



The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

Official Report

MEETING OF THE PARLIAMENT

Tuesday 6 October 2015

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Scottish Parliament

Tuesday 6 October 2015

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

Time for Reflection

The Presiding Officer (Tricia Marwick): Good afternoon. The first item of business this afternoon is time for reflection. Our time for reflection leader today is the Reverend Thomas White of St Mary's, Calton, in Glasgow.

The Rev Thomas P White PhB STL JCL (Parish Priest, St Mary's, Calton, Glasgow and Executive Chair, St Margaret's Children and Family Care Society): Presiding Officer and members of the Scottish Parliament, winter is coming!

I must confess that that opening remark is there for the titillation of the millions of fans of what is arguably the most popular fantasy drama of our present age. Perhaps more accurately, what I want to say is, "Autumn is here!"

For many of us, our summer holiday will be a distant memory. For me, like many of my fellow Scots, it was the Mediterranean that was a source of healing balm and relaxation. I confess that, on several occasions this year, I looked out over the blue waters, contemplating how, for so many others, that sea was not a source of leisure but was their final frontier. It was a barrier to be crossed to deliver them from persecution and terror.

Many of the world's great religions experience the changing of seasons. The Christian calendar, so to speak, is no different. The words Advent, Lent, Eastertide and Christmastide are familiar to those even outwith the Christian tradition. Those seasons are also peppered with feast days and saints days, such as St Andrew's day and All Saints' day.

Tomorrow is the feast of the holy rosary. For many outside the Catholic faith, the rosary may simply be understood as the beads that Catholics use to pray. For Catholics, the rosary is a powerful prayer tradition that focuses on specific events in the Lord's life and ministry. It is designed to help us in our vocation of following the Lord.

The date of this feast day was chosen specifically because it is the anniversary of the battle of Lepanto in 1571, when a coalition of European maritime states effectively prevented the Ottoman empire from gaining access to the Atlantic and thus the Americas, thwarting the invasion of Italy by a sultan who had taken

possession of Constantinople—the new Rome—and who had already taken to himself the title emperor of the Romans. The threat to Christian Europe was so great that Pope Pius V called for the recitation of the rosary throughout Europe.

Today, the stakes are just as high for those who would profess to be Christian. People are being drawn to Europe's borders and the dangers to what remains of the Christian fabric of this continent are very real. However, it is a threat born not out of invasion but out of indifference. If Europe demonstrates indifference to the plight of refugees, the Christian heart will be torn from our nations with greater efficiency than any Ottoman force could have achieved.

I serve as chairman of St Margaret's Children and Family Care Society. In 2011, one single letter concerning a hypothetical complaint endangered the good work of this charity, as the Office of the Scottish Charity Regulator passionately but erroneously began to view our work as having nothing to do with faith. With the support of this Parliament and the prevailing of common sense, the Scottish charity appeals panel recognised and understood the nature of religiously inspired good works, as protected by the European convention on human rights.

The practice of one's religion cannot simply be reduced to prayers or chants. In contemplating what we do at St Margaret's and the plight of refugees, there is great resonance with the challenge that is placed on us by Christ, as recorded in St Matthew's gospel:

"Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not minister to you? Then he will answer them, saying, 'Truly, I say to you, as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.'"

Or, as we read in St James,

"Religion that is pure and undefiled before God and the Father is this: to care for orphans and widows".

The scope of this Parliament's powers might be limited when faced with international issues, but that does not stop it being a voice that resonates true to our heritage. I praise the MSPs who have done so. Words are important and they have power. Often, people of religious conviction are unable to act and effect change, and words need to suffice. Those words have power and they are often identified by another name—prayer. In respect to Europe, may this Parliament and nation be like the leaven in the bread. May God bless our work.

Topical Question Time

14:05

Christopher Hales

1. Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government when the Crown Office was first notified of the allegations of mortgage fraud against Christopher Hales. (S4T-01133)

The Lord Advocate (Frank Mulholland): As the Crown has made clear on a number of occasions recently, the case of Christopher Hales was first brought to its attention by the Law Society of Scotland at a meeting on 18 December 2014.

Jackie Baillie: We understand that the Law Society told the Crown Office informally about the Christopher Hales case in December 2014, then in April 2015, and then formally in July 2015. Does the Lord Advocate believe that there should be an investigation into the process of communication between the Law Society and the Crown Office, given that additional opportunities for alleged mortgage fraud could have arisen due to the delay? Will he order such an inquiry?

Noting when the Lord Advocate instructed the police to investigate—and if, as we understand, that was within six days of receiving the report—has he set a deadline for the police to submit a report to the Crown Office? If that is not already the case, will he consider so doing?

The Lord Advocate: A number of questions have been asked of me. I will deal first with the last question. It is correct that, on 3 July 2015, Police Scotland was instructed to investigate the allegations that were the subject of the Scottish Solicitors Discipline Tribunal. The report was received on that day and was considered by the Crown Office. Six days later, I think on 9 July, formal instructions were issued to the police.

I cannot set a timescale, as these are complex matters, but I can say that the serious and organised crime division of the Crown Office is in regular contact with both the Law Society and Police Scotland, which is dealing with the matter, to monitor progress and to assist in a number of legal matters that have arisen as a result of the investigation.

As to whether I think that there should be an inquiry or whether I should order an inquiry, first, I do not have the power to order an inquiry; and, secondly, I do not think that there should be an inquiry. Let me explain why, and let me take members through the timeline of interaction between the serious and organised crime division of the Crown Office and the Law Society. There

are quarterly meetings at which a large number of matters are discussed, including issues of whether the Law Society will make a referral in relation to a solicitor who has been struck off or who is the subject of a disciplinary finding made against them.

The Crown Office was first advised of this issue on 18 December 2014. The Crown Office was advised that the matter was under consideration of a referral to the Crown. The Crown noted the findings of the Scottish Solicitors Discipline Tribunal and noted that neither the clients nor the properties involved were named at the meeting.

The next time the matter was discussed was, as the member rightly mentioned in her supplementary question, in April this year—28 April, to be precise. The issue was raised again, and it was noted that it was still under consideration of a referral by the Law Society to the Crown. Again, neither the clients nor the properties were intimated at the time.

Following those meetings, the Crown was in contact with the Law Society to discuss what needed to be obtained—what evidence needed to be obtained, what files needed to be obtained and who had them—and a whole host of other matters. Given that there is a live investigation, it would not be productive to get into those details. I hope that Jackie Baillie will accept from me that preparatory work was undertaken with the Law Society to deal with the matter if and when there was a formal referral.

As indicated, the referral was made on 3 July 2015. On 1 July 2015, the Law Society advised us that it required to get authorisation from the guarantee fund sub-committee to formally refer the case to the Crown Office. That is a Law Society procedure.

We must understand what we are dealing with. We are dealing with a criminal investigation in which a person's liberty could be in jeopardy, so these things cannot be dealt with quickly or by word of mouth. There is a process. That process was carried out by the Law Society, and authorisation was given for a referral by the guarantee fund sub-committee. Once that authorisation was given, the referral was made on 3 July 2015. That was a formal referral from the Law Society containing a whole load of information that the Crown would need, and the Crown has, of course, worked or been in contact with the Law Society about matters in anticipation of the referral being made.

As indicated, the referral was received on 3 July, which was a Friday. I think that the police were instructed the following Thursday.

The first time the Crown was made aware of the clients and the properties was on 3 July 2015. The

Crown was not aware of the clients and the properties prior to that. There would be client confidentiality and data protection issues, but that is not my problem, or that was not my issue, of course; that is a matter for the Law Society in its dealings with the issue. However, I have spoken to the persons who were at the meeting and have had sight of the notes of the meeting, and I can assure members that the first time the Crown was made aware of the identity of the clients and the properties involved was 3 July 2015.

Jackie Baillie: The public would probably not understand why it takes more than a year for the disciplinary tribunal to notify the Crown Office. Our concern should always be that, in the intervening period, vulnerable people could have been caught up and exploited in alleged mortgage fraud.

It appears from press reports that three lawyers, not one, have faced disciplinary action by the Law Society. In all cases, there has been a common denominator. Was the Crown Office aware at any stage of those additional cases and were connections made by the Law Society that were notified to the Crown? Given the seriousness of the allegations, has the Crown Office taken any steps through the Proceeds of Crime Act 2002 to freeze the assets of any of those who might be implicated?

The Lord Advocate: To deal with the last point first, the Crown has not yet taken steps under the proceeds of crime legislation. It is premature for that to be done or considered. In any criminal investigation, the Crown always has potential proceeds of crime at the forefront, but there has to be established criminality before steps can be embarked on.

On other solicitors who may or may not be involved, I have to be very careful about what I say, but I can tell members that, in relation to the referral on 3 July 2015, as far as I am aware—I read the referral this morning and I will check it after these proceedings are concluded—only one solicitor is referred to. However, Jackie Baillie has placed me on notice, and I will certainly make inquiries into that matter.

Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): In what circumstances would the Crown Office and Procurator Fiscal Service ask Police Scotland to investigate any other person connected with the solicitor subject to the Law Society's judgment?

The Lord Advocate: I have given consideration to that matter, because that question is highly relevant. The referral to Police Scotland relates to the solicitor who was the subject of the Scottish Solicitors Discipline Tribunal finding. The police has been instructed to investigate the property transactions relating to that finding, which resulted in the solicitor being struck off.

Police Scotland has a duty in any criminal investigation to follow where the evidence takes it. If, during a police investigation, evidence arises that other persons have been involved in criminality, such as fraud or whatever crime, I have complete faith that Police Scotland will act and do the right thing, as will the Crown Office and Procurator Fiscal Service.

Affordable Housing

2. Jim Hume (South Scotland) (LD): To ask the Scottish Government what its response is to the claim in the report, *Affordable Housing Need in Scotland*, that the need for affordable housing is double what is being delivered. (S4T-01136)

The Minister for Housing and Welfare (Margaret Burgess): We will, of course, consider the report's findings. We are delivering a huge boost to affordable housing provision across Scotland by investing more than £1.7 billion to build 30,000 affordable homes during this Parliament's lifetime. That is a significant achievement at a time of cuts to our capital budgets. We want to do more. We want to increase and accelerate our ambitions for Scotland's housing, and to continue to do so in an integrated and collaborative way. Our target of 6,000 affordable homes a year is absolutely not the limit of our ambition, and in the past seven years we have delivered 19 per cent more affordable homes than the previous Administration.

Statistics that were published this morning also show that provisional local authority capital expenditure on housing increased by 7.1 per cent from 2013-14 to 2014-15. That is 28 per cent of the total capital expenditure for 2014-15.

Jim Hume: The minister mentioned the previous coalition Government, but unfortunately, her figures were wrong. Housing starts for 2006-07 were more than 5,500, but starts in the past financial year were just over 3,500. We will put that to the side. The report, which was published by three of Scotland's leading housing organisations, has reassessed the target that is needed to tackle our housing crisis. It calls for

"at least 12,000 affordable homes a year for the next five years."

When will the Government be in a position to commit to reassessing its targets and to bringing them closer to realistic needs in order to solve the crisis?

Margaret Burgess: As I said, our target is not the limit of our ambition. We want to do more, and we are working with stakeholders across the sector to do just that.

I remind Jim Hume that, given this Scottish Government's falling budgets, we have built more houses over the past seven years than the previous Administration. We know that we need to build more houses, and we are working hard to do that. The member can be assured that housing remains a Scottish Government priority.

Jim Hume: The director of Shelter Scotland said that

"progress is nowhere near meeting the level of demand."

Homes for Scotland said that housing production is

"40% lower than in 2007 despite a record population and growing number of households."

The Scottish Federation of Housing Associations said that

"By ... tackling the housing crisis there is an opportunity to improve the life chances of Scotland's people, including some of the poorest and most vulnerable."

In the light of those expert opinions, will the minister provide information on what more it will do to help the most vulnerable people to obtain housing?

Margaret Burgess: The Scottish Government will work with all stakeholders in the sector to deliver housing through its joint delivery plan. The plan's key aim is to provide more housing and to see housing delivered across all tenures. We will work to achieve that. Our officials are also working tirelessly on more innovative ways to use the reducing finances that we get from the United Kingdom Government in order to ensure that we can stretch them further. We will continue to build social housing and housing across all tenures, which is a priority for this Government. We have delivered in this session of Parliament, and we will deliver any targets that we set in a future Parliament.

The Presiding Officer (Tricia Marwick): Members will note that we have some time in hand over the whole afternoon, so I intend to allow question time to continue in order to allow as many members as possible the opportunity to ask questions of the ministers. However, I would truly appreciate members' keeping their questions brief.

Ken Macintosh (Eastwood) (Lab): Two weeks ago, during Labour's debate on housing, the minister steadfastly refused to accept the description of our housing supply situation by the Commission on Housing and Wellbeing as a "crisis". Does she accept that the figure of 12,000 social houses a year is an accurate assessment of the current need for social housing?

Margaret Burgess: I said in my initial response that we will, of course, consider very seriously the findings of the report. I also said that the target of

6,000 affordable homes is not our ambition; our ambition is to build more homes—affordable homes and homes for social rent—than that. We will continue to do that. We have delivered 19 per cent more than any other Administration and we will continue to work to deliver even more, above that.

Alex Johnstone (North East Scotland) (Con): Against the need that was defined in Jim Hume's question, the national housing trust can be judged only as a failure. Will the minister commit to returning to the idea of the national housing trust and to making alternative proposals for a new vehicle that will facilitate private investment in affordable housing?

Margaret Burgess: At this stage, I am certainly not going to give a commitment to something that Alex Johnstone has, as far as I can recollect, mentioned for the first time. It is something that he has certainly not brought to me before. However, I can tell him that we are working with the sector and with investors and lenders to attract private investment into the housing sector. We will continue to do that. We are open to discussion, and have had discussions with many groups and investors, and we are willing to listen to any ideas. If Alex Johnstone has an idea that he feels we should be taking forward, I suggest that he bring it to us.

Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green): What action is the Scottish Government taking to enable local authorities to acquire land for housing at a more reasonable price? Does the minister accept the basic principle that Government targets ought to be determined by the level of need?

Margaret Burgess: Yes, we are looking at housing needs, which is why we have our housing need and demand assessments. Local authorities advise us on demand in their areas, and we look at that. The Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice, Communities and Pensioners' Rights recently launched the planning review, which is looking at delivery of housing and at the existing infrastructure to ensure that it is not just a process but is about effective and efficient delivery of housing programmes. We are looking at those issues, as well.

Ayrshire College (Cumnock Campus Closure)

3. Graeme Pearson (South Scotland) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government what action it is taking to ensure that people in Cumnock are not disadvantaged by the decision to close the Cumnock campus of Ayrshire College. (S4T-01131)

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning (Angela Constance): That news is disappointing. I understand that the

decision by Ayrshire College to close the Cumnock campus was due to a fall in student numbers, with students choosing to attend the other campuses, including the recently refurbished Ayr campus. The college advises, however, that it will continue to work with its partners and will run short courses at locations across the area to help people to develop employability skills.

Looking ahead, the new £53 million campus in Kilmarnock, which is due to open next year, will provide more opportunities in state-of-the-art facilities for learners across the region.

Graeme Pearson: I am grateful to the cabinet secretary for that response. She will understand the difficulties that are faced by people who live in the Cumnock area, which is a challenged area because of unemployment and other past upsets.

Women's access is an important issue for the Government. The announcement has come as a great shock to people in Cumnock because of the closure's impact not only on the economy, but on access to opportunities. Will the cabinet secretary take steps to ensure that what can be done will be done in relation to education in the area?

Angela Constance: It is imperative that Ayrshire College continues to work with the community in order to reassure and convince people that it remains, despite the closure of the Cumnock campus, committed to providing learning opportunities in the area.

Graeme Pearson might be interested to note that the Scottish Further and Higher Education Funding Council's outcome agreement guidance sets the expectation that colleges will offer a wide range of further education provision in locations across regions, thereby making FE more accessible to students.

I said that Ayrshire College intends to work with local partners to identify alternative venues for the two part-time courses that are currently offered. It will also have to work with the student association to support students during the transition to a new location.

Graeme Pearson: The cabinet secretary will know about the expense that students incur when they have to travel for courses. People in Cumnock are concerned about the additional cost to students in that regard. There is a perception in the area that courses have been transferred to other campuses, which has disadvantaged the Cumnock campus.

Discussions have been going on about the future of the crèche facilities in the Ayr and Kilwinning campuses, which is also of concern to constituents in the context of access to education. I hope that the cabinet secretary will take further interest in those matters.

Angela Constance: I will, of course, continue to take an interest in those matters.

I appreciate the tone and tenor of Mr Pearson's comments. He might be interested to note that students who live more than 2 miles from their college are eligible to apply for assistance with travel costs.

Closure of the Ayr and Kilwinning campus nurseries is a decision for Ayrshire College, which says that despite its endeavours to increase demand, the two nurseries have been struggling to break even. Currently 37 children use the facilities, at a cost to the college of £400,000. I will continue to make inquiries, as will local members, to test the nature of the information that comes our way.

Adam Ingram (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP): Does the cabinet secretary understand my concern about the college's lack of consultation of the community about the decision? The lack of transparency and openness compares unfavourably with, for example, the approach that is taken under the protocol for school closure proposals.

What discussions have taken place between the Scottish Government and Ayrshire College? Can the cabinet secretary reassure the Cumnock community in relation to the impact on the level and quality of college provision for my constituents?

