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Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

Official Report

MEETING OF THE PARLIAMENT

Wednesday 6 May 2015

Session 4

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Scottish Parliament

Wednesday 6 May 2015

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

Business Motions

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Elaine Smith): Good afternoon. The first item of business is consideration of business motion S4M-13093, in the name of Joe FitzPatrick, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, setting out a business programme.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees the following programme of business—

Tuesday 12 May 2015

2.00 pm Time for Reflection
followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions
followed by Topical Questions (if selected)
followed by Stage 1 Debate: Human Trafficking and Exploitation (Scotland) Bill
followed by Financial Resolution: Human Trafficking and Exploitation (Scotland) Bill
followed by Business Motions
followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions
 5.00 pm Decision Time
followed by Members' Business

Wednesday 13 May 2015

2.00 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions
followed by Portfolio Question Time
 Education and Lifelong Learning
followed by Scottish Government Debate: Scottish Apprenticeship Week
followed by Business Motions
followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions
 5.00 pm Decision Time
followed by Members' Business

Thursday 14 May 2015

11.40 am Parliamentary Bureau Motions
 11.40 am General Questions
 12.00 pm First Minister's Questions
followed by Members' Business
 2.30 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions
followed by Scottish Government Debate: Circular Economy (Waste Management)
followed by Business Motions
followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5.00 pm Decision Time

Tuesday 19 May 2015

2.00 pm Time for Reflection
followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions
followed by Topical Questions (if selected)
followed by Scottish Government Business
followed by Business Motions
followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions
 5.00 pm Decision Time
followed by Members' Business

Wednesday 20 May 2015

2.00 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions
followed by Portfolio Question Time
 Social Justice, Communities and Pensioners' Rights; Fair Work, Skills and Training
followed by Scottish Government Business
followed by Business Motions
followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions
 5.00 pm Decision Time
followed by Members' Business

Thursday 21 May 2015

11.40 am Parliamentary Bureau Motions
 11.40 am General Questions
 12.00 pm First Minister's Questions
followed by Members' Business
 2.30 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions
followed by Scottish Government Business
followed by Business Motions
followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions
 5.00 pm Decision Time.—[*Joe FitzPatrick.*]

Motion agreed to.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The next item of business is consideration of business motion S4M-13088, in the name of Joe FitzPatrick, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, setting out a stage 1 timetable for the Alcohol (Licensing, Public Health and Criminal Justice) (Scotland) Bill.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees that consideration of the Alcohol (Licensing, Public Health and Criminal Justice) (Scotland) Bill at stage 1 be completed by 5 February 2016.—[*Joe FitzPatrick.*]

Motion agreed to.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The next item of business is consideration of business motion S4M-13089, in the name of Joe FitzPatrick, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, setting out a

stage 2 timetable for the Prisoners (Control of Release) (Scotland) Bill.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees that consideration of the Prisoners (Control of Release) (Scotland) Bill at stage 2 be completed by 5 June 2015.—[*Joe FitzPatrick.*]

Motion agreed to.

Parliamentary Bureau Motions

14:01

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Elaine Smith):

The next item of business is consideration of two Parliamentary Bureau motions. I ask Joe FitzPatrick to move motion S4M-13090, on the approval of a Scottish statutory instrument, and motion S4M-13091, on committee membership.

Motions moved,

That the Parliament agrees that the Scottish Marine Regions Order 2015 [draft] be approved.

That the Parliament agrees that Alex Johnstone be appointed as the Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party substitute on the Welfare Reform Committee.—[*Joe FitzPatrick.*]

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The question on the motions will be put at decision time.

Europe (Rescue of Migrants)

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Elaine Smith):

Our next item of business is a members' business debate on motion S4M-12950, in the name of Alex Rowley, on thousands of migrants dying attempting to reach Europe each year. I advise members that we are incredibly tight for time during the debate.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament expresses its shock at the recent loss of life in the Mediterranean sea where almost 400 migrants attempting to reach the EU are believed to have died in a shipwreck off the coast of Libya; supports the comments of human rights groups across Europe that have condemned the scrapping of rescue operations in the Mediterranean, which it believes is endangering the lives of thousands of desperate migrants making perilous journeys across the sea; acknowledges the comments of the human rights group, Amnesty International, which stated that "European governments' on-going negligence towards the humanitarian crisis in the Mediterranean has contributed to a more than 50-fold increase in migrant and refugee deaths since the beginning of 2015"; believes that the decision of the EU to stop funding Italy's Mare Nostrum rescue mission last year in favour of the surveillance patrols currently being carried out by its border agency, Frontex, is a clear example of its dereliction of duty with regard to this matter; notes the evidence given to the European and External Relations Committee by Pasquale Terracciano, the Italian Ambassador to the United Kingdom, who stated "We are pressing to persuade the European Union that there is an external border that is of common interest and should be managed at a common level, we are pressing other partners to make it a European priority and all political pressure is welcome to create awareness of the scale of the phenomenon", and believes that it is the duty of all EU nations to work together to tackle this humanitarian crisis, the scale of which it considers is causing widespread concern and disbelief in the Cowdenbeath constituency and in communities across Scotland.

14:02

Alex Rowley (Cowdenbeath) (Lab): I thank all members of the Parliament who signed my motion and made this debate possible.

Members have received a copy of a publication from Amnesty International called, "Europe's sinking shame: The failure to save refugees and migrants at sea". The briefing sets out the sheer scale of the human disaster taking place in the Mediterranean, which has seen more than 1,750 men, women and children perish at sea in the first four months of this year. Everyone I have met and who I know has been shocked at the scale of the loss of life in the Mediterranean among men, women and children.

In October last year, the Italian ambassador to the United Kingdom came to this Parliament and addressed the European and External Relations Committee. He spoke of the human tragedy in the Mediterranean and said:

"We wish that there was a clearer plan. To be honest with you, the truth is that we have been left quite alone to face the tragedy."

He talked of migrants

"drowning by the thousand in the Mediterranean Sea."

He said:

"It is not possible for just one country, with the occasional help of Malta or Greece, to cope"

with such a major crisis. He added that Italy was

"pressing other partners to make it a European priority. All political pressure is welcome to create awareness of the scale"—[*Official Report, European and External Relations Committee*, 9 October 2014; c 38, 39.]

of the human tragedy taking place.

Today I am speaking to this motion to raise awareness of the tragedy, but also to make the case that this Parliament must do more to speak out and to use every bit of influence that we have to make the United Kingdom Government and Governments across Europe step up and do what is necessary to stop this tragedy continuing.

The vast majority of the people at risk are the men, women and children who are travelling to Europe from the poorest countries of Africa, where poverty is endemic and opportunity is limited. Many who are seeking protection and asylum come from trouble spots such as Syria, from which there is currently no legal and safe way to get to Europe. They need our help.

We cannot say that we do not know what is happening, as Frontex—the European border protection agency in Warsaw—follows every boat that is filled with refugees and, in the past year and a half, we have been using drones and satellites to survey the borders. European authorities have carried out surveillance of people drowning in the Mediterranean. We know that people are dying.

I want to quote Pope Francis. On 19 April, after a further 600 men, women and children had died, he said:

"They are men and women like us, our brothers seeking a better life, starving, persecuted, wounded, exploited, victims of war. They were looking for a better life. Faced with such a tragedy, I express my most heartfelt pain and promise to remember the victims and their families in prayer. I make a heartfelt appeal to the international community to react decisively and quickly to see to it that such tragedies are not repeated."

He added:

"It is evident that the proportions of the phenomenon demand much greater involvement. We must not tire in our attempts to solicit a more extensive response at the European and international level".

That is our purpose in being here today. Our country, Scotland, has a proud history of internationalism, of reaching out and of not looking

the other way when fellow human beings—no matter their nationality, no matter their colour or religion, and no matter their wealth or social status—are in danger. We have to think about protecting people, not just protecting borders; we have to think about saving lives, not just saving money.

We must consider legal ways for genuine refugees to reach Europe. The United Nations refugee agency and human rights organisations such as Germany's Pro Asylum group and Human Rights Watch have suggested that the European Union should create asylum procedures at the embassies of its member states in the same way as Switzerland has done.

The Italian navy's operation *mare nostrum* rescue mission, which protected hundreds of thousands of refugees from drowning, needs funds to be fully up and running once again.

The European Union also needs to finally begin participating seriously in the UN refugee agency resettlement programme. The UN is currently seeking guest countries for several hundred thousand refugees who need to be resettled. In 2013, North America took in more than 9,000 refugees, but Germany accepted only 300. We must all do more.

The EU's Dublin regulation, which allows refugees to apply for asylum only in their country of arrival, is an issue and we should also look at whether the visa requirement for people from crisis-torn countries—countries in conflict—should be temporarily lifted.

I do not say that those changes would stop the loss of all lives at sea, but the loss could be significantly reduced. We should send out a message that, just as when Europe once had its own refugees fleeing Europe and needing the help of the international community, we Europeans in the international community are prepared to help now.

I ask that we all remain focused on achieving action from our UK Government and from Governments across Europe, because we cannot allow the situation to continue.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Many thanks. As already indicated, we are very tight for time. Members have a maximum of four minutes for speeches.

14:09

Kenny MacAskill (Edinburgh Eastern) (SNP): Alex Rowley deserves enormous credit for bringing the debate to the chamber. There is, as we have heard, a crisis of humanity that should—and does—unite all members in the chamber. I agree not just with the tenor of Alex Rowley's

speech but with his thoughts as he has narrated them. We are talking about a catastrophe of biblical proportions. We have probably not seen such an exodus, and the kind of calamity that is being faced by individuals, on the European continent since world war two—indeed, for many generations.

It does not matter whether the individuals are black or white; Christian or Muslim; people who are seeking asylum or those who are immigrants. People—men, women and children—are drowning and dying, as Alex Rowley said, and common humanity dictates that we need to act now. Immediate action is needed. Some action is already under way, which is welcome. I even saw a tweet recently that said that the Irish navy has dispatched a vessel to assist. To be fair to the Government of Ireland, it has never been shy or slow in standing up—either in the United Nations or elsewhere—for what is right, which is welcome.

Equally, other nations—especially wealthy nations—in the EU and the wider world must do more to take their share of responsibility. Many squadrons of EU and NATO warships are currently located off the horn of Africa, and rightly so, because there are challenges from piracy. Ships are being taken by those who would hold people to ransom, and individuals are being kidnapped and not released and, sadly, sometimes slaughtered. If we can take action for commercial shipping, surely we can do much more in the name of common humanity. It is not an either/or question—the two elements are both essential.

There are underlying issues relating to immigration, but the issue that requires to be faced by all parties and all Governments in relation to this crisis is primarily not an immigration issue. Fundamentally, it is an asylum issue.

According to Human Rights Watch, more than 50 per cent of those who are coming are fleeing from Syria and Eritrea. They are driven not simply by a desire to live in what many see as a better world in the west but by the necessity of getting out of a country that is war-torn, in which famine, pestilence and plague are affecting their land. That issue requires to be tackled and addressed.

Yes—there will be debates and discussions on immigration among all parties following the election, but there is first and foremost a requirement for humanity to act and, as Alex Rowley said, necessarily to address the need of individuals for asylum.

The western world has had a role to play in some of these countries. The bombs and bullets were probably not manufactured in Syria or Eritrea; they were probably sold to those countries by the same western nations that many individuals

seek to get into. The problems have in some small part been created by those of us who see ourselves as the victims of people who are seeking to come here, and we require to take action on that.

I echo the points that Alex Rowley made, which members should take on board. We require to take immediate action to save lives. We should look across at the United States of America, where the steps that were taken to build a fence as a way of blocking people from coming across the Rio Grande have not worked and never will. Such steps will not work either in western Europe, where it is in many ways easier to cross the Mediterranean than it is to cross the Rio Grande. We require to solve the problem, and that means tackling war in places such as Syria and Eritrea, and ensuring that people can stay in their countries safe and healthy and can have hope and a future.

14:13

Patricia Ferguson (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (Lab): I thank my colleague and friend Alex Rowley for bringing the debate to Parliament, although in truth I fervently wish that such a debate was not necessary. However, it is necessary that we use every opportunity we have to highlight the deaths of people who are desperate enough to pay large amounts of money to smugglers who then take them out to sea in flimsy boats that they know have little chance of making the journey. It is necessary that we highlight the problems that make people leave their countries to seek new lives in Europe, and that we shine a light on the inaction of European Governments in terms of providing help and assistance to those at the front line.

In 2014, 3,000 migrants drowned in the Mediterranean, which was a record number. Already in 2015, however, 1,700 people have perished, which is estimated to be approximately 17 times higher than the number of those who had died by the end of April last year. That figure is all the more shocking when we consider that over the weekend just past—one weekend—Italian-led efforts rescued 7,000 more people. While the UK was gripped by election fever and the birth of the royal baby, 46 desperate people were drowning and another baby was born—a baby girl born at sea to a Nigerian woman rescued from the Mediterranean by the Italian navy. Those deaths and that birth rated barely a mention in our news cycle. That is why it is necessary that we use our voices and our Parliament to highlight the issue.

