disagreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that amendment S5M-00374.3, in the name of Mark Griffin, which seeks to amend motion S5M-00374, in the name of Angela Constance, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

For

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
 Adamson, Clare (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)
 Allan, Dr Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
 Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire South) (SNP)
 Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
 Campbell, Aileen (Clydesdale) (SNP)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
 Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh Western) (LD)
 Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
 Crawford, Bruce (Stirling) (SNP)
 Cunningham, Roseanna (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)
 Denham, Ash (Edinburgh Eastern) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)
 Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)
 Evans, Mairi (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
 Ewing, Annabelle (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP)
 Fabiani, Linda (East Kilbride) (SNP)
 Fee, Mary (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Findlay, Neil (Lothian) (Lab)
 Finnie, John (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee City West) (SNP)
 Forbes, Kate (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP)
 Freeman, Jeane (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)
 Grahame, Christine (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
 Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen) (SNP)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
 Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
 Johnstone, Alison (Lothian) (Green)
 Kelly, James (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
 Lamont, Johann (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Lennon, Monica (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)

Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 Lyle, Richard (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)
 MacDonald, Angus (Falkirk East) (SNP)
 MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
 MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
 Mackay, Derek (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP)
 Mackay, Rona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)
 Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP)
 Maguire, Ruth (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
 Marra, Jenny (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 McAlpine, Joan (South Scotland) (SNP)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
 McDonald, Mark (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
 McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Provan) (SNP)
 McKelvie, Christina (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP)
 McMillan, Stuart (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Neil, Alex (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
 Paterson, Gil (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
 Rennie, Willie (North East Fife) (LD)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
 Ross, Gail (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
 Rumbles, Mike (North East Scotland) (LD)
 Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
 Russell, Michael (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Sarwar, Anas (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Scott, Tavish (Shetland Islands) (LD)
 Smith, Elaine (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Smyth, Colin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
 Stevenson, Stewart (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
 Stewart, David (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
 Todd, Maree (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
 Watt, Maureen (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)
 Wheelhouse, Paul (South Scotland) (SNP)
 White, Sandra (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)
 Wightman, Andy (Lothian) (Green)
 Yousaf, Humza (Glasgow Pollok) (SNP)

Against

Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Con)
 Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)
 Burnett, Alexander (Aberdeenshire West) (Con)
 Cameron, Donald (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Carlaw, Jackson (Eastwood) (Con)
 Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
 Chapman, Peter (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Corry, Maurice (West Scotland) (Con)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Golden, Maurice (West Scotland) (Con)
 Greene, Jamie (West Scotland) (Con)
 Hamilton, Rachael (South Scotland) (Con)
 Johnstone, Alex (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Lamont, John (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 Lindhurst, Gordon (Lothian) (Con)
 Lockhart, Dean (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Mitchell, Margaret (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Mountain, Edward (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Mundell, Oliver (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
 Ross, Douglas (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Scott, John (Ayr) (Con)
 Simpson, Graham (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)

Thomson, Ross (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Tomkins, Adam (Glasgow) (Con)
 Wells, Annie (Glasgow) (Con)
 Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 88, Against 29, Abstentions 0.

Amendment agreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that motion S5M-00374, in the name of Angela Constance, as amended, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

For

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
 Adamson, Clare (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)
 Allan, Dr Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
 Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire South) (SNP)
 Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
 Campbell, Aileen (Clydesdale) (SNP)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
 Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh Western) (LD)
 Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
 Crawford, Bruce (Stirling) (SNP)
 Cunningham, Roseanna (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)
 Denham, Ash (Edinburgh Eastern) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)
 Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)
 Evans, Mairi (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
 Ewing, Annabelle (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP)
 Fabiani, Linda (East Kilbride) (SNP)
 Fee, Mary (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Findlay, Neil (Lothian) (Lab)
 Finnie, John (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee City West) (SNP)
 Forbes, Kate (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP)
 Freeman, Jeane (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)
 Grahame, Christine (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
 Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen) (SNP)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
 Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
 Johnstone, Alison (Lothian) (Green)
 Kelly, James (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
 Lamont, Johann (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Lennon, Monica (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 Lyle, Richard (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)
 MacDonald, Angus (Falkirk East) (SNP)
 MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
 MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)

Mackay, Derek (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP)
 Mackay, Rona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)
 Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP)
 Maguire, Ruth (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
 Marra, Jenny (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 McAlpine, Joan (South Scotland) (SNP)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
 McDonald, Mark (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
 McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Provan) (SNP)
 McKelvie, Christina (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP)
 McMillan, Stuart (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Neil, Alex (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
 Paterson, Gil (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
 Rennie, Willie (North East Fife) (LD)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
 Ross, Gail (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
 Rumbles, Mike (North East Scotland) (LD)
 Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
 Russell, Michael (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Sarwar, Anas (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Scott, Tavish (Shetland Islands) (LD)
 Smith, Elaine (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Smyth, Colin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
 Stevenson, Stewart (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
 Stewart, David (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
 Todd, Maree (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
 Watt, Maureen (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)
 Wheelhouse, Paul (South Scotland) (SNP)
 White, Sandra (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)
 Wightman, Andy (Lothian) (Green)
 Yousaf, Humza (Glasgow Pollok) (SNP)

Against

Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Con)
 Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)
 Burnett, Alexander (Aberdeenshire West) (Con)
 Cameron, Donald (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Carlaw, Jackson (Eastwood) (Con)
 Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
 Chapman, Peter (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Corry, Maurice (West Scotland) (Con)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Golden, Maurice (West Scotland) (Con)
 Greene, Jamie (West Scotland) (Con)
 Hamilton, Rachael (South Scotland) (Con)
 Johnstone, Alex (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Lamont, John (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 Lindhurst, Gordon (Lothian) (Con)
 Lockhart, Dean (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Mitchell, Margaret (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Mountain, Edward (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Mundell, Oliver (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
 Ross, Douglas (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Scott, John (Ayr) (Con)
 Simpson, Graham (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Thomson, Ross (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Tomkins, Adam (Glasgow) (Con)
 Wells, Annie (Glasgow) (Con)
 Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 88, Against 29, Abstentions 0.

Motion, as amended, agreed to,

That the Parliament welcomes Carers Week 2016 and thanks carers for their invaluable contribution to society and recognises the vital role that they play caring for family, friends and neighbours; supports the Scottish Government's plan to increase carers allowance, extend winter fuel allowance to children on higher rate disability living allowance and ensure that disability benefits are increased at least in line with inflation to ensure that they cover the cost of living, are not means tested and that assessments are fair and transparent; believes that carer and disability benefits, once devolved, will help achieve the Scottish Government's wider goal of supporting disabled people and their carers to participate in society, fulfilling their potential in life; believes that the UK Government's cuts to disability benefits are unfair and have caused unnecessary stress and financial hardship; urges the UK Government to make no further cuts to disability benefits; agrees that disability benefits are an investment in the people of Scotland and that they should support disabled people and those with long-term conditions and illnesses in a fair way; believes that, when the powers over disability and ill-health benefits are devolved, smooth transfer and transition is a priority, and considers that disabled people, carers and their representative groups should be fully involved in the development of the Scottish benefits, which should have dignity and respect at their heart.

Meeting closed at 17:05.

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