Angela Constance: I share some of Mr Ingram's concerns. It is important to say firmly that consultation should never be regarded as an extra and must be part of how the Government and public services conduct themselves.

I am aware of the particular challenges that face the community in Cumnock—not least its comparative isolation and long-standing high unemployment, which has been mentioned. I reiterate to Mr Ingram and to other members who have an interest in the matter my disappointment at the decision. We will continue to work together to ensure that the college mitigates the impact of the closure.

My officials have sought reassurance from the college that plans are in place to continue to enable local residents to meet their aspirations to learn and study. For students who attend the Cumnock campus, the college is, with its local partners, identifying an alternative location for delivery.

Island Communities

The Presiding Officer (Tricia Marwick): The next item of business is a debate on motion S4M-14448, in the name of Derek Mackay, on empowering Scotland's island communities. I call Derek Mackay to speak to and move the motion.

14:30

The Minister for Transport and Islands (Derek Mackay): I am delighted to open this afternoon's debate on empowering Scotland's island communities. First, I will reflect on the journey that we have taken and the progress that has been made since the launch of the our islands, our future campaign by the three island councils and the establishment of the island areas ministerial working group in 2013.

The publication of the "Empowering Scotland's Island Communities" prospectus in June 2014 produced the most comprehensive package for empowering Scotland's island communities that has ever been put forward by any Government. That was quickly followed by my appointment as the islands minister, which provided a focus and a voice for all of Scotland's 93 island communities at the heart of Government.

The Government's commitment to our islands was further strengthened when the First Minister announced, in her first programme for government, her intention to reconvene the ministerial working group to continue the focus of addressing the challenges that our island communities face and to consult on potential measures for inclusion in a future islands bill. The ministerial working group reconvened in February, and I will touch on some of the progress that has been made.

On transport, we are clear about the significant contribution that our lifeline ferry services make to the social, cultural and economic wellbeing of our islands. We have invested over £1 billion in our ferry services since 2007. Most recently, continued investment has allowed us to complete our roll-out of road equivalent tariff fares on the Clyde and Hebrides ferry services this month and to support Caledonian Maritime Assets as it finalises the award of contracts to Ferguson Marine Engineering Ltd for the building of two 100m vessels. We have listened to the views that have been expressed around timetabling and, as I announced on 22 September, Caledonian MacBrayne is consulting island communities widely on the detail of proposals for enhanced 2016 summer sailings.

We are committed to affordable ferry fares. I am therefore pleased to announce today a freeze on fares for 2016-17 across all Scottish Government-

subsidised ferry services, which includes fares for passengers, cars and commercial vehicles.

During my recent visit to Shetland, I announced a comprehensive study of the northern isles service. That is to be carried out to inform the tender process for the next contract, which is due to begin in April 2018, and we will continue to engage with key partners as part of that process. We will also work closely with both Orkney Islands Council and Shetland Islands Council in considering their internal ferry services.

Building on all that, I have agreed to establish a strategic islands transport forum, which is a specific ask of island councils. The forum will meet biannually and its membership will include local authorities and other key stakeholders. It is hoped that the first meeting will take place shortly.

On air travel, the Government has made significant capital investment in purchasing new Twin Otter aircraft for the three routes that we support between Glasgow and Barra, Tiree and Campbeltown. The aircraft are already in operation on those routes on a much-improved frequency.

We have extended the air discount scheme to 2019. The scheme is expected to cost around £6.4 million this year alongside the significant cost of running Highlands and Islands Airports Ltd's airports. I do, however, recognise and understand the concerns about the cost and reliability of air travel to and from our islands. The Government is keen to address those issues and is working with stakeholders to achieve improvements. I have met Scott Preston, who started the online campaign, and I also recently met Loganair. Loganair has outlined a range of initiatives to enhance engineering support through its network to improve reliability and a review of scheduling to improve punctuality. I hope that passengers will start to see the benefits of those initiatives soon.

Liam McArthur (Orkney Islands) (LD): I am very grateful to the minister for taking an intervention.

I bear the scars of the latest delay, which I experienced coming down from Kirkwall this morning. Has the minister established a timeframe with Loganair for the range of measures that I know it is undertaking to take effect, so that we see improvements in the reliability of those lifeline services?

Derek Mackay: That is a fair question. A Loganair board meeting is to take place this week, at which that and other matters will be discussed. Loganair has a plan around engineering support, capacity and parts for the aircraft. Obviously, I want that plan to be put in place as soon as possible so that we can start to see improvements in reliability and in support for the aircraft. The

nature of the aircraft is such that safety is never compromised, but I want reliability to improve, and some of the improvement can be brought about through the scheduling and timetabling initiatives.

Ken Macintosh (Eastwood) (Lab): I thank the minister for taking another intervention.

Is the minister aware that some islanders are concerned that some of the planes are occasionally pulled from island services to serve more lucrative routes? Will the minister investigate that claim and see whether the practice can be stopped?

Derek Mackay: I am happy to raise that with the operator when I meet it again, but both issues are really to do with reliability and the cost of air fares. I think that even the campaigners recognise that, when it comes to air fares, there are costs associated with servicing the islands, and that this is not about sheer profiteering, as it has been described. There are genuine cost pressures on the operator, but I will be happy to add the matter that Ken Macintosh raises to the other matters that I have raised with Loganair when representing island communities.

I return to the issue of air fares. Fares are set by Loganair, as they are by any other airline, and they reflect the cost of operating the fleet, including staffing, fuel, airport charges and air passenger duty on the northbound sectors. As with other airlines, advance bookings are generally cheaper than bookings that are made at the last minute. However, our understanding of the cost of travel and of the lifeline nature of the services means that, as a Government, we want to do more. I am therefore pleased to advise Parliament that we will increase the air discount scheme discount from 40 per cent of the core fare to 50 per cent, which is the maximum that is allowed under the terms of the scheme. That increase will apply to bookings that are made on or after 1 January next year. I am sure that that extension will be welcomed across the island and more remote communities in Scotland.

On energy, delivery of new strategic grid links to Orkney, Shetland and the Western Isles remains a top priority for the Scottish Government. We continue to press the United Kingdom Government directly and through the Scottish island renewables delivery forum on its clear commitment to provide a viable support package for remote island wind generators. We are doing everything that we possibly can to influence the key players—the UK Government, the Office of Gas and Electricity Markets and Scottish Hydro Electric Transmission—by encouraging positive direct action and, importantly, promoting continued co-operation between them.

Communities across the Scottish islands are already reaping the benefits of hosting or owning renewable energy projects, support for which is provided through the Government's community and renewable energy scheme—CARES.

Fuel poverty is another challenging issue that affects our island communities, and it was discussed by the islands ministerial group in July. We believe that all people in Scotland should live in high-quality, sustainable homes that they can afford to heat. Fuel poverty spreads far and wide through our urban and rural communities, and that is simply not good enough. That is why we have allocated more than £0.5 billion since 2009 for our fuel poverty and energy efficiency programmes.

We have also increased our investment in domestic energy efficiency—this year, we have made available a record £119 million. That will give more households that live in fuel poverty access to measures to make their homes warmer and more energy efficient. However, we recognise that more remains to be done, so we have established a new Scottish rural fuel poverty task force that will explore issues around fuel poverty in rural areas. It will report its findings next year.

Claudia Beamish (South Scotland) (Lab): Would the minister consider making a commitment to look particularly at island communities in relation to fuel poverty? That would be helpful to islanders.

Derek Mackay: Yes. I will absolutely make that commitment today, and that work will return to the island areas ministerial working group.

Providing access to high-quality digital connectivity is another high priority for the Scottish Government. At yesterday's convention of the Highlands and Islands, the Deputy First Minister chaired a discussion among councils, BT and the major mobile operators on improving coverage across the Highlands and Islands. That is in addition to the Government schemes in which we are supporting community access such as community broadband Scotland, which can make a difference.

Earlier this year, community broadband Scotland provided almost £1 million to a group of island communities in Argyll for a project called gigaplus Argyll; more than 1,400 homes and businesses are set to enjoy high-speed broadband. A similar project will be rolled out on Skye and other projects are in the pipeline.

We are also looking at the potential use of white space technology. White space is a wireless technology using spectrum freed up by the move to digital television. The pilot will also test the capabilities of white space in a ferry terminal.

We want to make significant improvements to mobile coverage, because we recognise its vital importance to island communities. In March this year, we provided 3G and 4G mobile services on the Isle of Coll, in partnership with Vodafone and the islanders themselves, whose mast is a community asset. We are assessing how that model can be replicated elsewhere, potentially using European funding. We have also changed the permitted development rights, making it easier to upgrade existing mobile sites to increase coverage. We will continue to apply more pressure on the UK Government.

I welcome the involvement of the island authorities in the recently established stakeholder advisory group on the Crown Estate. The devolution of management and revenues of the Crown Estate in Scotland presents a genuine opportunity to deliver added benefit to Scotland and local communities.