We have to ask why it is happening. It is happening because life in Syria, Eritrea, Libya, Gambia, Senegal and all the other countries from which people are fleeing makes the odds on

surviving a hazardous journey in an overcrowded boat seem worth the risk. I have mentioned in previous debates the plight of refugees from Syria and the fact that their near neighbours in Jordan and Turkey have between them accommodated somewhere in the region of 3 million displaced people. Today, I want to look at Eritrea.

In recent discussions with organisations in my constituency, I became aware that large numbers of people from Eritrea are now living in the communities of Maryhill and Springburn, and I was told that many of them are young people who are trying to escape the mandatory conscription that now applies in their country. It is no ordinary conscription, as it has no limit. People can be conscripted at 20 and still be in the army at 45. Some people pay army officers large sums of money in the hope of being released. Others are told that, in return for what are euphemistically called sexual favours, their commanding officer will allow them to go, but release on those terms rarely happens. Is it any wonder that families are smuggling their sons and daughters out of the country at great risk to the young people involved and at great cost to their families?

The Italian Government deserves respect for what it has tried to do, as does its commercial fleet, but it cannot patrol all of the Mediterranean alone. It needs help, and the international community needs to find a way to help to stabilise the countries that people are fleeing from and to support good governance there. That must be the long-term goal but, in the meantime, Europe must fund rescue missions in the coastal areas of the Mediterranean. The idea that seems to be current in some Governments that, by ending support for such rescues, we can discourage migrants from making the attempt is not just callous and inhumane; it is useless, as the numbers show no sign of abating.

As Alex Rowley said, legal asylum must take the place of the illegal smuggling of people. Together we must make it a European priority.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I must ask members to keep to their four minutes.

14:18

Jamie McGrigor (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I, too, congratulate Alex Rowley on securing today's debate on a highly distressing and significant issue, which I readily accept is a matter of major public concern to people across Scotland, including many of my constituents in the Highlands and Islands. Surely all of us in the chamber have been shocked and horrified by the appalling loss of lives of migrants in the Mediterranean. Indeed, the European Council has rightly called the situation a "tragedy", and our

thoughts go out to the poor souls who have drowned and to their families.

We know that our British Government has made a bigger contribution to foreign aid than any other in Europe. However, while admitting that, we know also that the Government has acknowledged that the arrangements that have existed in the Mediterranean since last October have simply been unsuccessful and insufficient. It is committed to working with EU partners to improve search and rescue services. The recent European Council meeting achieved agreement on a number of key measures that are aimed at preventing further loss of life at sea. Specifically, the UK Government has announced that HMS Bulwark, three helicopters and two border patrol ships have been sent as part of the EU's extra efforts in operations Triton and Poseidon.

I completely agree with the statements made by the UK Government and our EU partners that, although our sympathies must of course go out to migrants and their families and friends, our anger and focus must be strongly directed against the organised criminal gangs that are profiting from this vile people trading and murder. Stopping that trafficking is a huge international challenge that needs a co-ordinated response, and I warmly welcome the fact that the UK Government has offered the services of our National Crime Agency and security services to help to identify and target the traffickers. They should try to identify the useless boats that are liable to be used and take them out of the equation somehow.

The other massive international challenge that the UK is working on with other member states is addressing the factors in Libya and other countries in Africa and elsewhere that are driving migrants to want to come to Europe. There are no easy answers on that, but the UK Government is investing very significant amounts in its aid programme in the key source countries. All countries must do whatever is in their power to support UN-led efforts to re-establish Government authority in Libya. That must be fundamental.

The debate is useful in allowing the Parliament to express our and our constituents' sympathies for the migrants who have drowned and to unite in condemning the criminal gangs that are taking advantage of vulnerable people and profiting from the appalling trade in human beings. Our European and External Relations Committee is considering whether to undertake some work on EU migration. If it does, I am sure that the debate will help to inform any work that it might do on what we can all agree is a huge international challenge.

One thing is sure: Italy cannot be expected to cope with the problem on her own. It is surely an opportunity for the members of the EU to unite for

humanity and practical assistance. The EU must step forward and show its worth. Operation mare nostrum needs funds and it is time for action, not for looking the other way.

14:21

Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green): I add my thanks and congratulations to Alex Rowley for bringing this important debate to the Parliament. He and other members have used the right language in it: we have talked and heard about human beings facing danger. How different that is from the rhetoric that represents those people as a threat to us, which we hear not only in this country but in a number of other European countries. They are not a threat to us; they are human beings and we must reach out in a spirit of compassion rather than have a response to the crisis that is driven by fear, as so many seek to make it—especially in this frenetic election period.

Alex Rowley also said that our policy response must place greater priority on protecting lives than it does on protecting borders. That is absolutely right and—once again—contrasts with much of the rhetoric in our political debate at the moment. A response that is geared towards protecting lives will not only re-establish the search and rescue operations but will establish safe routes for people to flee from persecution, conflict, poverty and other factors.

I am not convinced by the arguments of people who call for a security-led response—a military response. I have heard calls for boats to be destroyed and for other approaches that are primarily about deterrence and protecting borders. If we take such an approach and disrupt the unsafe routes of passage, it will only make the human beings who use them more vulnerable to the threats and dangers that they face. We have to place safe routes of passage before them rather than merely disrupt the unsafe ones. That is a critical difference.

Frontex and operation Triton are geared towards deterrence and protecting borders. Simply putting search and rescue operations into their remit is not enough. We need to change that remit entirely and place the emphasis on protecting lives and people, as Mr Rowley said, and not principally on protecting borders.

We must look at the causes of people fleeing—the things that we should label as threats. They include conflict, poverty and persecution. Already, climate change is a driver of migration. It will continue to grow as a significant driver of migration during this century and may become a dominant driver. As Kenny MacAskill said, we must take responsibility for the contribution that we

have so shamefully made to those problems, threats and things that cause fear.

We must recognise that people have a right to seek to migrate, whether for asylum or because of conflict, climate change, persecution or poverty. The criminals who exploit them, whether through trafficking or exploiting their labour when they reach a country of safety—in which they often do not experience the same degree of safety that we would expect to experience in our lives—must be treated as criminals. However, the causes of that migration must be recognised and, fundamentally, the rights of people to flee those causes of human suffering must be our priority. I commend Alex Rowley again for his motion and for his choice of topic for debate.

14:25

Stewart Stevenson (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP): This is one of the occasions in the hubbub of political debate and disagreement that shows that, actually, all of us politicians here are more united by issues than we are divided by them. I do not expect to hear a contrarian voice on this subject. In the past 24 hours, Al Jazeera has reported that six operations have rescued 600 migrants. The operations mainly involved Italy, but they also involved Malta, which is a very small jurisdiction that has a population similar to Edinburgh's. I join others in congratulating Alex Rowley on bringing the topic for debate, which is timely, appropriate and necessary.

In its briefing, Amnesty International tells us that "3.9 million refugees are registered in Syria's neighbouring countries and Egypt."

However, since 2013, the EU has offered 40,000 places—one would barely notice that anyone had been removed from those 3.9 million. I say "Well done" to Germany, which provided 30,000 of those places.

Alex Rowley's motion focuses on the mare nostrum rescue mission, which has been stopped, and its replacement. Amnesty has provided us with a graphic illustration of how our support has reduced. We used to have six helicopters; we now have one. We used to spend £9.5 million; we now spend less than £3 million. Let us get an idea of the scale of that: the amount of money that is being spent on helping people who are escaping from threat, poverty and hunger is less than one tenth of what we spend on providing the free bus pass in Scotland. That is how tiny the amount of money that is being spent to support people in personal extremity is.

Since the support for what is happening in the Mediterranean has reduced and retreated closer to Italy, meaning that help is many times further away from Libya, we have seen a huge increase in

the number of casualties that are resulting from the problem.

The right kinds of things are being said. The European Council's Donald Tusk said that saving lives of innocent people is

"the number one priority for us",

but when you match words to the deeds it is not all that obvious that we are going—

Neil Findlay (Lothian) (Lab): Will the member give way?

Stewart Stevenson: I will.

Neil Findlay: Does Stewart Stevenson agree that if the EU spent as much time and effort on protecting and enhancing the lives of people across the globe as it does on protecting its own economic interests we would be in a much better place and would not see the catastrophes that we are seeing?

Stewart Stevenson: I do not always agree with Neil Findlay, but he captured the essence of the issue extremely well in that intervention.

I will stick within the strict four minutes that I have been allocated and sum up. In 1947, the Labour Government passed an act to support the Poles, so we know that there is good will among the members to my left. We have also heard good will from Jamie McGrigor on the right. The bottom line is that this must not be a borders issue. It is about common decency and humanity. I support every word of Alex Rowley's motion.

14:30

Claire Baker (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): I thank my colleague Alex Rowley for bringing such an important members' business debate to the chamber. Only a few weeks ago, we witnessed the highly distressing scenes that dominated the headlines but, as Patricia Ferguson highlighted, the news cycle moves on. The crisis is still very much on-going, and there were reports of more rescues and deaths in the Mediterranean at the weekend. With no long-term solution on the horizon, it is right that we use time today to highlight a heart-breaking and complex crisis.

May has only just begun but we are heading towards 2015 being the deadliest year for migrants attempting to escape persecution and find a better life in Europe. That must urge us all to action.

The solution is far from simple. Many push-and-pull factors need to be addressed, and the next couple of months will be crucial. The European Commission is moving towards completion of its agenda for migration, which must play a vital role in addressing the crisis in the Mediterranean, and

must ensure that our summer months are not filled with more horrific stories of innocent people dying.

The decision to cancel operation *mare nostrum* and to use operation Triton instead was simply wrong and was taken for all the wrong reasons. As the decision was being taken, clear warnings were being given that the consequences would be fatal. The logic that scaling back the rescue operation would result in fewer people attempting to make the voyage was clearly flawed. It failed to take into account the human trafficking aspect of the Mediterranean crisis or the fact that for many migrants and refugees the risk of staying in Libya was, and remains, greater than the serious risk of trying to cross the sea.

If we are to find long-term solutions to the problem, the question we should ask is not about where the migrants want to go or how we stop them; rather, we should ask why they are risking their lives and those of their children and families to leave family and friends behind. We face new dangers in the world when ideology fails to recognise borders. Conflicts extend beyond countries and spread quickly throughout regions.

The majority of the boats that try to cross the Mediterranean depart from Libya but almost half the people in the boats are Syrians or Eritreans who are trying to flee war, poverty and persecution. They find themselves in a country that they are not from and do not want to be in. As conflicts escalate, countries become unrecognisable to their own people and the desire and need of many to escape grows.

Those who have read the Amnesty International briefing will be aware of the dangers that migrants have to face on such trips. The case studies that are described in the briefing are heart-breaking and the details are harrowing. As the debate continues, we must all remember that.

That is why we need to introduce a full and proper search and rescue mission that is not just about patrolling Italian borders but focuses on saving the lives of those who are in jeopardy. In the current circumstances, what we are facing in the Mediterranean is not a crisis about border controls but a humanitarian crisis.

If we are to deal with the crisis, we must look to address the root causes of men, women and children being willing to risk their lives to flee to Europe. The problems are complex, as are the solutions. They will require an understanding of global pressures and an acceptance in Europe that, although we have a border, we are global citizens with the responsibility to play our part in addressing the world's problems and in securing a better future for people around the globe.

14:33

John Finnie (Highlands and Islands) (Ind): I join other members in congratulating Alex Rowley on securing a debate on this hugely important issue. I also thank Amnesty and Save the Children for their briefings, and I declare my membership of both.

Amnesty talks about thousands of people fleeing from conflict, persecution and violence, and trying to reach safety. The conflict has been fuelled by the ready availability of armaments, many of which have been designed and manufactured in and sold from Scotland, so we are under an obligation.

People are fleeing persecution. The west's attitude to the Arab spring sent a very confusing message. There was initial support but then an indication that we are not that bothered about democracy but about who is in charge and access to resources. That has resulted in a violent and brutal backlash, much of which passes without comment.

Many people are leaving Libya, which is in a state of anarchy. The Foreign and Commonwealth Office advice is against all travel to Libya. Indeed, it urges British nationals to leave immediately. However, the Government is also urging other people to stay there, despite the shortage of medical supplies, water and food. The situation is similar in Tunisia and Egypt, and there is lengthy advice about travel to those areas.

We know that the Mediterranean route is the most dangerous and lethal in the world. However, for those who are desperate enough to attempt it, it is clearly better than the alternative, whether that is Syria, Eritrea or, as is increasingly likely, west Africa, where conflict is rife.

It is entirely wrong to lay the responsibility entirely at the door of Italy. As the motion states, the Italian ambassador to the UK spoke of a

"common interest"

that should be

"managed at a common level".