Although we do not believe that the Scotland Bill clause on the Crown Estate that is currently making its way through Westminster truly reflects the Smith commission proposals, our focus is on ensuring that the devolution of the Crown Estate to this Parliament takes place in a workable way. There will be a wide consultation on how best to manage Crown Estate assets in Scotland for the longer term. We have already committed through the island areas ministerial working group to ensuring that coastal and island communities benefit from the net revenue from marine assets out to 12 nautical miles.

Lewis Macdonald (North East Scotland) (Lab): Will the minister give way?

Tavish Scott (Shetland Islands) (LD): Will the minister give way on that point?

Derek Mackay: Okay. I give way to Lewis Macdonald.

Lewis Macdonald: Is it the Government's intention to implement the aspects of the Smith commission that refer to the further devolution of control of the Crown Estate to island authorities?

Derek Mackay: We are consulting on the structure at the moment. Once we have clarity on how the administration, regulation and planning will actually work, we will be able to say more. However, we are involving the island authorities in the future structure of the Crown Estate in Scotland. Our commitment as laid out in the prospectus on local and community benefit is very clear—it is to ensure that for the first time local communities can benefit from the Crown Estate in a way that they were not previously able to do.

Education is another example of an area in which we are working closely in partnership with

the island authorities, having held a summit fairly recently.

Last Wednesday, I launched a consultation paper on a future islands bill. It will seek views on a range of issues including placing a legal duty on ministers and relevant public bodies to island proof their functions and decisions; what additional powers could transfer to island councils and communities; whether there is merit in the Government producing a national islands plan; whether statutory protection should be provided for the Western Isles Scottish parliamentary constituency boundary; and whether the Local Government Boundary Commission for Scotland should have discretion to recommend wards with fewer than three councillors to take account of specific island circumstances.

The consultation paper is the start of a conversation. It deliberately does not seek to be too prescriptive. This is an opportunity for ideas to be shared and considered before any decisions are made and I encourage everyone with an interest to respond.

Finally, I plan to hold an islands communities conference in early 2016. During the summer I was struck by the many positive examples of community initiatives taking place across our islands. I therefore want to provide a platform for ordinary islanders to come together to share best practice and learn from each other.

I am very focused on a more prosperous future for all Scotland's 93 island communities.

I move,

That the Parliament welcomes the publication of the Scottish Government's consultation paper on measures for inclusion in a future islands bill; notes that the paper seeks views on issues including the concept of "island-proofing", devolution of further powers, the possibility of a national islands plan, statutory protection for the Western Isles Scottish parliamentary constituency boundary and whether the Local Government Boundary Commission in Scotland should have discretion to recommend wards with fewer than three councillors so that populated islands are not placed in an electoral ward that contains a significant proportion, and often a majority, of mainland population, and recognises that the publication of this paper is a further signal of the Scottish Government's support for island communities following the creation of the Island Areas Ministerial Working Group in 2013, the publication of the *Empowering Scotland's Island Communities* prospectus in 2014, and the creation of a specific ministerial post with responsibility for island issues, giving a voice to all of Scotland's 93 islands at the heart of government.

14:44

Ken Macintosh (Eastwood) (Lab): I thank the minister and the Government for bringing to the chamber a debate on the subject of Scotland's islands. I would not ever pretend to be an islander, but as someone who lived in Skye and went to

school there—albeit briefly—and who has returned there every year since, I admit to an affinity with and an affection for island life.

I know enough to realise that my experience of the Hebrides and other Scottish islands as a visitor is not the same as the experience of those who live there all year round. In fact, all those who visit our beautiful islands on a crystal-clear spring day and are tempted to up sticks and move house immediately should take heed of the best advice that I have ever heard: spend the winter there first. Island life is enticing—romantic, even—but it can also be harsh.

The problems with which we as MSPs wrestle on behalf of our constituents throughout Scotland, such as inadequate housing, fuel poverty and poor transport connections, are there on our islands too, but in spades. The needs and desires of the people who live on Scotland's islands are no different from those of anyone else: they want a decent job, a warm home and access to the best education and healthcare. Islanders might enjoy their remoteness, but they want to be part of the modern world; at the least, they want to ensure that they do not miss out on it and are not overlooked.

I will return later to the importance of work and being able to earn a decent living. Before I do so, I want to acknowledge—at least in passing—why the islands have been so instrumental in shaping Scottish Labour's values and our vision for this country of ours. There is much in Scotland's history on which we can look back with pride, but we would do well to remember the scar that was the clearances. The legacy and unfairness of an era of poverty-stricken crofters, absentee landlords and a land ownership system that entrenched inequality can still be seen today.

It was no accident that Labour used the first session of the new Scottish Parliament to introduce the bill that became the Land Reform (Scotland) Act 2003, which is still one of the most important pieces of legislation that the Parliament has ever passed. We supplemented the act with a series of practical measures that were designed to support the local economy on the islands, invest in our health service and build new schools.

As the Government begins to consult on a new islands bill, the minister would do well to bear in mind the weaknesses of his party's own legislative record on crofting and land reform, and to learn—we would hope—from those experiences.

Turning to the forthcoming bill and the current consultation, I thank my Liberal Democrat colleagues, in particular Liam McArthur, who reminds us in his amendment of the origins of the proposed legislation. I do not mind saying that one of the more welcome offshoots of the build-up to

the referendum was the establishment by three island councils of the our islands, our future campaign. The campaign highlighted that, for a resident in Lerwick, there is little difference between centralised control from London and centralised control from Edinburgh.

Today's debate is—I hope—relatively consensual, but I believe that it is at least worth highlighting that there is nothing in the Government's motion about devolving more fiscal powers to the islands. An interesting test of the Scottish Government's mettle—as my colleague Lewis Macdonald mentioned in his intervention on the minister, and as I think Tavish Scott was about to ask when he stood up to intervene—will be when it finally decides what to do with the Crown Estate.

Will the Scottish Government support Labour's position—which is the position to which the Government signed up as part of the Smith commission—of devolving control to our islands and our local authorities directly, or will it be tempted to hang on to some of the power and, of course, to some of the money?

Although Scottish Labour will be supporting the Government's motion today, there are several other issues that the motion does not include or mention that I would argue are of crucial importance to most islanders. The first issue is transport, in particular the affordability and reliability of air services to the islands, as the minister mentioned in his opening remarks.

As I am sure the minister will know, there is only one operator, Flybe, which serves the islands through its franchise partner Loganair. I have been informed that, in the past 12 to 18 months, there has been a huge rise in the number of delays and cancellations. I believe that the minister himself—or certainly one of his colleagues—has experienced that problem directly. I certainly know that my colleagues on the Rural Affairs, Climate Change and Environment Committee were delayed on a recent visit to Jura and Islay by three and a half hours on the way out and a further couple of hours on the way back.

It is not difficult to see the impact that such delays might have on local residents, public services and businesses. Hospital appointments at Raigmore in Inverness or in Glasgow are regularly cancelled; onward travel connections are missed; and business meetings are rearranged or dropped.

Rob Gibson (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP): I want to correct slightly what Ken Macintosh said about the RACCE Committee visit. Two of the committee members went by ferry—by three different ferries, in fact—and were not

delayed at all, and they arrived on Jura in time for a meeting with a quarter of the island's population.

Ken Macintosh: I am glad that Mr Gibson travelled on a service that is still in public ownership. It caused my colleagues some anguish that they took the plane when they would have been quicker going on the ferry with Mr Gibson. I thank him for highlighting that point. The unreliability of our air services coupled with uncertainty about the future of the ferries is damaging to business confidence and investment altogether.

As to why the air services are proving to be increasingly unreliable, some have pointed to the aging stock, with many planes being more than 25 years old. The minister acknowledged that fact. Others have commented on the number of times that aircraft are dragged off to serve other, more profitable routes, which is something I have asked the minister about. However, the island routes receive Government subsidy and it is therefore important that they work for the islanders they are supposed to serve.

As it is, the cost of flying to the islands is already off the scale. Even booking months in advance, a return flight to Stornoway, for example, would cost more than £250, with very few so-called economy or budget seats available. The fare is more likely to be £370 return. In other words, it would be enough to fly a whole family to Spain and back.

I remember very well when Labour and the Liberals introduced the air discount scheme, which was preceded by the rural transport fund. It is time for an immediate review of the air services that, at the very least, looks at the business model that is used, the size of and investment in the aircraft, and the number of seats available. The Scottish National Party has already drastically reduced the air discount scheme, but in many cases the costs have simply been shunted to other parts of the public service. A majority of seats on many journeys are often taken up by the public sector, with flights to hospitals paid for by the national health service being one frequent example. Should the cost of those flights be capped, perhaps?

Ministers cannot fob us off on the issue indefinitely. Islanders want to hear words of commitment, not woolly expressions of sympathy. In fact, the issue of air services flags up one of the anxieties that some islanders have with the Scottish Government's agenda. Greater autonomy is to be welcomed but, if there are no resources to accompany greater control, it is very much a double-edged sword.