That is entirely right. The decision to end operation *mare nostrum*, Italy's search and rescue operation, was taken in agreement with the EU, and the situation therefore demands an EU response.

Common humanity has been mentioned a number of times. We know that operation *mare nostrum* was replaced by operation Triton, which involves patrolling borders in smaller craft, nearer to the shore and further from the north African coast—previously, the patrols went 95 nautical miles off the Libyan coast. Alex Rowley noted that technology allows us to be fully aware of the

tragedy that is occurring. We are increasingly reliant on coastguards and on the humanity of people on commercial ships. I found out, while looking into this matter, that all shipmasters are bound by an obligation that is codified in the international law of the sea, to render assistance to those who are in distress at sea, regardless of their nationality, status or the circumstances in which they are found. That is a sound foundation for any operation that the EU might mount. It is important to praise the Italian coastguards and the armed forces of Malta.

Many members here will have signed Stewart Maxwell's fine motion on Nepal, which talks about the contribution of six firefighters from the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service, who are working with colleagues from across the United Kingdom to provide support that will include medical assistance and search and rescue missions. That is proactive humanitarian support, and it is right that we applaud it.

There was a news report yesterday about dozens of people drowning off the coast of Italy. Some members will have seen the footage that showed an overladen craft, terror on everyone's faces and a bewildered toddler girl, sitting in the middle and looking to adults for support. These people are victims; they are not the accused. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees said that Europe must step up the capacity to save lives.

Triton is a mythical Greek god. In Virgil's "Aeneid", we are told that Triton killed Misenus by drowning him.

Alex Rowley talked about the need for this Parliament to speak out, and I think that that is what we are doing. Next week, the EU presents its operational plan. We are not only calling for an expansion of the search and rescue operation; we are hoping for action to address the reasons why thousands of people flee conflict, persecution and violence to reach safety in the first place.

14:37

The Cabinet Secretary for Culture, Europe and External Affairs (Fiona Hyslop): I thank Alex Rowley for lodging this motion, and I assure him and other members who have spoken that the Scottish Government is fully committed to doing whatever we can to address the on-going tragedies and the devastating loss of human lives. Indeed, we have offered assistance in the past year. This Parliament in the north-west of the EU should stand in solidarity with the Europe of the south and with the distressed and dying people in the Mediterranean.

It is with profound sadness that I note that the situation in the Mediterranean has slipped from

recent news headlines. That is despite reports that nearly 6,800 people were rescued in separate incidents over the weekend and the bodies of 10 people were recovered. One of those rescued was a heavily pregnant woman who gave birth to a daughter on her rescue ship—I understand that there have been six such births on naval vessels.

Although reporting of those human tragedies might fluctuate, the deaths and misery continue. It is vital that we never forget what has happened, and continues to happen, in the Mediterranean. Today's debate in the Parliament helps to keep the issue at the forefront of our minds.

The news headlines do not tell stories of single humanitarian disasters. They represent only a fraction of thousands of individual human stories of war, climate change and extreme poverty, spanning years and decades. That human suffering drives people to take unimaginable risks for themselves and their families in pursuit of a safer and better life.

The deaths of so many vulnerable migrants is an issue that I have raised persistently since 2013. It was in 2013 that the world learned of what has become known as the Lampedusa disaster, which occurred when hundreds of migrants died in a shipwreck off the Italian coast, despite the best efforts of the Italian coastguard to rescue as many people as possible. I was in Italy a few days after that disaster, and I heard the then Italian Prime Minister Enrico Letta declare of the hundreds who had died, "They are all Italians now."

The horror of the Lampedusa disaster was not an isolated incident; it was just one that made the news. Such incidents are an issue not just for the Italians, but for all of us as members of the human race and humanitarians. Vulnerable migrants and asylum seekers have been desperately fleeing to Europe across the Mediterranean for years. It is estimated that more than 10,000 people have died in the Mediterranean in recent decades.

After the Lampedusa disaster, migrants have continued to search for safety using that route. Most worryingly, it is now believed that the number of migrant journeys will reach its peak this summer. Those journeys will be accompanied by terror, misery and death unless, as a global and European community, we act.

Since I first raised the issue in 2013, I have continued to raise the need for multilateral action at the joint ministerial committee and in correspondence with the UK Minister of State for Europe and the UK Minister of State for Security and Immigration. Throughout my campaigning on the issue, I have endeavoured to stress that the EU's abandoning of search and rescue—in which it was supported by the UK—was simply wrong. It was wrong from the point of view of basic human

decency and compassion, and it was wrong in practical and pragmatic terms. I am pleased that there has been an emergency EU summit on the issue, but Europe must adopt a long-term strategic approach to address such tragedies, as many members have stressed.

Our strategic action needs to look at where people are fleeing from and why. Many of them are from Syria and Eritrea, as we have heard, and many are coming from Libya. Men, women and children are dying in the Mediterranean, but the issue goes beyond the confines of the Mediterranean Sea, Italy or the EU. As part of our strategic efforts, we must look at the displacement of millions of people and provide support for the rehabilitation and compassionate treatment of refugees in their countries of origin. If there is no effective rescue operation, that will not stop desperate people fleeing desperate situations and taking ever greater risks to reach Europe.

Outside of our Scottish Parliament, there has, in my view, been too much of a focus in the media and in political debate on a response that involves criminalising human traffickers. However, many of the migrants are not being trafficked, and such a focus can be misleading. It obscures the reality that many vulnerable migrants feel compelled to make such perilous journeys in search of safety. For reasons that are extremely difficult for us to understand, many of the migrants in question have paid for the transportation that may lead to their death and the death of their children, so they are not being trafficked. The situation requires there to be a focus on the vulnerable victims themselves, and it must be addressed as a humanitarian issue.

Humanitarian issues are by their nature cross border and pan-European. Together, we must prevent the Mediterranean from continuing to be a watery grave for so many people who are fleeing conflict, fear and hate. The EU must take collective responsibility, and the agreement of four priority actions at the emergency summit is a start, but it is only a start and it must not be a temporary political fix.

We must stand together. We must not treat the situation in the Mediterranean as a Frontex or a borders issue. The Italian Government needs long-term support from its EU partners. The UK is not a member of Frontex, as it is not part of the Schengen area, but the UK must play a full part in supporting our Italian friends and colleagues. Italy should not bear the responsibility and tragic misery by itself, and the UK must not just make a one-time offer of help when the Mediterranean is in the news headlines.

That is why our debate here in the Scottish Parliament is so important. As parliamentarians, we must encourage parliamentary scrutiny of the issue at not just European but domestic level. Now

is the time for the incoming UK Government to approach the issue differently. It should adopt a humanitarian, strategic and multilateral approach. I am sure that that would be supported across the Parliament.

In my correspondence with the UK Government last November and again in January 2015, I said that the Scottish Government stands ready to help. We have also said to the UK Government that we can play our part in whatever co-operation is required on Syrian refugees. We will continue to make those offers.

I know that members across the Parliament also stand ready to help in whatever way they can, and that they are prepared to support the Scottish and UK Governments on the issue. By standing together in solidarity and taking long-term strategic action, we can make a difference, and we will continue to do all that we can to address this devastating humanitarian crisis.

I undertake to ensure that the new UK Government is fully informed of our debate, our concerns and our commitment to the vulnerable people of the Mediterranean.

General Question Time

14:45

Schools (Support Staff)

1. Johann Lamont (Glasgow Pollok) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government what steps it is taking to assess and sustain the levels of support staff in schools. (S4O-04294)

The Minister for Learning, Science and Scotland's Languages (Dr Alasdair Allan): That is a matter for education authorities, as the employment of teachers and of support staff and recruitment practices are ultimately matters for local authorities. They have the statutory duty in relation to education expenditure and are responsible for providing a staff complement that meets the needs of their schools and pupils in light of the resources available.

Johann Lamont: I am sure that the minister appreciates that access to education is about more than teachers, books and buildings, so will he acknowledge the importance of learning support, behaviour support, classroom assistants, personal assistants, administration staff, attendance staff and all the support staff who are ensuring that children have an opportunity to learn and who allow teachers to focus on their teaching? I heard his comment that this is the responsibility of local authorities, but does he share my concerns about anecdotal evidence that there are fewer support staff, with heavier burdens, which has consequences for equality of opportunity in our schools? Will he commit at least to taking a proper view of what is happening with support staff and to working with local authorities to ensure that such support is there and to allow all our children to learn to their potential?

Dr Allan: The Government has made a commitment to ensuring that our schools are staffed and staffed well; that is what lies behind some of the Government's stances on the number of teaching staff across Scotland. We recognise the importance of support staff, not least for those who have additional needs, including additional learning needs. In the face of statistics that show an increase in such requirements, the Scottish Government is working hard with local authorities to ensure that those needs are being met.

Police Scotland (Community Engagement)

2. Margaret Mitchell (Central Scotland) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what its position is on the effectiveness of Police Scotland's strategy for engaging with local communities. (S4O-04295)

The Cabinet Secretary for Justice (Michael Matheson): The Scottish Government has the clear expectation that community engagement should be a key part of all public bodies' functions. Local policing and local accountability are fundamental to policing in Scotland, and Police Scotland's annual policing plan, which was launched just last week, sets out clear examples of the vital role that Police Scotland plays in our communities, including examples of where our police service is working closely with communities not only to solve crime but, importantly, to prevent it from taking place.

Police reform has led to an almost 150 per cent increase in the number of local elected members across Scotland who are scrutinising the police service and shaping local delivery. Around 360 local councillors now attend local policing committees, compared with 146 local councillors who attended prior to the creation of Police Scotland.

Local policing and local accountability remain fundamental to policing in Scotland. Each of the 14 Police Scotland command divisions has a local commander who works with the council, the communities and local partners to shape and deliver policing through 353 ward-level policing plans that cover every community in Scotland.

Margaret Mitchell: I thank the cabinet secretary for his comprehensive answer. Does he recognise and value the excellent prevention work of and local intelligence provided by crime prevention panels and does he agree that the proposal to cut their budgets and remove police officer support from their meetings is a retrograde step?

Michael Matheson: As I said, the national annual policing plan sets out a range of measures that Police Scotland intends to take forward over the next year, including work with local partners to ensure that it delivers effective policing. I mentioned that a key part of that is action on prevention. I have no doubt that, if the member has concerns about the way in which Police Scotland is operating in partnership with some local crime prevention bodies, she will be more than willing to engage with it directly on how she feels that the situation can be improved. I am always open to suggestions from members on how such matters can be better addressed, but the member can be assured that Police Scotland recognises the importance of local engagement and working with partners in the community to deliver effective policing in communities.

Patricia Ferguson (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (Lab): In recent correspondence with the chief constable, I ascertained that he will review the opening times of police stations following the closure and curtailment of many of them last year. Will the minister join me in urging

the chief constable to ensure that community councils and other community groups are not just able to take part in that consultation but positively encouraged to take part in it and to understand that their views are critical to understanding the effect that those changes have had in communities?

Michael Matheson: Local engagement is an important part of policing at a community level. I expect Police Scotland to engage with a range of stakeholders that have an interest in how it operates locally.

As the member stated, she has engaged with the chief constable on the matter. She may also wish to pursue the issue with the Scottish Police Authority, which has oversight of how our police go about such matters and how the chief constable handles them.

However, I recognise the points that the member has raised. It is extremely important that all stakeholders that may have a view on the issues are given the opportunity to participate in the discussion. I encourage her to continue to support the organisations that may wish to express their views on such matters.

Self-directed Support (Guidance)

3. Graeme Dey (Angus South) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what guidance it provides to local authorities on the purposes for which self-directed support may be used. (S4O-04296)

The Minister for Public Health (Maureen Watt): Self-directed support involves a rights-based approach that enables eligible individuals, their families and carers to have flexibility, choice and control of their care and support in order to meet their health and social care outcomes. The Social Care (Self-directed Support) (Scotland) Act 2013 is accompanied by statutory guidance, which was launched in April 2014. That guidance supports local authorities to take an approach in which personal needs are assessed as part of a collaborative conversation. If eligibility for support from the local authority is agreed on, a care and support plan will be developed that is based on what the person wants to achieve—their personal outcomes. The person also has choice in and control over how the care and support are delivered.

Graeme Dey: What commonsense flexibility can be deployed in that regard? I ask that question in relation to a situation that a constituent of mine has found themselves in. They want to use SDS to fund a course of applied behaviour analysis therapy, in the hope that that will help their child to communicate and thereby ease the considerable difficulties that the family face, will provide respite

from those challenges and, in turn, will ensure that the child perhaps has a more productive educational experience than at present. Could such a use of SDS be permissible?

Maureen Watt: Flexibility and creativity are essential to making the best use of support within available budgets. Local authorities provide social care and support to children and families as part of the wider policy and practice framework of getting it right for every child. The local authority has a duty under the Social Care (Self-directed Support) (Scotland) Act 2013 to offer flexibility and choices in relation to a child's care and support. If the member has not already done so, he may wish to direct his constituent to contact Angus carers centre or Dundee Carers Centre for information and support on access to self-directed support. Jointly, those organisations have been awarded £143,000 for 2015-16 from the Scottish Government's support in the right direction fund to ensure that the people of Scotland have access to high-quality information, support and advocacy services.

Disclosure Scheme for Domestic Abuse Scotland

4. Annabel Goldie (West Scotland) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what progress has been made with the implementation of the disclosure scheme for domestic abuse Scotland, which was piloted in Aberdeen and Ayrshire. (S4O-04297)

The Cabinet Secretary for Justice (Michael Matheson): The disclosure scheme for domestic abuse Scotland is still being piloted. The six-month pilots in Aberdeen and Ayrshire will formally end on Sunday 31 May and will be independently evaluated by the University of Glasgow. I confirm that the schemes will continue to operate in Aberdeen and Ayrshire pending the outcome of that evaluation.

I am optimistic that the learning from those pilots will support a roll-out across Scotland. Although the practical implementation of the scheme is for Police Scotland to determine and take forward, the Scottish Government will of course continue to work with it and to support that work.

Annabel Goldie: The two pilots are welcome but, in the rest of the United Kingdom, the scheme was rolled out on international women's day in 2014, bringing huge help and support to potentially vulnerable partners. How soon can we provide the same degree of protection to potential victims across Scotland?

Michael Matheson: I am sure that the member recognises that it is important to ensure that the scheme is fit for purpose and suitable for the Scottish justice system, which is why the two pilots

were established and why the independent evaluation will take place to assess their effectiveness. As I said, I am optimistic about being able to take the scheme forward nationally, and the chief constable has stated that he is optimistic about doing that once Police Scotland has the findings from the independent evaluation, which will be done quickly.

I assure the member that we are keen for the project and the pilots to be taken forward nationally. Once we have the evaluation, we will be able to determine the final timescale for that.

NorthConnect Power Scheme

5. Stewart Stevenson (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what progress is being made with NorthConnect's £2 billion power scheme between Aberdeenshire and Scandinavia. (S4O-04298)

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Finance, Constitution and Economy (John Swinney): NorthConnect KS has made an application to Aberdeenshire Council for planning permission relating to a converter station for the proposed link to Norway. The council received the application on 14 April and a public consultation will run until 21 May. It would not be appropriate to comment on a live planning application.

Stewart Stevenson: Does the cabinet secretary welcome—within the limits of there being a live planning application—the fact that the scheme will draw significantly on green energy developments in both Scotland and Norway? Does he agree that we will need to see similar cross-country initiatives if we are to meet electricity demand in Scotland? We should be encouraging more investment in renewable energy projects.

John Swinney: On the policy questions that Mr Stevenson raises, I agree whole-heartedly. Increasing interconnection and transmission upgrade activity is a necessity for us. It is a generic process that is inherent in changing the sources of power generation on which we rely. The Government has taken forward a number of sustained investments in the renewable energy sector, and it has taken the policy initiatives to enable the renewable energy sector to thrive in Scotland. We look forward to taking policy decisions that enable us to continue that activity in the years to come.

Police Scotland (Control Centre Responses)

6. Alex Rowley (Cowdenbeath) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government how many complaints Police Scotland has received from Fife residents regarding police response and call-out times since

services were moved from the Fife control centre to Bilston Glen. (S4O-04299)

The Cabinet Secretary for Justice (Michael Matheson): As the member is aware, the Police Scotland review of contact, command and control across the country has been on-going since early last year. There has been a phased approach, with the latest stage being the transfer of the operation from Glenrothes to Bilston Glen in March. Police Scotland has been engaged with local authorities, local partnerships and unions on the impact of the change.

Issues surrounding performance at the Bilston Glen control centre have been raised previously in the chamber, and the First Minister committed to looking into them. That has been done and both Police Scotland and the Scottish Police Authority have taken direct action to address any issues surrounding the Bilston Glen operation. I have met Police Scotland and have been given an assurance that the situation at Bilston Glen is now much improved and that appropriate steps have been taken to ensure that the public continues to receive a high-quality service.

Alex Rowley: Some three weeks ago in the town of Cowdenbeath in my constituency, a group of pensioners were terrified in their own homes as a result of antisocial behaviour. When they called the Bilston Glen centre and reported that, among other things that were happening, a wheelie-bin had been set on fire, they were told that the police "don't put out fires." A chief superintendent has now confirmed that

"regrettably the calls received at the police station control room had not been logged correctly and local officers were not dispatched."

The police never came. Is that acceptable?

Michael Matheson: In short, no, it is not acceptable. Police Scotland recognises that there have been some challenges around Bilston Glen, which is why it has taken robust action to address the issues and why I now receive weekly reports from Police Scotland on performance at Bilston Glen.

I want to make sure that the public can be reassured that when they make a 101 call, they get the type of response and service that they should expect from Police Scotland, and the measures that Police Scotland is putting in place will help to ensure that that happens. From the recent information that I have received from Police Scotland, a clear level of improvement is being achieved in that regard. However, I assure the member that robust measures are being taken to address issues of the type experienced by his constituents.

Ambulance and Health Services (Mull)

7. Michael Russell (Argyll and Bute) (SNP):

To ask the Scottish Government what progress it is making in ensuring that the ambulance and health services on Mull meet the needs and expectations of the local community as expressed to the Cabinet Secretary for Health, Wellbeing and Sport at a meeting in March 2015. (S4O-04300)

The Cabinet Secretary for Health, Wellbeing and Sport (Shona Robison): The Scottish Government is facilitating engagement between NHS Highland and the Scottish Ambulance Service to ensure that the healthcare needs of the Mull community are met. Both boards were encouraged during the meeting to work together in designing a multidisciplinary approach and a sustainable solution for the community.

Michael Russell: The cabinet secretary is aware, as her predecessor was made aware at a previous meeting in October, that there is deep dissatisfaction on Mull with the Scottish Ambulance Service, and the fact that commitments have been entered into that have not been met is immensely regrettable. Will the cabinet secretary agree to meet me and the community again, because while the progress that NHS Highland has made and the encouragement of further progress that she has given to both boards is extremely valuable, the Scottish Ambulance Service has not yet come up to the mark?

Shona Robison: I recognise the concerns that Mike Russell outlines. The Scottish Ambulance Service is currently working on an options appraisal, and it is working with the community council to develop it. The Scottish Ambulance Service is planning to carry out community engagements at the end of this month to discuss the options. It is currently finalising dates but anticipates that the options appraisal should take place in July. Officials are being kept up to date on the process and, in turn, they are keeping me up to date. They are in regular communication with the Scottish Ambulance Service to ensure that the work is progressing.

To answer Mike Russell's question directly, I can say that I am happy to meet him and others as he sees fit to discuss the outcomes of the options appraisal process.

Out-of-hours Primary Care Services (Review)

8. Linda Fabiani (East Kilbride) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government when its review of out-of-hours primary care services will be published. (S4O-04301)

The Cabinet Secretary for Health, Wellbeing and Sport (Shona Robison): I announced a national review of primary care out-of-hours

services on 30 January. Professor Sir Lewis Ritchie is leading the review and has been asked to report recommendations to me by the end of September.

Linda Fabiani: What is the cabinet secretary's view of how local health boards' consultations on out-of-hours services will complement the national strategy? I place on the record concern in East Kilbride—Scotland's largest town—that the local health board is considering taking out-of-hours services away from the town.

Shona Robison: The national review of primary care out-of-hours services will report recommendations that are designed to reflect its findings. I recognise that responsibility for the design, implementation and management of out-of-hours services ultimately remains with NHS boards, so the recommendations will be in the form of guidance. However, I would expect any proposals for the redesign of out-of-hours services from any board to be in line with that guidance.

National Health Service (Waiting Time Guarantee)

9. Drew Smith (Glasgow) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government whether Barnett consequential arising from a mansion tax could help the NHS meet its waiting time guarantee. (S4O-04302)

The Cabinet Secretary for Health, Wellbeing and Sport (Shona Robison): This Government has passed on health resource consequential in full since 2010-11 and allocates funding in line with its priorities. Additional consequential would be dealt with in the same way. We have committed to increasing the NHS revenue budget in real terms for the remainder of this parliamentary session and for each and every year of the next session, too.

Drew Smith: Of course the Scottish Government's central policy in this election is to end the provision of consequential, due to its policy of full fiscal autonomy, which would end the pooling and sharing of resources and scrap the Barnett formula. The most aggressive example of nationalism in this campaign—

The Presiding Officer (Tricia Marwick): Mr Smith, can I get a question?

Drew Smith: The most aggressive example of nationalism in this campaign is the Scottish National Party's policy—

The Presiding Officer: Question!

Drew Smith: —to cut off our nose to spite our face.

Shona Robison: I will reply to Drew Smith in the gentlest of terms by quoting the Institute for

Fiscal Studies—I know that he and the Labour Party like to quote the IFS. In its analysis of the manifestos, the IFS has concluded that real spending on the NHS in England in 2019-20 compared to 2014-15 would be £8.7 billion higher under the SNP's plans. It is clear that, if Scots want the NHS to have the money that it needs, they must vote SNP tomorrow to deliver it.

First Minister's Question Time

15:05

Engagements

1. Kezia Dugdale (Lothian) (Lab): To ask the First Minister what engagements she has planned for the rest of the day. (S4F-02769)

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): Engagements to take forward the Government's programme for Scotland—and maybe a bit of last-minute campaigning.

Kezia Dugdale: Before the 2010 general election, the First Minister's predecessor encouraged people across the United Kingdom to deny a Scottish Labour Prime Minister a majority. Can the First Minister tell us what happened next?

The First Minister: I recall Labour's message to the people of Scotland in the 2010 election being that they should vote Labour to keep out the Tories. What happened next? Scotland voted Labour and the Tories got in. My message tomorrow is this: vote SNP to make Scotland's voice heard and then use that voice for better politics at Westminster.

Kezia Dugdale: Presiding Officer, I will tell you what happened next: we got a Tory Government that imposed austerity on our country and the Scottish National Party stood by while working parents had to rely on charity to feed their kids. The First Minister might not like the truth, but it is a fact that Alex Salmond spent the previous general election telling people to vote against Gordon Brown's Labour Government. That was a Labour Government led by a Scottish Prime Minister and a Scottish chancellor.

In this election, unsurprisingly, the First Minister is telling people in Scotland to vote for the SNP and against Labour. She is also urging people in Wales to vote for Plaid Cymru and against Labour, and she is calling on people in England to vote for the Greens and against Labour. For someone who says that she wants a Labour Government, she has a funny way of showing it.

I will ask the First Minister a very simple question. What is the best way to get a Labour Government? Is it to vote for or against Labour tomorrow?

The First Minister: I am not sure that this is Kezia Dugdale's intention—I have to assume that it is not—but she is making my point for me. In 2010, Scotland ended up with a Tory-led Government that has done real damage to Scotland and to individuals and communities across Scotland. Here's the thing: Scotland voting Labour in 2010 did not stop that Tory Government.

It did not protect Scotland against that Tory Government or the bedroom tax, just as Labour MPs in the past could not protect Scotland against the Tory poll tax.

Tomorrow, we should do something different. We should vote SNP tomorrow to send a big team of SNP MPs to Westminster to stand up for Scotland in a way that Labour MPs never have, to make Scotland's voice heard and to ensure that it is a voice for better policies such as an end to austerity, whether that austerity is proposed by the Tories or by Labour. The question for Labour is this: if we wake up on Friday morning with an anti-Tory majority across the United Kingdom—as I hope we do—will Labour be willing to work with the SNP to kick the Tories out, or will Labour stand back and watch David Cameron get right back into Downing Street?

Kezia Dugdale: The First Minister says that she wants the Tories out, but she is fooling no one. She said that the SNP would defeat a Labour budget, but she could do that only with Tory votes. Her deputy has said that the SNP could defeat a Labour Queen's speech, but it could do that only with Tory votes. We have been here before, in this very chamber, when the SNP voted with the Tories against the living wage; when the SNP voted with the Tories against a rent cap; and when the SNP voted with the Tories against a ban on exploitative zero-hours contracts. Why, when we were on the side of working people in Scotland, was the First Minister on the side of the Tories?

The First Minister: Again, for the avoidance of any doubt, let me make it clear: if a Labour Government were to introduce a budget that sought to continue Tory austerity and damage the most vulnerable people in our society, SNP MPs at Westminster would not vote for that budget, because we want an end to austerity. That would not bring down the Government, but it would send it away to think again and come back with a better budget—a budget that lifted people out of poverty and protected our national health service and our public services. That is the value of having a big team of SNP MPs at Westminster: we can lock the Tories out of government and then ensure that they are not simply replaced by a Labour Tory-lite Government, but by something better.