Housing is another area that exemplifies concern. A more locally tailored approach would pay dividends, but that would be no excuse for

underfunding from the Scottish Government. No matter where we go on Scotland's islands, the lack of affordable housing emerges time and again as the biggest single worry. Without it, young people cannot remain in their communities or return after leaving for college or university. Key staff who are needed to support local services have nowhere to live and young families have nowhere to set up home, which has an immediate knock-on effect on local schools and shops.

Rural areas generally have half the level of social housing that we see in the rest of Scotland and, more worryingly, they have half the level of investment. Even on islands, housing need creates population shift. So few houses are available for social rent that people often end up moving to the main towns, such as Portree, or to the mainland. Housing need is consistently underestimated, areas of relative affluence can occasionally obscure pockets of need and, more likely, people in small villages will simply not join a council waiting list when they know that there are no council houses in their community.

Unlike in the rest of Scotland, where the private sector has doubled in size in recent years to meet demand, on the islands rented accommodation is often prioritised for the holiday market. In fact, it is common for young people to rent one of those holiday homes for the winter, move into a caravan for spring and summer, and then move back again.

There are many reasons why affordable housing is a particularly acute problem on Scotland's islands. The unavailability of land is one factor. Perhaps the most important, as usual, is simply to do with finance. Rural areas can have high development costs but few economies of scale, with only a few houses on each site. As we all know, the SNP Government's decision to cut the level of grant to housing associations has had an effect across the country, but it has proven to be particularly problematic in island communities.

However, we also know that when community initiatives are successful and housing is built, such as that on the Isle of Gigha, it has helped to double the population. Housing is absolutely essential to rural and island development.

There is nothing in the minister's motion for us to object to, and I hope that we will be able to work constructively on any legislation that is introduced following the Government's consultation on a future islands bill. What is noticeable, however, is that the Government's motion concentrates on process when what is needed is practical action. Ward boundaries are important, but I would like to hear from the minister and his back-bench colleagues about how he intends to tackle poverty, build warm homes and allow more people to go to college. Those are the steps that we all across

Scotland want to see, and they are particularly important to fragile, remote and dispersed communities.

I move amendment S4M-14448.2, to insert at end

“; acknowledges the importance of the Our Islands Our Future campaign, which has highlighted the contribution of the island communities to Scotland, and recognises the immediate challenges that all island communities face in areas such as housing, fuel poverty and transport connectivity”.

14:55

Liam McArthur (Orkney Islands) (LD): All my adult life and probably for a good number of years before that I have been driven by a desire to see powers delivered to our island communities. For me, the establishment of this Parliament was always only part of the story—it was a process, not a one-off event, certainly; but more than that, it was about devolving power within and not just to Scotland. It is about recognising, as all good liberals in the fine traditions of Jo Grimond do, that power rests with the people and is passed up and pooled only by consent and where necessary. It is about giving people and communities the tools that they need to shape their own futures and trusting them to take decisions on their own behalf rather than taking a top-down, “minister knows best” approach.

I am delighted to be able to contribute to the debate and I am grateful to Derek Mackay for lodging his motion. We may—and do—have our differences but I have always found the minister approachable, courteous and willing to take seriously issues that are raised with him. Despite that, the SNP Government’s track record on empowering our islands is not as the minister has characterised it, with powers being removed from rather than devolved to our island communities.

The publication of the Government’s consultation on empowering island communities is undoubtedly welcome but it stands in stark contrast to the behaviour of this Government since 2007. There is, of course, the untimely demise of the historic concordat, an agreement once proclaimed by every minister in every speech as guaranteeing parity of esteem between the Scottish Government and local authorities.

The concordat lasted about as long as it took for the first council to point out that a never-ending council tax freeze, added to a host of unfunded SNP promises on education, housing and so on, was wholly incompatible with Government rhetoric. Now, local authorities are scapegoated for pretty much anything. The SNP’s treatment of our island communities is scarcely any better. Derek Mackay’s appointment as the minister with responsibility for the islands is one that I

welcomed, but we need to see more evidence of that delivering change in Government policy and its approach.

Mike MacKenzie (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): Will Mr McArthur at least acknowledge that Orkney Islands Council, which is in the constituency that he represents, enjoys one of the highest per capita settlements of any council area in Scotland?

Liam McArthur: That shows Mike MacKenzie’s willingness to simply be a spokesperson for the SNP rather than to recognise his constituents. If he was doing his job properly, he would recognise that Orkney Islands Council, among others, has been most critical of historical council underfunding. Despite the welcome freeze in ferry fares for next year, Orkney and Shetland remain the only island communities excluded from the Government’s cheaper ferry fares.

Likewise, although warmly welcoming the minister’s agreement to the request that Tavish Scott and I made earlier in the summer to lift air discount scheme support to 50 per cent, I point out that nevertheless all island businesses still face 40 per cent higher air fares thanks to the SNP Government’s previous cut to the ADS.

Meanwhile, police in all three island communities continue to grapple with a botched centralisation that undermines accountability and the ethos of community policing that has been the hallmark of island forces.

As Labour’s amendment rightly acknowledges, the consultation is of course a response to the campaign driven by the three island authorities—a campaign for which they deserve recognition and real credit. Yet, interestingly, the case for empowering our island communities was not always so fondly received by SNP ministers.

This was not mentioned in Mr Mackay’s opening recap of the recent history of the issue but I well recall that when Tavish Scott and I made a very similar case for giving more powers and responsibilities to the northern isles that we represent, it was met by a torrent of invective from SNP spokespeople. SNP members from the then Deputy First Minister to a range of dutiful back benchers lined up to denounce us as troublemakers and, indeed, worse.

Having been put in a flat spin by the notion that our islands might be lukewarm on the idea of seeing power centralised in Edinburgh as opposed to London, the SNP has sought to react. Yet, to date, that U-turn in rhetoric has not seen a U-turn on centralisation. Take, for example, the centrepiece of the Government’s consultation: a commitment to “island-proof” legislation and decisions by ministers. That is perfectly reasonable as a concept. However, let us view

that commitment in the context of what has gone before.

Based on the SNP's track record, there seems little likelihood of island proofing lasting any longer or being any more meaningful than the historic concordat. The First Minister's attainment fund provides a perfect illustration. We are told that it is a central plank of the Government's overriding priority. It aims to provide additional support for those children from more disadvantaged backgrounds who need it. I am pretty confident that Tavish Scott, Alasdair Allan and I could all identify areas in our constituencies that are directly affected by poverty and where the targeting of that sort of resource could make a huge difference to improving the life chances of children in our islands. Sadly, because of the way that the Government thinks and its broad-brush approach to policy, which inevitably sees the interests of the central belt prevail, there was never a prayer that my constituents might benefit from the attainment fund.

The bottom line is that island proofing will need to be more than a tick-box exercise; it will require a different way of doing things, with a recognition that ministers do not know best, that one size does not fit all and that, as Ken Macintosh said, island communities must be allowed the power and resources to make decisions that directly affect them.

As luck would have it, the Government has an early opportunity to demonstrate its willingness to turn over a new leaf. As our amendment says, the Smith commission backed calls by my colleagues Mike Moore and Tavish Scott for control over the sea bed to be passed to island and coastal communities. That recognised that there is little to be gained from passing control of those vital assets from London to Edinburgh and that, rather, it is the communities that most directly rely on those assets that need to have control of and discretion over how they are used. Ministers have promised to pass on revenues—the minister did so again this afternoon—but that less-than-munificent offer, as well as providing a wonderful contrast with ministers' demands for more powers for the Parliament, misses the point.

Another crucial test for the Government's concept of island proofing will be its approach to the delivery and funding of services, whether by the public sector or the third sector. Too often in the past, funding allocations have been on a per capita basis, but that ignores the fact that, to deliver any service, a minimum level of funding is needed. Without that base funding, it is highly unlikely that any sort of service can be provided or sustained. That needs to be addressed.

More generally, the Government does not fully take into account the additional costs of delivering

services to a small and older population that is dispersed over a number of islands. For example, last year, we had the ridiculous situation in which the Scottish ministers issued press releases announcing that they had made good the historic underfunding of health boards in Orkney and Shetland yet, a month later, the Government's own published figures gave the lie to that assertion. Even now, any increase that has been provided to NHS Orkney will only pay back the borrowing that was needed to make up the shortfall in previous years.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Elaine Smith): Could you come to a conclusion, please?

Liam McArthur: I will, indeed.

That situation is not sustainable and it puts unbearable strain on those who are charged with providing healthcare in Orkney.