I remind Kezia Dugdale that, last Thursday, Ed Miliband said on live television that he would rather not have a Labour Government than work with the SNP. Will Kezia Dugdale confirm—I am asking her a direct question—that, if there is an anti-Tory majority on Friday morning, Labour will work with the SNP to get the Tories out? Or will Labour stand back and watch David Cameron waltz back into Downing Street?

Kezia Dugdale: The First Minister has a cheek to describe the Labour Party as Tory lite. There

would be more progressive policies in the first week of an Ed Miliband Government than there have been in eight years of an SNP Government.

David Cameron has said that he needs just one more seat than Labour across the United Kingdom to stay in office—one seat. We can vote Labour on Thursday and start the process of changing our country on Friday—abolishing the need for food banks, calling time on zero-hour contracts, investing in our NHS, guaranteeing jobs for our young people, increasing taxes for the rich and sharing that wealth across the whole of the United Kingdom. That is the change that people will get only with a Labour Government. Is it not the case that if people want a Labour Government they must vote for Labour tomorrow?

The First Minister: The simple fact of arithmetic is this: if on Friday morning there are more Labour and SNP MPs in the House of Commons than there are Tory MPs, the only way that David Cameron and the Tories will get back into 10 Downing Street is if Ed Miliband and Labour hold the door open for them. I am clear that, if there is an anti-Tory majority, the SNP will want to work with others to keep the Tories out.

We have heard all this from Labour before. Kezia Dugdale talks about zero-hours contracts. I agree that we must get rid of exploitative zero-hours contracts. Tony Blair promised that 20 years ago and, under his Government, zero-hours contracts increased by 40 per cent.

It is not enough for Scotland just to get rid of the Tories tomorrow—of course we want to do that—but we must ensure that the Tories are replaced by something that is better than the Tories. That is what a big team of SNP MPs can secure: an end to the Tories and a better, bolder and more progressive Government to go in their place.

Prime Minister (Meetings)

2. Ruth Davidson (Glasgow) (Con): To ask the First Minister when she will next meet the Prime Minister. (S4F-02774)

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): No plans in the near future.

Ruth Davidson: We know who the First Minister wants to be Prime Minister on Friday morning: Ed Miliband, the man Alex Salmond described as

“the weakest Labour leader I've seen in my political career.”

For once, I agree with Alex Salmond. Why does the First Minister want the weakest Labour leader in recent history to become Prime Minister? What are the top three things that make him the right man for the job?

The First Minister: I'll tell you the top thing—he's no a Tory. I want the Tories out of office. David Cameron's Tory-led Government—this is a serious point—has been devastating for vulnerable people across our country. It has pushed more children into poverty, undermined our public services and held back our economy. I want to see the back of it tomorrow.

Just as I have said to Kezia Dugdale, I do not want David Cameron's Tory Government to be replaced by Ed Miliband's Tory-lite Government. I want a better Government for Scotland. The only way that we can make Scotland's voice heard tomorrow—the only way we can put an end to austerity, with protection for public services and a stronger economy right at the heart of the Westminster agenda, is to vote for the Scottish National Party. Here is the truth: the more seats the SNP wins tomorrow, the more power Scotland will have.

Ruth Davidson: If I had a pound for every time the First Minister has said "Tory" today, I would be on her wages. That was it—that is the reason she wants to put Ed Miliband into government. It is because of her hatred of the Tories.

I want people to vote positively tomorrow: for an economic recovery that has created 100 Scottish jobs every day since we came to power, for a plan that has left fewer children in workless households than we have ever seen, and for a Government that will always back the union, just as Scots voted for last year.

Of course, Nicola Sturgeon does not want to put Ed Miliband in Downing Street because she thinks that it will push independence further away; it is because she thinks that it will bring independence closer and that she can hold a weak Labour Party to ransom and divide our nation for evermore.

Nicola Sturgeon and I both know that there will be no post-election deals between our two parties, so is it not the case that, whereas her party might be the party of independence, the Scottish Conservatives are the only party that people can trust to safeguard the union?

The First Minister: Ruth Davidson has perhaps stumbled across something. It was interesting, was it not, that Kezia Dugdale did not talk about independence today. This must be the first day in the election campaign when Labour members have not talked about independence. Perhaps they have read the reports in the papers today about the research carried out by the University of Edinburgh, which found that, when Labour brings up the issue of independence, it increases support for the SNP. The researcher has said that making independence an issue

"penalises ... Labour, because voters perceive it as closer to the other unionist parties".

In other words, it reminds voters of the Labour-Tory alliance. Tomorrow we have an opportunity to do something better for Scotland.

Where I will try to find a note of agreement with Ruth Davidson is on this point. I agree that people should vote positively tomorrow—for a strong voice for Scotland in Westminster, for an end to austerity, for stronger investment in our public services and for a fairer economy that works for the many, not the few. That is why I say to everybody in every corner of Scotland, regardless of how they voted in the referendum and even if they have never voted SNP before, that tomorrow is our opportunity to come together as a country to make our voice heard in Westminster louder than it has ever been heard before.

Cabinet (Meetings)

3. Willie Rennie (Mid Scotland and Fife) (LD): To ask the First Minister what issues will be discussed at the next meeting of the Cabinet. (S4F-02770)

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): Issues of importance to the people of Scotland.

Willie Rennie: I have put the case that the Liberal Democrats stand for stability and unity—*[Laughter.]*

The Presiding Officer (Tricia Marwick): Order. Let us hear Mr Rennie.

Willie Rennie: —for our strong economy, anchored in the centre ground; for investment in education, the national health service and mental health; and for respect for the result of the referendum last year. In contrast, the First Minister's evasion and avoidance show that a vote for her party is a vote for the second referendum party—or can she now at last rule out a second referendum for a generation?

The First Minister: I am very grateful to Willie Rennie for giving me the opportunity again to directly address the people of Scotland on this issue. The election tomorrow is not about independence, even if—and I am not making a prediction—the Scottish National Party wins every seat in Scotland. That is not a mandate for independence or a second referendum. Tomorrow is an opportunity to make Scotland's voice heard, and we need Scotland's voice to be heard louder than ever before.

Willie Rennie may try to make that positive case for the Liberal Democrats, and good luck to him as he tries to do so but, unfortunately for him and his party, people know that, over the past five years, his party has been standing shoulder to shoulder with a Conservative Government damaging the poorest in our society. That is why I do not think that the verdict of the Scottish people tomorrow on

the Scottish Liberal Democrats will be a particularly happy one for Willie Rennie.

Willie Rennie: That is very interesting, but that is not what the First Minister said to *The Guardian* this morning. She was very clear:

“I’m not going to rule it out”.

That is not what she said before last September. She expects people to believe her this time. We know that her colleagues are on manoeuvres for a second referendum, but the First Minister can sort this out now. [*Interruption.*]

The Presiding Officer: Order. Let us hear Mr Rennie.

Willie Rennie: The First Minister has the capacity to show leadership on this. Will she rule out serving as First Minister in a Scottish Government that holds a second referendum? Will she rule that out?

The First Minister: From what I have seen this week, it has been Ruth Davidson on manoeuvres, sitting astride her tank, which I have to say—albeit that we are in opposing political parties—was a splendid photo call. I am not sure that it will win many votes, but there you go.

Mr Rennie is clutching at straws. As right now we have less than 24 hours before the opening of polls in this unique—perhaps watershed—general election, I am happy to let the Scottish people have their say. I am very clear about what this election is and is not about and I will let people in Scotland judge. This election is not about independence. That is why it is an opportunity for people, regardless of how they voted in the referendum and regardless of how they voted in past elections. It is an opportunity for us to unite as a country—for us to come together and make our voice heard. [*Interruption.*]

The Presiding Officer: Order.

The First Minister: Only if people vote SNP tomorrow will Scotland’s voice be heard loud and clear in Westminster. We will then have a team of SNP members of Parliament standing up for an end to austerity and for stronger public services. That is the opportunity that we have as a country tomorrow—let us grab it.

Universities (Access)

4. Stewart Maxwell (West Scotland) (SNP): To ask the First Minister what progress the Scottish Government is making on widening access to university for young people from the most deprived communities. (S4F-02776)

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): In the programme for government, I set a long-term target for the Government and our universities to eradicate the inequality in access to higher

education so that a child who is born today in one of our most deprived communities will, by the time he or she leaves school, have the same chance of going to university as a child who is born in one of our least deprived communities.

That is why this year we doubled funding to the impact for access fund, which encourages people from disadvantaged backgrounds to go to university. Our commitment to free tuition benefits more than 120,000 undergraduate students every year, and since 2007 there has been a 40 per cent increase in the proportion of 18-year-olds from the most disadvantaged backgrounds being accepted to university.

Stewart Maxwell: I thank the First Minister for that answer and welcome the progress that is being made in getting students from less-well-off areas into higher education, while at the same time agreeing with her that there is still much more to do. As part of that on-going effort, is the First Minister able to provide me with details on the programme of work that the widening access commission will now undertake?

The First Minister: Stewart Maxwell is absolutely correct when he says that there is much more to do. I am not in any way complacent about this; I genuinely want every young person in Scotland to have the same chance to go to university. I want young people from our most deprived communities not just to have a better chance than they have had, but to have the same chance as any other child in Scotland.

In order to remove barriers to access, we first have to understand more fully what they are, which is why we have established the widening access commission under the convenership of Dame Ruth Silver. The commission met for the first time last week to address the question directly. A key part of its work will be to engage more widely with people who can, through their own experiences, relate what needs to change in order for us to meet the ambition that we have set out. I look forward to receiving the commission’s final report in the spring next year.

Iain Gray (East Lothian) (Lab): I also welcome the commission and its membership, which I think is first-class. However, we need to see the full remit for the commission’s work. In the meantime, can the First Minister confirm that the commission will look at the impact on widening participation of Scotland having the lowest student grants in western Europe and of student debt being highest among students from poorer backgrounds, uniquely in the United Kingdom?

The First Minister: I hope that we can reach some consensus across the chamber on the issue because I think that we all agree on its importance. I will just point out to Iain Gray that it

was not this Government but NUS Scotland that described the Scottish Government student support package as

“the best support package in the whole of the UK”.

The latest Student Loans Company figures, which were published in June last year, show that average student loan debt in Scotland is the lowest in the UK. It is £7,600 in Scotland compared with more than £20,000 in England, £17,000 in Wales and more than £16,000 in Northern Ireland. Those are the facts, and it would serve us all well to remember them.

I want the commission on widening access to look at any issue that it wants to look at, because I am absolutely serious about my determination and that of the Government to close the inequality gap.

I know—as many members in all parts of the chamber will know from personal experience—the importance of a good education. I cannot speak for anybody else, but I know that I would not be standing here right now without it. I am determined that every young person in Scotland will, regardless of their background, get the same chances in life that I had.

Fracking

5. Neil Findlay (Lothian) (Lab): To ask the First Minister what the Scottish Government’s position is on fracking. (S4F-02771)

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): We are taking an evidence-based approach to fracking, which is why we have in place a moratorium to ensure that it cannot happen while we are looking further at a variety of issues. We will undertake a full public consultation, listen to the voices of concerned communities and undertake further research.

That cautious and evidence-led approach to unconventional oil and gas is in direct contrast to what I would describe as the gung-ho approach of the United Kingdom Government, and indeed to the Labour Party’s refusal to support a moratorium when one was proposed in the House of Commons.

Neil Findlay: Since January I have been pursuing a freedom of information request with the Scottish Government to bring into the public domain the Scottish Government’s dealings with INEOS at Grangemouth and the company’s plans for fracking. That request has been refused because of

“The sensitive nature of some of the discussion”.

According to INEOS, the company had

“a very positive relationship with the former First Minister and met with him on numerous occasions”.

Will the First Minister now order the release of that information so that the Scottish people can see exactly what plans the Scottish Government has to facilitate INEOS’s desire to frack across the central belt?

The First Minister: As Neil Findlay knows, there is a statutory process to go through for freedom of information requests, and the Government will comply with that.

In case it has escaped Neil Findlay’s notice, I note that INEOS is a major employer in Scotland. Surely any member in the chamber, and certainly everybody outside the chamber, would want any First Minister and any Government to seek to have a positive relationship with an employer who provides so many jobs in Scotland, and I make no apology for seeking to do just that. The fact that Labour questions that perhaps tells us all that we need to know about Labour’s unfitness to hold office in this Parliament.

That positive relationship will not influence the position that the Scottish Government reaches on fracking. We will go through the evidence carefully, consistent with the precautionary and evidence-based approach that I have described, and take decisions that are in the broader—indeed, the widest possible—interest of the people of Scotland, because that is what people have a right to expect their Government to do.

Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green): Communities throughout Scotland that have been threatened by fracking and other forms of unconventional gas are impatient to see a moratorium turned into a full permanent ban. However, they cannot understand—and nor can I—why the Scottish Government has not included underground coal gasification, which is an even riskier form of unconventional gas, in its evidence-based approach or its moratorium. Why has it not done so?