Unless island proofing addresses those sorts of practical issues, my constituents will question whether it is worth the copious amounts of paper that it is written on. I welcome the appointment of an islands minister, particularly in the guise of Derek Mackay, and I welcome the establishment of a ministerial group and the publication of the consultation. However, the group will be judged on what it delivers in practice and on the change of mindset from a Government that has relentlessly been centralising powers and decision making, particularly in the past four years.

I move amendment S4M-1448.1, to leave out from "and recognises" to end and insert:

"; recognises that the campaign for greater recognition of local needs by the Scottish Government grew out of public concern in all three island communities at the centralisation of a range of public services and decision-making responsibilities over recent years; endorses the Smith Commission recommendations that are particularly relevant to the islands on such matters as fully devolving management of the seabed to local control, and notes that health, education and other public services are under particular financial pressure in the islands due to the increased costs of delivering services in such communities."

15:03

Mary Scanlon (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I welcome the consultation paper. It is only fair to welcome the announcements on the freeze on ferry fares for 2016-17—which I know will be absolutely welcomed—and on the strategic islands transport forum. I also welcome the announcement on the air discount scheme, which is to be extended, with the discount increased to 50 per cent. However, to touch on a point that Ken Macintosh made, it is still much cheaper—about a quarter of the price—to go by air from Edinburgh, Glasgow and Aberdeen to many capitals in Europe than it is to go to our islands. I would like

more to be done on that, so that more tourists can visit our islands.

I welcome the measures on fuel poverty. On community broadband, Tavish Scott and I visited Mull on behalf of the Public Audit Committee and found that it had taken three years for the islands to get together and work together. It takes a long time just to get to that stage.

Before I move on, I will just point out that almost all Education and Culture Committee meetings start with apologies from Liam McArthur because his plane has been delayed. Today's meeting was no exception.

I welcome the consultation paper. It is over two years since the our islands, our future campaign was launched by the Western Isles Council, Orkney Islands Council and Shetland Islands Council. Michael Russell reminded me in the tea room that he represents more islands than are included in those three council areas, so we should not just think about those three groups of islands.

I want to put on record some of the excellent examples of governance that can be found in all our island authorities—in Shetland Islands Council in particular. Over the years, we—particularly those of us on the Public Audit Committee—have become accustomed to the problems relating to Shetland Islands Council, but those problems now seem to be historical. That is due partly to good management, to teamwork and to partnership working in the council, but it is also due to the excellent leadership of Malcolm Bell and Gary Robinson. We should thank all the authorities that were responsible for the our islands, our future campaign, which has brought us to this point today.

My second point concerns the fact that the three island authorities, and the islands of Argyll, are all very different. Their problems might be similar in terms of transport infrastructure, broadband and delivery of public services, but their histories and distinct identities in terms of their local economies are extremely different. Neither should it be assumed that devolution to our islands is all about shifting powers from Edinburgh to Lerwick, Kirkwall and Stornoway. Those are the main towns, but we are talking about an opportunity to devolve power more locally throughout our islands. I would like to highlight the distinct nature of Whalsay, which I have visited several times. Its museum and local traditions are much to be admired.

I hope that you will tolerate my relating an anecdote of my experience, Presiding Officer. In 2000, Duncan Hamilton of the SNP, Margaret Jamieson of Labour, Margaret Smith of the Liberal Democrats and I visited the Western Isles to

consult on free personal care legislation. As I said, it was a long time ago. We were told by some elderly ladies on Barra that they did not want to end their days in Stornoway and that they would, as a matter of fact, rather go to Glasgow. Having been born on Barra and having lived there all their lives, they wanted to remain on Barra and, when their time came, they wanted that to be on Barra, too. I use that as an example of my point that it is not just all about Stornoway; it is about the individual islands, and we need to respect them.

Part 2 of the consultation paper concerns island proofing. This morning, I noted that the policy memorandum of the Higher Education Governance (Scotland) Bill already states that it is island proofed, as well as being equal opportunities proofed. I very much welcome that, but I am not sure whether that means that we are now offering something that is already happening.

It would be helpful if it were possible to understand the island-proofing process. There is quite a bit about it in the consultation paper, but I think that it would be helpful and would make the process more transparent and more accountable if the Government could say whom it has listened to and what it has done to island proof decision making on legislation. That would be better than just including a sentence that says, "This has been island proofed."

Part 3 of the consultation paper concerns empowering island communities. It is possible to be much more innovative with regard to how we deliver services on our islands. For example, we could bring about even closer integration and collaboration among public services such as fire and rescue services, ambulance services, the national health service, the police and local authorities. Much more can be done to ensure that there is more of a one-stop shop. I am fed up seeing that the fire station is closing here, the ambulance station is closing there and so on. The islands, with their small populations, have a wonderful opportunity to think about how services can work together and be better integrated. Again, I suggest that what might be right for Shetland and Orkney, under the Zetland County Council Act 1974 and the Orkney County Council Act 1974, might not be what is right for the Western Isles. That is my only concern. We should not assume that all the islands are homogeneous in that respect.

Page 13 of the consultation document outlines the next stages. I notice that it is a three-month consultation, which will finish at the end of the year, but the matter obviously depends on the responses. I would like the minister to give a direction of travel and to commit to responding and making some recommendations and proposals at least prior to the dissolution of Parliament.

15:10

Mike MacKenzie (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): I am pleased to speak in the debate as an islander and as a representative of the Highlands and Islands region. Most, if not all, of Scotland's islands are in that vast region and, although not an expert on any of them—except, perhaps, the one that I live on—I am familiar with most of them. Therefore, I say with some assurance that although each of our islands is unique—each with its own romantic and rugged charm—they all also have much in common, as Mary Scanlon said.

I take Mary Scanlon's point about centralism. The centralism that I see tends to be centralism around the main towns of each island group, not the centralism Liam McArthur talked about. In fact, I challenge him to give me one example of real, tangible detriment as a result of the so-called centralism that he talked about. If he would give me an example of one crime not investigated as a result of that so-called, theoretical centralisation, I would be grateful to hear about it.

Liam McArthur: I am grateful to Mike MacKenzie for the challenge. I counter-challenge him to point to one police officer in Orkney who has had anything good to say about the police centralisation. I commend the police officers for their efforts in dealing with a botched centralisation that has not assisted them in their work at all. *[Interruption.]*

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Order, please.

Mike MacKenzie: I thank Mr McArthur for making my point for me: it seems that he was not able to give one example.

As an islander and as a representative of the Highlands and Islands region, I welcome the consultation on the proposed islands bill as one more milestone on a journey that, as we heard, started in July 2013 when, at a Cabinet meeting in Lerwick, the then First Minister announced the formation of the islands area ministerial working group. That was the Scottish Government's first response to the our islands, our future campaign waged by the three island authorities, which sought better opportunities for Scotland's islands.

I remember that day in Lerwick well. It was a day of blue skies and warm sunshine, but there was also some uncertainty about whether the Cabinet meeting would go ahead, as there was concern that flights might be delayed or cancelled due to the possibility of sea fog that often accompanies such weather on Shetland. Those are the uncertainties of travel with which islanders live in summer as well as winter, and that point was well noted by all present.

Less than a year later, in June 2014, I was on Orkney for the launch of "Empowering Scotland's

Island Communities", an 80-page Scottish Government document full of substantive proposals with the overall aim of levelling the playing field between Scotland's islands and its mainland areas that recognised the generations of regional disadvantage from which our islands have suffered. It is a thoughtful and comprehensive document, and it was warmly welcomed by the island authorities and by island and coastal communities throughout the Highlands and Islands.

It is important that many of the proposals in that document apply not just to the island authorities but to all of Scotland's islands and to coastal communities, not least of which is the devolution of 100 per cent of Crown Estate revenues. I wish it was possible to devolve more of the Crown Estate revenues, but I understand that it could not be more than 100 per cent.

I can only contrast that with the lukewarm and limp response from the UK Government that followed in August of that year, in a document entitled "A Framework for the Islands". I am sure that everybody has forgotten about the document, which comprised a few pages of warm words and not much else. It promised greater transparency of Crown Estate revenues, although those are still shrouded in fog, like Sumburgh airport on a summer's day. It promised a desk and an officer at the Scotland Office to deal with island issues, although there is no evidence to date that that officer has done anything other than twiddle his thumbs.

Underpinning the meaninglessness of that document is the following caveat:

"This framework is a statement of political intent and it does not create legal obligations between the parties. It is intended to be binding in honour only."

As I contemplate the unionist parties and their various promises to the Scottish people, I can reflect only that honour appears to be a very scarce commodity.

Mary Scanlon: This is supposed to be a consensual debate.

Mike MacKenzie: By contrast, the Scottish Government has moved quickly to honour its commitments—

Mary Scanlon: For goodness' sake.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Order.

Ken Macintosh: Will the member take an intervention?

Mike MacKenzie: If I have time, I am willing to take Mr Macdonald's intervention.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I will give you the time back. I call Ken Macintosh.

Ken Macintosh: Yes—Mr Macintosh, not Mr Macdonald.

Would Mr MacKenzie care to confer with the minister and get back on script? I think that this is meant to be a consensual debate about Scotland's future.

Mike MacKenzie: From where I am sitting, the speeches of Mr Macintosh and Mr McArthur did not appear to be all that consensual.

The Scottish Government has honoured its commitments to the islands and has moved quickly, first of all by appointing Derek Mackay as Scotland's first islands minister and then by proceeding with the preparatory work for Scotland's first islands act and opening this consultation. The proposals that form the basis of the consultation could be as profound as they are powerful. Not least of those proposals is the concept of island proofing in recognition that what may work well in Edinburgh may not work well in Egilsay, on Eigg or indeed on my home island of Easdale.

The possibility of further devolution of powers and functions to our island authorities is worthy of a debate in itself. A national islands plan is another powerful possibility.

There is much in the consultation to occupy the thoughts of our islanders in what is the best opportunity for our islands that I have known in my lifetime. I commend the Scottish Government's approach to our islands, and I urge all islanders to put on their thinking caps and respond to the consultation.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: If members care to take interventions at this stage, I might be able to give a small amount of time back.

15:17

Jayne Baxter (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): I begin by telling my "Tried to get to the islands but couldn't get a flight" story, since everyone else has done so.

Earlier this year, I tried to represent the Equal Opportunities Committee on a visit to Islay. I got to Glasgow airport and the plane was overbooked. There was nothing anyone could do and I just had to go home again. However, I got a compensation payment of €250, which seemed like quite a good deal. I gave the money back to the Parliament—I put it on record that I did not keep the compensation. Islay's loss was the Scottish Parliament's gain on that occasion.

I digress. For me, Scotland's islands bring many happy memories to mind. As a tourist, I have experienced their culture, their environment and their landscapes. I have hill walked in Skye, and

travelled by ferry to Mull and Iona, and Harris and Lewis. I have crossed the Atlantic bridge to Seil and Easdale. I have had a fantastic week in Orkney visiting the historical and cultural sites of interest, and I have been a guest of the guizer jarl at the Up Helly Aa on Bressay in Shetland. I would be the first to agree that our island communities are a special part of Scotland.

Although, on the face of it, Scotland's islands appear to face the same challenges as mainland communities—such as fuel poverty, housing and transport—we need to ensure that they are equipped to deal with those challenges, and the solutions and services required may differ from the mainland, or indeed among different islands.

From my previous existence as community planning officer in Fife, I know how important it is that politicians and their officials listen to local people and stakeholders when making decisions about policies and how resources are used. The Shetland, Orkney and Western Isles Councils, through their our islands, our future campaign, which was launched in 2013, have worked hard so that their concerns and ideas are heard. Their campaign set out a vision for a stronger future for Scotland's island communities and called on both the Scottish and UK Governments to commit to ensuring that the needs and status of island areas were clearly recognised in whatever emerged as the future governance arrangements for Scotland.

That is why Scottish Labour supports the work of the our islands, our future campaign. In recent years, campaigners have made a strong case for empowering our island communities so that they can address the problems that they face, and we will continue to work with them to ensure that the anticipated islands bill meets their expectations.

The Scottish Government is now at the stage of consulting interested stakeholders on plans for more power and protection for Scotland's islands, so as to inform the future bill. We must ensure that the islands can secure a more prosperous and fairer future for their communities as a result of that bill.

I will focus on one key aspect of that consultation: island proofing. The principle of island proofing, as set out in the consultation document, is about building a broad-based islands awareness into the decision-making processes of relevant parts of the public sector. In practice, it will involve consideration of the particular needs and aspirations of island communities when the Scottish Government and other relevant public bodies exercise their functions.

The Government is seeking views on whether it should have the power to issue statutory guidance to other public bodies and on whether those bodies would be required to adhere to the

guidance. The consultation further asks which bodies should be included in the scope of that statutory guidance.

The issues that have been outlined in the consultation documents seem to be considered, fair and reasonable. I note a word of caution, however: in my experience, proofing for any of a range of scenarios, be they to do with equality, rural, future or island issues, can too easily become a tick-box exercise. If the assessment is to add real value, we have to take a participative approach, involving all stakeholders. That will involve additional time and expense, but the results in the long term will be worth while.

That participatory democracy, and the ability that comes with it to robustly island proof policy in the future, will be influenced by the outcome of the Scottish Government's consultation, which, as well as asking about island proofing, also raises questions on:

"Empowering Island Communities – what additional powers and functions could be passed to island councils to benefit or better protect the island communities they serve".

Would that be the same for all islands, or could there be geographical variations?

The consultation discusses a

"National Islands Plan – whether a legal duty should be placed on all future Scottish Governments to prepare a 'National Islands Plan', setting out on-going commitments across all policy areas of Government to support, promote and empower our island communities"

and

"Statutory protection for the Na h-Eileanan an Iar Scottish parliamentary constituency boundary",

with the Western Isles being the only constituency in Scotland made up entirely of islands but not having that protection.

The consultation also mentions:

"Local Government Electoral Wards – whether the Local Government Boundary Commission in Scotland should have discretion to recommend wards with less than three councillors so that populated islands are not placed in an electoral ward that contains a significant proportion of mainland population".

That is because of concerns among some island communities that their distinctive interests may not be represented in a larger council's discussions, and that the island community may not have a councillor among its residents.

In its 2015 manifesto, Scottish Labour committed to use the powers of the Smith commission to devolve more power to our island communities and to use new powers of the Scottish Parliament to devolve the administration and revenues of the Crown Estate to communities so that they could manage and develop their own sea bed and foreshore.

We also committed to ensuring our island communities a place at the heart of the UK Government. That involved commitments to maintain the islands desk in the Scotland Office and to convene a summit between the UK Government and Scotland's island councils twice a year.

Scottish Labour will play our part in ensuring a strong deal for our island communities. I look forward to the progress of the islands bill and to the opportunity to bring about a positive impact on the health, wellbeing and prosperity of Scotland's islands.

15:24

Michael Russell (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): I very much welcome the Parliament's opportunity to debate the issues particular to islands in Scotland. I congratulate the Scottish Government on its initiative, not just in securing a debate and in holding a consultation, and not even in drawing up an islands bill; I want to congratulate the Government on having an islands minister. He might not be as enthusiastic about his role as I am—that is perhaps because I write to him on a regular basis.

Mary Scanlon was, as usual, very nearly right. I am the constituency member who represents most islands—not all the island groups altogether, which have more, but I represent more inhabited islands, and Argyll and Bute Council has more islands in its area, than any of the island authorities.

It is therefore of concern to me that it is the island authorities that have been talked about in this debate and that it is the island authorities that the minister has met in the islands group. That is contrary to natural justice and unfair to the islands of Argyll and Bute. I hope that the minister will today not just renew the commitment that the Government has made to ensure that the Argyll islands receive the benefits of the policies as they roll out, but endeavour to bring the Argyll islands and Argyll and Bute Council into discussions of those matters, perhaps starting with the new strategic ferries group.

I understand why the island authorities have shown a lack of solidarity and generosity in their attitudes. With matters such as the special islands needs allowance, there is the question of a finite budget, and the inclusion of the Argyll islands threatens some of that special financial treatment. However, the approach is unfair to the Argyll islands and the people who live on them.

There is much in the consultation that must be welcomed, and I encourage my constituents to make their own representations. Some issues are particularly germane at this time. For example,

changes to local government wards that are being proposed by the Local Government Boundary Commission for Scotland in its fifth review would severely disadvantage the island areas of Argyll and Bute and make the council even less accountable. Changes are needed to allow smaller wards and more local transparency—the types of changes that are currently applied in terms of both ratio and parity to the islands councils, but which are not applied in Argyll and Bute.

In addition to the island problem, a particular problem in Argyll and Bute is growth. Economic growth is not happening and the population is falling. The area is losing population faster than any other part of the country. I welcome the economic development task force that is in place, which is currently chaired by Nick Ferguson, and I welcome its emerging conclusions, which are about connectivity. I want to make connectivity the centre of what I say.

Connectivity—digital and physical—is key to the healthy future of island communities. They must have an improved mobile phone service. The Scottish Government innovation on Coll is a good pointer forward, but companies have to contribute. They cannot ignore their island customers, as they tend to do. Improved broadband is essential for island communities. Last year, 25 new undersea cables were laid as part of the Highlands and Islands Enterprise and British Telecom project. That was the largest number of undersea cables ever laid in a single summer. However, the slow roll-out is leading to frustration. Community broadband Scotland has certainly stepped in, and the Mull project that the minister mentioned is of great significance, but there needs to be a tangible outcome so that people feel that they are getting the service. People want that quickly.