The First Minister: As Patrick Harvie will be well aware, there are different technologies at stake, but we will continue to consider all the issues properly.

I know that some people—those who, for understandable reasons, oppose fracking—are impatient to see a moratorium turned into a ban. However, if we were to do that before doing all the work, we would not be taking an evidence-based approach, just as we would not have been doing that if we had not had a moratorium. We are striking the right balance and we will continue to do so, taking into account all the right issues before coming to our final views.

As Patrick Harvie is well aware, part of the work that we are doing involves a public consultation exercise. That will give every member in the Parliament, and all their constituents in the areas

that would be affected if fracking was ever to go ahead, the opportunity to take part. I hope that members on all sides of the chamber would welcome that.

Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): On Monday the leading Scottish engineering company Weir Group announced a new joint venture with Rolls-Royce to produce an integrated power system to make fracking more efficient. Can the First Minister explain to us how the Scottish National Party Government's indefinite moratorium on fracking will help a successful Scottish company such as Weir Group that wants to expand, create jobs and grow the economy?

The First Minister: We want to support—and as a Government we have a very good record on supporting—companies to locate, expand, succeed and prosper in Scotland. The economy and the jobs of thousands, and tens and hundreds of thousands, of people depend on that approach, so we will continue to do that.

I know that Murdo Fraser takes a particular view on unconventional gas, but I think that it is right for the Scottish Government to take a precautionary approach. A number of concerns have been raised about health and environmental impacts and about the rights of communities who would be affected by fracking to be properly and meaningfully consulted. I will leave it to Murdo Fraser and the Conservatives to argue with those communities as to why they should not have a voice in taking those decisions, but the Scottish Government will continue to take a precautionary, evidence-based approach because, fundamentally, that is the right thing to do.

Chic Brodie (South Scotland) (SNP): I welcome the First Minister's comments on the need for public consultation and, indeed, for the moratorium. Can she provide an update on the devolution to the Scottish Parliament of licensing of onshore oil and gas extraction, as recommended by the Smith commission?

The First Minister: The devolution of powers over onshore oil and gas licensing represents a significant increase in the ability of the Scottish Government to determine our own path for onshore oil and gas. Following the Smith commission heads of agreement and the subsequent United Kingdom publication of the draft clauses and command paper, the Scottish Government is awaiting further discussions with the incoming UK Government to determine the full extent of the devolution of those powers prior, I hope, to the introduction of a Scotland bill later this year. Parliament will be kept fully informed of progress and will have the opportunity to contribute as appropriate.

Population Increase

6. Roderick Campbell (North East Fife) (SNP): To ask the First Minister what the Scottish Government's position is on the increase in Scotland's population. (S4F-02777)

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): I am delighted that Scotland's population has risen again and is now at its highest ever level—more than 5,300,000. In the past year, we have seen a significant increase in the number of people coming to Scotland from the rest of the United Kingdom and indeed from further afield, highlighting just how attractive Scotland is as a place to live, work, study and invest. Not only that, but more than two thirds of those coming to Scotland from overseas are aged between 16 and 34, showing the value of migration in helping to grow our working-age population.

Roderick Campbell: The First Minister will be aware that 48 per cent of migrants from the rest of the UK are aged 16 to 34. Despite lots of stories during the referendum that people would be put off coming to Scotland, it is clearly the case that young people in particular continue to seek to study, live and work in Scotland. Regardless of the result tomorrow, will the First Minister agree to continue to extend the hand of friendship to people elsewhere in the UK?

The First Minister: I do agree to do that, and I always will. Scotland welcomes the contribution that new Scots make to our economy and to our society, whether they come from overseas or from just over the border.

The latest population figures show that Scotland's net migration gain from the rest of the UK was approximately 9,600. That is a significant contribution to the overall population increase. I believe—and I hope that my view is shared across the chamber—that Scotland should always welcome people who want to come and live here, whether they come from other parts of the UK or from further afield.

We are a nation of emigrants as well as immigrants. People who come here make a significant contribution to our economy and to our society, and we should welcome them.

Annabel Goldie (West Scotland) (Con): Given that the population increases closely follow existing projections, does not that strengthen the validity of forecasts on Scotland's ageing population—in particular, the Scottish Government's report, "Demographic Change in Scotland"—and make the well-documented failure of the Scottish Government's change fund to reshape care for older people even more stark?

The First Minister: I am not sure that I entirely follow Annabel Goldie's train of thought or logic

there, but if that is my fault and I have perhaps missed the premise of her question, she should feel free to write to me and I will be happy to address it fully.

As I said in my original answer, more than two thirds of people coming to Scotland from overseas are between 16 and 34. In other words, they boost our working-age population. One of the ways in which Scotland, in common with many other countries across the world, has to deal with its ageing population—and let us never forget that our ageing population is a good thing to be celebrated, because it means that people are living longer—is by growing our working-age population. The figures are therefore good news in many different ways, but not least because the increase enables us to ensure that we can cater for a population that, thankfully, is living longer into old age.

The Presiding Officer: That ends First Minister's questions. I shall give members a few moments to settle down before portfolio questions. Those who are leaving the chamber should do so quickly and quietly.

Portfolio Question Time

Infrastructure, Investment and Cities

15:35

Freight Transport (Carbon Saving)

1. Rob Gibson (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what carbon saving would be made by removing one supermarket lorry from the A9 between Edinburgh and Thurso and carrying the contents by rail. (S4O-04274)

The Minister for Transport and Islands (Derek Mackay): Based on the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and Department of Energy and Climate Change carbon emission figures published in 2014 and the latest data published by the Rail Delivery Group, the Scottish Government estimates that, for each tonne transferred by rail freight rather than by road, CO₂ emissions would be reduced by up to 75 per cent. The actual carbon saving may depend on loading figures.

Rob Gibson: The minister should perhaps understand that 90 per cent of the supermarkets in the Highlands are within 1 mile of the railway and that many supermarkets deliver provisions by van to the furthest-flung doors in the country. Will he explore the possibility of introducing a new means to deliver supermarket stock, which could be unloaded from containers and picked up from rail sidings en route to supermarkets, so that further reductions can be made in greenhouse gases?

Derek Mackay: I will consider that. We are refreshing our rail freight strategy and will consult on it over the summer. It will include steps that the rail industry can take to encourage and support innovation and growth in the rail freight sector.

Rail Journey Times (Highland Main Line)

2. Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what progress has been made on reducing journey times on the Highland main line between Inverness and Edinburgh. (S4O-04275)

The Minister for Transport and Islands (Derek Mackay): Two additional train services were added on the Highland main line in December 2011, which increased the number of trains from nine to 11 per day between Inverness and the central belt. In December 2012, following technical improvements between Perth and Inverness, journey times improved by up to 18 minutes on some services. Further journey-time improvements of around 10 minutes on average, the introduction of an hourly service between

Perth and Inverness that extends to Glasgow or Edinburgh and increased opportunities for freight will be delivered by 2019.

Murdo Fraser: As I am sure the minister knows, the Scottish National Party promised in its 2007 manifesto to cut journey times from Inverness to Edinburgh by 45 minutes. The latest available figures show that the average journey time between Inverness and Edinburgh has reduced, but by nine minutes, and that the Monday-to-Friday service between Inverness and Edinburgh is taking longer than it did in 2007. When exactly will the Scottish Government deliver on that eight-year-old promise? Do we have to wait a generation?

Derek Mackay: The Scottish Government is working on the next stages of the investment strategy for future control periods, so we will continue to work on our manifesto commitments. We are making progress. We are modernising the railways and investing a significant sum of money. We will be aided by the proposals that the SNP has put before the people in the Westminster election, which will mean more spending on infrastructure than would be the case if the Tories were re-elected and infrastructure spending was reduced. The commitment will come more quickly with the SNP than it ever would have done with the Tories.

David Stewart (Highlands and Islands) (Lab): I welcome any increase in the speed of journeys, particularly for freight, between Inverness and the central belt. Does the minister share my view that one of the practical technical constraints is that the vast majority of the line is single track and that a serious increase in signalling is required to increase the speed of the service?

Derek Mackay: Yes—Mr Stewart is absolutely right. There are technical and infrastructure requirements that need to be addressed to help to achieve the reduction in journey times that we all wish to see. The point is fair.

Stewart Stevenson (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP): I draw members' attention to my entry in the register of members' interests in relation to my role in Railfuture and my presidency of the Scottish Association for Public Transport. Will the minister confirm that, in Scotland, we are investing in our rail network more than double per capita what is being invested in England and Wales?

Derek Mackay: Yes. The Scottish Government is committed to investing £5 billion in Scotland's railways over the five years to 2019, including more than £3 billion of capital investment in Network Rail infrastructure. On a per capita basis, that is more than double the equivalent investment planned by United Kingdom ministers.

John Finnie (Highlands and Islands) (Ind): What steps can the minister take to ensure that developments in the central belt do not mean that there are no slots for improving the frequency of trains on the Highland main line?

Derek Mackay: There is always a balancing act, but we are investing in Scotland's rail infrastructure to improve journey times across the country, expand capacity, improve the customer experience and reach out to parts of the country. In considering capacity, demand and timetabling issues, we will ensure that the Highlands and every part of Scotland are fully connected to the central belt. That is our aspiration.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (John Scott): Question 3, in the name of Neil Bibby, has not been lodged. An explanation has been provided.

Government Procurement

4. Gavin Brown (Lothian) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what changes it has planned for government procurement. (S4O-04277)

The Cabinet Secretary for Infrastructure, Investment and Cities (Keith Brown): A public consultation on changes to the planned procurement rules ended last week. We are analysing the responses to that consultation and will consider them as we take forward our plans to transpose the new European procurement directives and implement the Procurement Reform (Scotland) Act 2014.

Gavin Brown: The Federation of Small Businesses Scotland has suggested one change to procurement—namely, that annual procurement reports should,

“as a minimum, publish spend with suppliers broken down by ... business size (including micro and small businesses).”

What is the cabinet secretary's response to that proposal?

Keith Brown: I said that we have just finished a consultation exercise. I would rather wait until we have seen all the consultation responses before taking a definitive view. Gavin Brown's substantive point, which is about giving small and medium-sized businesses as much advantage as possible, is well made. We very much have that in mind. At the same time, we want to ensure that public bodies and others are not overburdened with bureaucracy when they are involved in procurement. We try to reconcile those interests and we will make a substantive response when we have considered the consultation responses.

Claudia Beamish (South Scotland) (Lab): How will the Government ensure coherence between the 2014 act's statutory guidance, which has just been consulted on, and the three-part

duty on public bodies that is set out in the Climate Change (Scotland) Act 2009? When my amendment on climate change was rejected at stage 2 of the Procurement Reform (Scotland) Bill, Nicola Sturgeon offered to have further discussions with me and Patrick Harvie about the development of the guidance to “encapsulate the points ... made”.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: And the question is?

Claudia Beamish: Will the cabinet secretary agree to meet me and Patrick Harvie to discuss the issue further?

Keith Brown: I hope that Claudia Beamish and Patrick Harvie have responded to the consultation. I am more than happy to meet them to discuss the issue.

Neil Findlay (Lothian) (Lab): When the bill on public procurement was passed, the minister responsible said that all that was needed to deal with blacklisting was guidance. Can the cabinet secretary tell me of any project in Scotland in which the Government’s approach has prevented a blacklisting company from gaining a public contract?

Keith Brown: We have put into procurement provisions a provision that no company involved in blacklisting will be allowed to have a Government contract.

It is worth pointing out—I think that Neil Findlay knows this—that, unfortunately, employment law is still the preserve of the United Kingdom Government. His party refused to agree to all employment law being devolved to Scotland. The UK Government is responsible for it.

We have taken action—the firmest action in the UK, I believe—to prevent blacklisting and we will continue to do that. If Neil Findlay wanted to work with the Government on that, I would be more than happy, but he should not make such points, because we have taken effective action to prevent blacklisting.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Question 5, in the name of Margaret McCulloch, has been withdrawn and an explanation has been provided.

Roads (Investment)

6. Cameron Buchanan (Lothian) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what plans it has to increase investment in roads as a result of the forecast population increase. (S4O-04279)

The Cabinet Secretary for Infrastructure, Investment and Cities (Keith Brown): Our strategic transport projects review is a 20-year plan for investment that took into account forecast economic and population growth up to 2022.

Despite Westminster’s real-terms cuts to Scottish capital budgets of about a quarter between 2010-11 and 2015-16, the Government continues to take decisive action to accelerate economic recovery through our investment decisions.

We have invested more than £6.5 billion in roads since 2007, with a further £690 million to be invested in the current financial year to ensure that our strategic road network remains safe, efficient and effective. Looking forward, we will continue to implement the STPR and our infrastructure investment plan, including completion of the largest transport infrastructure project in Scotland for a generation—the Queensferry crossing—and the dualling of the road network between Scotland’s cities.

Cameron Buchanan: Does the Scottish Government consider that it would be better to assess planning applications after it is known how infrastructure will develop in the area?

Keith Brown: We do that, but when a planning application is made, we also have to take into account the likely impact on infrastructure. That correlation is underlined by, for example, policies such as no detriment. When a planning application could mean an additional burden on the road network, that should be taken into account during the planning process. There is a link between planning and infrastructure requirements.

We have also provided assistance in relation to housing developments to help with past infrastructure costs. The link is really between the investment plan for infrastructure and the planning process.

Such things are therefore taken into account. If the member has ideas on how that could be done more effectively, I am more than willing to listen to them but I assure him that what he seeks is done at the present time.

Graeme Dey (Angus South) (SNP): Will the Scottish Government confirm that, despite the Westminster Tory cuts to Scotland’s capital budget of more than 25 per cent in the past five years, it is committed to embarking on the largest road investment programme that Scotland has ever seen?

Keith Brown: That is true, and it is worth remembering why it is true. A few months ago, the United Kingdom Secretary of State for Transport said that the problem in Scotland was the lack of investment in transport infrastructure. What the transport secretary, who was a minister for transport in 1989, said is correct: for decades we have not had the required investment in our road and rail networks.

In the point that was made earlier to Derek Mackay, the fact that we have had Beeching and

massive disinvestment in our road and rail infrastructure was forgotten. We are doing what we can to turn that around. As Stewart Stevenson pointed out, we are making twice the level of investment per head in the rail and road network. A modern, developed economy should, at the very least, have motorways or dual carriageways between its cities, and this Government will achieve that.

Committee on Climate Change (Transport Recommendations)

7. Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green): To ask the Scottish Government what its position is on the transport recommendations made by the Committee on Climate Change in its 2015 progress report. (S4O-04280)

The Minister for Transport and Islands (Derek Mackay): The United Kingdom Committee on Climate Change's 2015 progress report showed that Scotland is outperforming the UK in reducing greenhouse gas emissions. However, we have the ambition to do more, and we are already taking action on some of the transport recommendations made in that report. For example, our switched on fleets initiative helps to overcome barriers to the adoption of electric vehicles by providing expert analysis to highlight where they can be most effectively introduced into fleets. We are backing that analysis with £2.5 million of funding to enable councils and their partners to act by buying or leasing electric cars and vans.

Patrick Harvie: The minister says that the Government is taking action on some of the recommendations, but it is unclear whether it has accepted all the recommendations. If it has, we might hear fewer speeches about how great it is to have the biggest road-building programme that we have ever had.

The report's final recommendation calls on the Scottish Government to assess the carbon impact of any proposed changes to air passenger duty. Does the minister agree that it would be bizarre to do that, find that carbon emissions are going to go up as a result of the proposed changes and proceed anyway?

Derek Mackay: We have to look at overall carbon emissions, and it will fit within our overall policies if we look at everything that we have set out for the transition to a low-carbon economy.

On roads and road building, we support the decarbonisation of road use, so it is not necessarily the case that building roads will lead to a massive increase in emissions. We want to bring levels down, which is why we support electric cars.

To answer Patrick Harvie's question, we do not plan to introduce congestion charges or road user

charging schemes, which was a recommendation in the report. Although congestion charging is a matter for local authorities, we do not plan to support its introduction. We are doing everything in our power to take forward the climate change agenda, and I will play an active role in the Cabinet sub-committee on the matter.

Jamie McGrigor (Highlands and Islands) (Con): What progress is being made in developing the use of hydrogen-powered vehicles, where and by whom?

Derek Mackay: I am happy to write to the member with the details of our support for such projects. We have been supporting projects through the grant assistance that the Scottish Government provides.

Transport System (Enhanced Devolution)

8. Richard Lyle (Central Scotland) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what opportunities enhanced devolution could bring to the transport system. (S4O-04281)

The Minister for Transport and Islands (Derek Mackay): The Scottish Government signalled our commitment to enhanced devolution of powers over transport in our submission to the Smith commission. We argued that all transport policy that is not currently the responsibility of the Scottish Parliament should be devolved.

Enhanced devolution is a natural step to take to ensure that our transport system is as consistent and integrated as possible—administratively and practically—to best meet the needs and aspirations of the people of Scotland.

One example of the opportunities that enhanced devolution could bring to the transport system is a reduction in air passenger duty. We have confirmed that we intend to reduce APD by 50 per cent in the next session of Parliament, with a view to eventual abolition of the tax when public finances allow.

Further, of course, we have stated our view that connecting Scotland to the high speed 2 line is a priority, and that there should be a high-speed connection between Glasgow, Edinburgh and the north of England as part of any high-speed rail network.

Richard Lyle: Unlike most other countries' Governments, the Scottish Government does not currently have responsibility for borrowing. Does the minister feel that the delivery of proper borrowing powers to this Parliament will help us to invest in more infrastructure and, in turn, help to retain and create jobs, which would boost our economy through a multiplier effect, and of course, make a long-term contribution to growth and productivity?

Derek Mackay: Yes, of course. We welcome the extensions that are currently proposed, but we could go much further with regard to all the requests that members have made of the transport budget this afternoon if we had enhanced financial flexibility and the borrowing powers that this Parliament should have in order to grow Scotland's economy.

Chic Brodie (South Scotland) (SNP): The minister has answered the question that I was going to ask about air passenger duty. Can he tell me how the discussions with Her Majesty's Government in Westminster are dealing with the issue? When will we hear of the completion of those discussions?

Derek Mackay: How the matter is taken forward is now in the hands of the next Westminster Government. The matter was covered in the Smith recommendations, and it will be for the next Westminster Government to fulfil the promises in the vow that was made to the people of Scotland.

As the member would expect, we have had some technical discussions around the devolution of APD, and we hope that that power is secured for the Parliament so that the Government can use it to best effect for the economy of Scotland.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Question 9, in the name of Adam Ingram, has not been lodged. An explanation has been provided.

Edinburgh to Glasgow Improvement Programme

10. John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on the status of the Edinburgh to Glasgow improvement programme. (S4O-04283)

The Minister for Transport and Islands (Derek Mackay): The Edinburgh to Glasgow improvement programme is making good progress and remains on schedule for the introduction of the first electric services on the Edinburgh to Glasgow via Falkirk High route in December 2016.

Passengers are already benefiting from the £25 million transformation of Haymarket station and the Scottish Government's £80 million investment in the electrification of the line between Cumbernauld and Glasgow, both of which were completed on time and on budget.

John Mason: I understand that, while the Winchburgh tunnel is closed, we will lose four trains an hour from Glasgow Queen Street high level to Edinburgh, but ScotRail is proposing only to add one on an additional route. Can the Government comment on whether that will be sufficient to deal with capacity?

Derek Mackay: Because Mr Mason was at the presentation and briefing that I arranged for all members of the Scottish Parliament, he will be aware that there is a full communication exercise around arrangements for that necessary period of disruption, which we will keep to a minimum, to enable that excellent investment to happen.

Passengers will still be able to make direct rail journeys between Edinburgh and Glasgow on any of the other three routes connecting the cities, and ScotRail has provided an assurance that its disruption management plan will make best use of available resources, including, where possible, additional capacity.

Culture, Europe and External Affairs

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We move to portfolio questions on culture, Europe and external affairs.

European Union (Benefits)

1. Chic Brodie (South Scotland) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what benefits it considers the European Union brings to Scotland. (S4O-04284)

The Cabinet Secretary for Culture, Europe and External Affairs (Fiona Hyslop): EU membership has been a vibrant source of social, cultural and economic benefit for Scotland over the past 40 years. Membership provides significant economic benefits, including access to the world's largest single market, which has more than 500 million potential customers. In 2013, the EU was the destination for 46 per cent of Scottish exports, with a worth of some £12.9 billion.

The Scottish Government welcomes the social, cultural and economic benefits that migration from the EU delivers to Scotland's communities. The right to freedom of movement is also beneficial to Scots who move to live, work and study elsewhere in the EU.

That is why the Scottish Government will continue to make the case for Scotland's membership of the EU, as set out in "Scotland's Action Plan for EU Engagement", which was launched on 27 March 2015. A booklet on the benefits of Scotland's membership of the EU was published alongside the action plan to further emphasise the advantages that Scotland enjoys by being part of the EU.

Chic Brodie: The Economy, Energy and Tourism Committee recently held an evidence session on internationalising Scottish business. In that session, the former Labour minister Brian Wilson stated that, as 330,000 Scottish jobs depend on exports to the EU,

“it would be bonkers to come out of Europe.”—[*Official Report, Economy, Energy and Tourism Committee*, 4 March 2015; c 6.]

He went on to say that every company and trade union had a vested interest in ensuring that we do not leave Europe.

Does the cabinet secretary agree that Scotland’s position is and always will be best served inside the EU?

Fiona Hyslop: Yes, I do. It is vital that Scotland remains in the EU so that we can preserve the economic benefits of EU membership. That is why the First Minister has proposed that, if there were to be a referendum on the UK’s membership of the EU, a decision to exit the EU should require not just a majority across the whole of the UK but a majority in each of its four constituent parts—in other words, a double majority. However, not having a referendum in the first place by locking out the Tories would, of course, be preferable.

Scottish Film Studio (Location and Timetable)

2. John Pentland (Motherwell and Wishaw) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government when the Cabinet Secretary for Culture, Europe and External Affairs will announce the location and timetable for the development of a permanent Scottish film studio. (S4O-04285)

The Cabinet Secretary for Culture, Europe and External Affairs (Fiona Hyslop): I advised the Economy, Energy and Tourism Committee on 4 May that Scottish Enterprise had received a new proposal to provide studio infrastructure for Scotland. That proposal had to undergo due diligence and commercial negotiations to consider its viability.

The due diligence process is complete but has proved more complicated than first thought. Commercial negotiations are still on-going and, at present, the proposal remains commercial in confidence. As such, I am unable to provide a definitive date for any announcement on a location or timetable for the development of a permanent Scottish film studio, but I will seek to make an announcement as soon as possible.

John Pentland: I thank the cabinet secretary for her reply, and I hope that she enjoyed her trip to Hollywood.

Obviously, I would want the studio to be located in North Lanarkshire, even though the proposed studio near Edinburgh would be called Pentland studios. Does the cabinet secretary agree that we need to speed up progress on the proposal to use the industrial site in North Lanarkshire, where the project would be welcome and would give a much-needed boost to the local economy?

Fiona Hyslop: I am aware that there are different proposals on the location of a film studio. All that I can say at the moment is that discussions are on-going in relation to the proposal that Scottish Enterprise received.

The member refers to the studio that is already located in his region. It is worth reminding everyone that “Outlander”—the production that is currently being filmed in Cumbernauld—had a £38 million budget for its first season. On my visit to the United States, I was quite aware of the huge impact that that series is having, and I am delighted that it is being filmed in Scotland.

From the point of view of delivering an economic impact, the member should not underestimate what we are talking about—it is the biggest inward investment in film activity that we have had in Scotland, and it is very much to be welcomed. However, as he will appreciate, I cannot give him further information or details on a location or timetable for the proposed new studio.

Patricia Ferguson (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (Lab): As the cabinet secretary will be aware, I have pursued this issue for many years now; in fact, as recently as 28 April, she was kind enough to reply to a parliamentary question from me in the same terms that she has replied to John Pentland. I understand the issues with regard to due diligence and commercial confidentiality, but I would be very interested to know whether, when the cabinet secretary makes the announcement—which sounds to me fairly imminent—she will do so by statement to Parliament, inspired PQ or press release.

Fiona Hyslop: First, I confirm that an announcement will be made. However, although the due diligence has been completed, there are further issues that have to be addressed. I am very conscious of my responsibility to inform Parliament in the appropriate way; I have not yet determined what that way will be, but I respect Parliament and I am very much aware of the need to communicate by a statement, by a question or indeed, as I have done previously, through evidence to committees.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I very much hope so.

David Stewart (Highlands and Islands) (Lab): The cabinet secretary will be well aware that my Highlands and Islands region has been the location for many famous films including “Braveheart”, the “Harry Potter” series and “Skyfall”. Does she share my view that the film studio at Sabhal Mòr Ostaig in Skye has first-class production facilities and is the ideal location for shooting film and television?

Fiona Hyslop: When I attended the recent Celtic media festival, I made that very point about

the economic impact of Sabhal Mòr Ostaig and its studio and the impact of the Gaelic production “Bannan” not just in Skye but in the Western Isles.

It is important that we highlight not just the scenery here but the economic impacts. Scotland is not just a location; we need to emphasise the attractiveness of the skills on offer, and the development at Sabhal Mòr Ostaig is particularly to be commended in that respect. This is not just about growing the infrastructure but about developing skills and making clear the benefit of our wonderful locations.

Film and Arts Sectors (Shetland)

3. Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government what support it provides to the film and arts sectors in Shetland. (S4O-04286)

The Cabinet Secretary for Culture, Europe and External Affairs (Fiona Hyslop): Creative Scotland is the national leader for Scotland’s arts, screen and creative industries, and it distributes funding on the Government’s behalf. In 2013, Creative Scotland invested more than £745,000 in the Shetland Islands through 20 awards.

One example is Shetland Arts Development Agency, a Creative Scotland annual client, which received £212,000 in 2013-14. From 2015-16, that agency will become a regularly funded organisation, receiving £750,000 over three years.

Of course, the largest investment in Shetland went to Shetland Arts Development Agency for the development of the Mareel, the United Kingdom’s most northerly music, cinema and creative industry centre, which was awarded more than £2 million in 2008-09.

Rhoda Grant: I acknowledge the cabinet secretary’s awareness of the Mareel centre, which contains a wonderful broadcasting and film production unit for the islands. Although the centre is well used locally, it has a lot of spare capacity. What is the cabinet secretary doing to attract the film industry to the Mareel centre following the popular television series “Shetland”?

Fiona Hyslop: Although the Mareel has had its challenges, I have been very supportive of it and have visited it on a number of occasions. On the question of opportunities for using its spare capacity for further film activity, I am more than happy to receive in writing any suggestions, ideas or opportunities that the member might have for the centre, and I will ensure that Creative Scotland gets that. Alternatively, the member might want to approach Creative Scotland directly.

Jamie McGrigor (Highlands and Islands) (Con): How does the Scottish Government

support traditional Scottish music, which is a big part of Shetland’s vibrant arts sector?

Fiona Hyslop: The wider agencies that are there, which are obviously supported by the variety of arts development, support different activity in Shetland. With regard to traditional music, Fèis Rois has been a fantastic development, particularly in the Highlands and Islands, and we should also celebrate the different events and festivals such as the Shetland folk festival and the Shetland fiddle frenzy. There are a number of such events that are supported not only through the development of skills but by funding applications, and anyone who makes an application with regard to traditional music or another area can benefit from project funding from Creative Scotland.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Question 4 in Mark Griffin’s name has not been lodged. An explanation has been provided.

Festivals and Community Celebrations (South Scotland)

5. Claudia Beamish (South Scotland) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government what support it will give to local festivals and community celebrations across South Scotland, such as Beltane in Peebles, Lanimers in Lanark and the Wickerman festival in Dumfries and Galloway. (S4O-04288)

The Cabinet Secretary for Culture, Europe and External Affairs (Fiona Hyslop): All Scotland’s festivals—both big and small, national in outlook, such as the Wickerman festival, or community focused, such as the Peebles Beltane festival and the Lanimers festival in Lanark—are a hugely important aspect of our culture. The Scottish Government supports our festivals through Creative Scotland and EventScotland, which is VisitScotland’s events directorate. Creative Scotland supports festivals that apply directly to it for funding, and EventScotland supports a portfolio of events through its national, international and beacon programmes, which are designed to assist events to grow their audience. Support is also available through themed-year funding, which in 2015 links inspirational events with the year of food and drink.

Claudia Beamish: I am sure that the cabinet secretary will agree that it is a testament to local communities and imaginative individuals that, year after year, they voluntarily commit time and money to support those festivals and celebrations. What support can be given specifically by VisitScotland to help to promote and market those events to ensure that rural and small-town festivities do not lose out to the cities, and that they are used to maximise home and foreign tourism opportunities?

There has been some disappointment in that regard so far.

Fiona Hyslop: It is clear that the responsibility for VisitScotland lies with Fergus Ewing as Minister for Business, Energy and Tourism. However, we debated fairly recently in the chamber the role of festivals, including rural festivals, which are very important to the economy of Scotland. In my discussions with VisitScotland, we want to try to promote awareness that people do not go to the cities just for cultural experiences. If we look throughout Scotland across the calendar year, we will find festivals of some description. We need to improve how we promote Scotland as a festival nation, but marketing of that is a matter for VisitScotland. I will ask it to communicate to Claudia Beamish its plans.

Creative Scotland (Meetings)

6. Ken Macintosh (Eastwood) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government when it last met Creative Scotland. (S4O-04289)

The Cabinet Secretary for Culture, Europe and External Affairs (Fiona Hyslop): The Scottish Government regularly meets Creative Scotland to discuss its plans, progress and priorities. Most recently, I attended the British Film Commission familiarisation visit reception with Creative Scotland staff on 25 April. That event welcomed television studio executives from Los Angeles to Scotland. I also met the new chair of Creative Scotland, Richard Findlay, on 1 April to discuss his new role.

Ken Macintosh: In its evidence in the Education and Culture Committee's inquiry on the attainment gap in Scottish schools, the Unison trade union was just one of many organisations that highlighted the importance of the arts. I think that it gave us the example of the benefit to English marks of going to see a play as opposed to reading it out loud in the class.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: What is your question?

Ken Macintosh: Unison went on to highlight the importance of out-of-school charges and, therefore, the importance of being supported in school, but charges are making that less likely. In other words, we are likely to increase the attainment gap. In either percentage or real terms, how much is Creative Scotland spending on helping poorer and deprived households to access the arts?

Fiona Hyslop: I cannot give Ken Macintosh the exact amount now, but I am happy to follow that up.

Part of my discussion with the new chair of Creative Scotland was about the Government's

three priorities, as set out in our programme for government. Tackling inequalities is one of those priorities. There are different ways of doing that in relation to the attainment gap.

I refer Ken Macintosh to one of the most seminal pieces of research, which showed that although viewing or seeing plays or productions is important, participation has a bigger impact on young people. Regardless of parental income, participation will have a bigger influence on whether people subsequently enjoy the arts as adults. In order to close the attainment gap—or equality gaps of any description—it is really important that we focus on participation, although that is not to say that being able to see productions is not really important.

Our national companies already do a great deal of work in taking orchestra, theatre and ballet performances around the country. Perhaps Parliament should become more familiar with that work. I will therefore ask the national companies to ensure that they communicate to members information on activities in their constituencies in order to reach out and ensure that young people who might never be taken by their parents to see a play or a performance have the opportunity to see such things.

Claire Baker (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): At the weekend, I was at a paying artists campaign event that was highlighting the issue of artists not being paid. I am pleased that, since October, Creative Scotland has put in its guidelines for funding applications that it expects that artists will be paid standard rates. What more can be done to encourage and enforce standard rates of pay more widely throughout the arts and cultural sector?

Fiona Hyslop: It is very important that Creative Scotland has made that a part of its requirements. Again, I raised proactively with Creative Scotland some time ago—I think that it was before Claire Baker was in her current position—the importance of paying artists. There are two points here: one is public expectation and the second is funding requirements for funding bodies. There needs to be more general awareness: far too often people think that, for charitable events and suchlike, artists can be asked to come along without expecting to be paid. Generally across society there is more to be done in recognising the importance of paying for the performances that people receive. That is probably the area that needs more focus and emphasis with regard to what is acceptable. It is dependent on everybody asking at events, "Are the artists being paid?"

National Museums Scotland (Industrial Dispute)

7. Neil Findlay (Lothian) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government what progress is being made in bringing to an end the dispute at National Museums Scotland. (S4O-04290)

The Cabinet Secretary for Culture, Europe and External Affairs (Fiona Hyslop): As I said in my response to Drew Smith MSP last week, I have met both the chair and the director of National Museums Scotland and representatives of the unions and strongly encouraged both sides to develop a more productive working relationship to try and negotiate an agreement that would resolve the dispute. The two sides met most recently on 13 April and have agreed to maintain contact.

Neil Findlay: Given that the justice secretary managed to get £7 million out of the finance secretary to prevent a strike in the Scottish Prison Service in the run-up to this and next year's elections, does the culture secretary have so little clout in the Cabinet that she cannot even weasel £200,000 from John Swinney to pay low-paid staff in National Museums Scotland the money that they are owed for working unsociable hours? In her answer, will she spare us any reference to Wales, England, Ulan Bator or anywhere else that she has no responsibility for and instead concentrate on what she does have responsibility for?

Fiona Hyslop: The reason why the member does not want me to mention Wales is that there they want to take away a weekend working allowance from those who already have it, which is not the situation in Scotland. I would hope that the member would do a bit of research before he comes here. He knows, because he was in the chamber when I made it clear last week, that the cost of the proposal would be £400,000 a year, which would amount to £1.2 million by the next spending review.

The member is also wrong in another area, because there is no no-strike agreement with the Prison Officers Association Scotland. Of course, the only person who introduced such an agreement was Jack Straw, when he was a Labour Home Secretary. The member is also wrong on another count—

Neil Findlay: On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I wonder whether the cabinet secretary will reflect on her comments and correct the record, as I never said that there was a no-strike agreement. Maybe she will correct the record when she gets the opportunity.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Mr Findlay, you know very well that that is not a point of order, but you have made your point. Cabinet secretary, please conclude.

Fiona Hyslop: Neil Findlay is wrong on a third element. The Scottish Prison Service found funding within its existing budget because the agreement was made in good faith to incentivise the engagement of prison officer staff in a process of discussion. The issue in relation to National Museums Scotland is to get both parties to have a discussion that is not predicated only on the introduction of a new weekend working allowance for staff on new contracts since 2011.

European Parliament (Monitoring of Proceedings)

8. Mary Scanlon (Highlands and Islands) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government how it monitors proceedings at the European Parliament. (S4O-04291)

The Cabinet Secretary for Culture, Europe and External Affairs (Fiona Hyslop): The Scottish Government monitors proceedings in the European Parliament through the Scottish Government's European Union office, based in Brussels.

Mary Scanlon: I am sure that the cabinet secretary and the Scottish Government Cabinet will be fully aware of the medium combustion plants directive, which has the potential to cost thousands of jobs and slow down North Sea oil production by up to 60 per cent, so why did Scottish National Party MEPs, in the past hour, choose not to vote for Ian Duncan's amendment to exempt North Sea oil rigs?

Fiona Hyslop: Matters for the European Parliament are matters for the European Parliament. The member might not have noticed, but I have been in the chamber since the beginning of the meeting at 2 o'clock, when I was leading for the Government in the debate on the deaths of migrants in the Mediterranean.

The Scottish Government is fully aware of the medium combustion plants directive and what it means for Scotland. In co-operation with the office of the United Kingdom permanent representation to the European Union, we have been working with the policy team on the issue. We have offered a further briefing to all Scottish MEPs on the importance of the issue and directed them to SSE's EU liaison officer in relation to some issues. We are aware of the issues and they have been discussed not just here but in the European Parliament. However, I am not accountable for events in Brussels within the past hour.

First World War Commemorations 2015

10. Stewart Maxwell (West Scotland) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on the Scottish

commemorations programme's first world war commemorations for 2015. (S4O-04293)

The Cabinet Secretary for Culture, Europe and External Affairs (Fiona Hyslop): The programme of events to commemorate first world war dates of particular relevance to the people of Scotland is progressing well both for 2015 and, beyond that, for the years to 2018. On Saturday 25 April, the First Minister and I were privileged to take part in the dawn service for the Gallipoli and Anzac day commemorations at Edinburgh castle. The first national event will be the commemoration of the Quintinshill rail disaster, with services in both Gretna and Rosebank cemetery, Leith, on Friday 22 and Saturday 23 May.

In Stirling, on 4 June, I will attend an evening reception followed by Sir Hew Strachan's lecture "1915: The search for solutions", which commemorates the troops leaving Scotland for Gallipoli from Stirling castle. That will mark the opening of a weekend of commemorative activity in Stirling including a photographic exhibition, a play by local children and displays by military bands from both Scotland and Turkey.

Stewart Maxwell: I offer my personal congratulations to the Scottish commemorations panel on its successful programme of events last year.

Will the cabinet secretary provide an update on the progress of the centenary memorials restoration fund and confirm which war memorial projects in the West Scotland region have benefited from the fund?

Fiona Hyslop: I am not aware of the details that the member requests for the West Scotland region, but the centenary memorials restoration fund is run by Historic Scotland and I will ask it to provide those details to the member. The Heritage Lottery Fund is responsible for some of the projects, and I will ask for those to be identified as well.

The member is right to pay tribute to the work of the Scottish commemorations panel, which has set up a range of different events in a very considered and thoughtful way. In particular, I thank the chair, Norman Drummond, and all the members of the board for guiding us through the next few years.

Decision Time

16:17

The Deputy Presiding Officer (John Scott): There are two questions to be put as a result of today's business. The first question is, that motion S4M-13090, in the name of Joe FitzPatrick, on approval of a Scottish statutory instrument, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament agrees that the Scottish Marine Regions Order 2015 [draft] be approved.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The second question is, that motion S4M-13091, in the name of Joe FitzPatrick, on committee membership, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament agrees that Alex Johnstone be appointed as the Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party substitute on the Welfare Reform Committee.

Meeting closed at 16:17.

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