Connectivity in services is vital. Mary Scanlon referred to that. The Royal Mail's recent volte-face on sorting mail on Tiree and Mull was important because it showed that a bit of pressure from the islands could say to large national bodies, "You shouldn't do things this way." However, we need island proofing not just in Government policies but in every commercial enterprise and in all national bodies, and we need to recognise the particular problems and issues on islands and respond accordingly. We need to innovate in transport and delivery matters, for example. The discussion in the chamber last week about the possibility of ferry hubs for delivery is germane.

Transport is also at the heart of the matter. I have a constituent who sends me twice a day the link to the departures and arrivals boards at the airport in Islay. She does that because every single day and with every single flight there is a delay. That is unacceptable for any carrier. I am grateful for what the minister has said, but that

must stop. If it is true that Loganair is prioritising other services instead of its island services, the minister should stamp down hard on that.

Air travel is vital, and so is ferry travel. Ferry travel is central to life on islands. Just as I represent more islands, I represent more ferry routes.

We should recognise that road equivalent tariff is a major achievement. People of a certain political vintage—such as Mr Rob Gibson and me, perhaps—argued for RET in the 1970s. It has been delivered by an SNP Government, and I am immensely proud of that. We now need to move on and look at the issue of transport and freight costs. A review is under way, and that is very important.

I represent a wonderful area, but unfortunately it has a local authority that is trying to destroy it with the cuts that have been brought forward in the past week. We need to look at the right way to develop services in local areas. That comes from a variety of different levels of decision making.

Sometimes, the change will come from community ownership as is the case in Gigha. Sometimes, it will come not only through existing structures, such as local authorities, but through bodies such as the Tobermory Harbour Association, which wants to have the powers of the Crown Estate—its biggest barrier is the local authority, which wants to cut its funding.

Sometimes, it comes through this chamber. In looking at the islands spread across the west and north of this country as the jewel in the Scottish crown, we must recognise their special needs and go that extra mile to ensure that we support the people who live in the islands, the services in the islands and the links to the islands, so that those islands grow and flourish. I am proud of what this Government is doing; it can always do a wee bit more.

15:30

Stewart Stevenson (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP): I draw members' attention to my entry in the register of members' interests: I am president of the Scottish Association for Public Transport—public transport is a subject that I expect to cover in my speech.

I was thinking about when I first went to an island. It appears to have been at Easter 1965, when I first went to Skye. It has been my very great pleasure to have visited islands all around Scotland.

We have talked a good deal about aviation. I have, so far, flown into 13 island airports. I flew the plane on four of those occasions; the other times I was flown commercially.

The islands are part of my and my family's heritage. My grandfather was appointed as a schoolmaster in Lewis in the 1880s. He was an Anglophone Scot who was married to an English lady. It was not the most obvious appointment in what was a wholly Gaelic-speaking community, but that is precisely part of the disrespect that was shown to island traditions. Abolition of Gaelic was almost public policy in those days, and I regret that my grandfather played a little role in that.

Mike Russell may have missed a little trick. We are talking about islands and island authorities, but parts of mainland Scotland are almost islands in terms of their accessibility. I am particularly thinking of the Mull of Kintyre. By contrast, one could almost suggest that Skye is no longer an island, now that it is connected to the mainland, but let us pass on that issue.

I know that Dave Thompson is going to talk about air services to Skye in his speech, so I will talk a little bit about how we could change the regulatory regime to make air services cheaper, easier and more pervasive. First—I pursued this matter as a minister, but without much success—we require commercial flights in the UK to be operated by twin-engine aircraft. That is not the case in Finland, France, Greece, Spain or Norway, where single-engine aircraft can operate many of the thin routes, which reduces costs and increases frequency.

When Lord King was asked why he flew in a 747 whenever he could, he said, "Because it's got four engines and they don't make any six-engine planes." What is the reliability and accident record of single-engine compared with multi-engine planes? Interestingly, the accident rate in the United States for single-engine turboprop planes is 1.99 per 100,000 flight hours, but for twin-engine planes it is 2.37 per 100,000 flight hours. In other words, it is 15 per cent higher for planes with more than one engine. Why? It is because flying a multi-engine plane with one engine not working is more complex than dealing with total failure of the engine of a single-engine plane. Fatalities are similarly greater in multi-engine light aircraft than they are in single-engine light aircraft. We should look at others' experience and continue to lobby the Civil Aviation Authority and the UK Government.

Secondly, we should consider whether we have the right approach mechanisms. This is a technical issue, but it matters. We are talking about the reliability of air services in Scotland, so the weather has quite a lot to do with things. I was reading an incident report about a Loganair flight that had been severely affected by icing and in which there had been no injuries—indeed, the passengers may not have even been aware of the incident. Fog and low cloud are issues at our

airports. In the UK we have, as far as I am aware, one airport that is using modern global positioning system technology to allow aircraft to make their approach—that airport happens to be Shoreham airport.

The United States now has 1,800 airports at which pilots can make their approach in single-engine aircraft using GPS. For example, the pilots' chart for Provo in Utah shows that they can descend using GPS through a cloud base of 200ft, but for Wick in Scotland, which does not have that facility, we are talking about a higher cloud base of 366ft.

Of course, GPS is also very cheap. An instrument landing system costs £1 million, but putting in GPS costs the airport almost nothing and costs the operators only quite modest amounts. It is time that the CAA and others allowed matters to move on so that we can simultaneously reduce costs and improve reliability. I know that such improvements are not necessarily in the gift of the minister, except in so far as he can lobby others elsewhere, including European authorities, and not only UK authorities.

I will close by touching on something that has not yet come up in the debate, which is universal services for the islands—in particular, for delivery and collection of goods. Too many of our island communities and relatively remote mainland communities are disadvantaged by excess delivery charges by commercial operators. It is high time that that was tackled by legislation, if necessary and possible, but certainly by exposing the rip-off merchants for what they are and by seeking to persuade them that equity is required if we are going to support people in all the islands, but particularly in the three islands council communities of the Western Isles, the Orkneys and the Shetlands. They have a range of problems, but also a range of opportunities.

15:36

Margaret McDougall (West Scotland) (Lab):

As an MSP for West Scotland, I have island communities in my region: Arran, which has a population of 4,629, and the Cumbraes, which have a population of 1,280, as of 2011. I note that the Government is looking to change electoral ward rules for populated islands. That is currently a hot topic on Arran—more so with the proposed boundary changes—so I will be keeping an eye on how that develops and will encourage people on Arran to respond to the consultation.

I will highlight some of the difficulties that are faced by our islands in housing, transport and fuel poverty, with the added factor of being in remote and difficult-to-reach locations. The main focus of

my speech will be housing, although I will briefly touch on other areas.

At a recent meeting of the cross-party group in the Scottish Parliament on housing, which I chair, Derek Logie, who is the chief executive of Rural Housing Scotland, gave an interesting presentation on issues that are faced by people on our islands and in our rural communities. Housing in those areas is traditionally more expensive—the average rural price is 15 per cent higher than the urban one. About 13.5 per cent of houses in rural Scotland are for social rent and, despite having 18.4 per cent of the population, island and rural communities receive only 9 per cent of Government housing investment. That means that in many of those areas there is a real lack not just of social housing, but of affordable housing, and many local people are priced out of the market.

Solving that problem is no easy task, because building affordable rural housing is difficult and expensive. The problem is more apparent on islands; ferries have to be used to move construction materials and equipment, which leads to higher building costs. Irvine Housing Association experienced that while constructing 56 affordable homes in Lamplash for North Ayrshire Council. The additional costs slow construction rates, which harms the local and national economies, and cause supply and demand issues.

In order to deal with issues of demand and to tackle insufficient social housing supply, Scottish Churches Housing Action established a charity called Whitebeam Homes. According to Whitebeam, people on Arran are being priced out due to high selling and rental costs, and although it welcomes the Lamplash development, it fears that it will not be enough to meet current local demand.

I urge the Scottish Government to look into its lower investment per population share and other issues that I have mentioned. I ask it to identify where demand is not being met and to outline a plan to deal with the matter.

Fuel poverty is a serious problem across our islands. The rate of fuel poverty in Millport on Cumbrae is in line with the rate in the rest of North Ayrshire and is too high, with about 29 per cent of the population suffering fuel poverty. On Arran, 40 per cent of the population suffer from fuel poverty, according to Scottish Government figures. Arran is further away from the mainland, so fuel costs are higher. In addition, many houses on the island are old and are not energy efficient.

Regulatory standards for retrofitting privately rented homes could have helped to tackle fuel poverty. It is unfortunate that such standards were not included in the Scottish Government's Housing (Scotland) Act 2014. Not enough is being done to eradicate fuel poverty, which is a national scandal.

We need to do more to promote retrofitting. We also need to encourage people to switch service provider. Islanders tend to be loyal to their power supplier, even when switching could save them hundreds of pounds a year.

I must mention the CalMac situation. CalMac provides a lifeline ferry service to Arran, Cumbrae and many other islands, but the service might be under threat due to the contract's being put out to tender. The last time that process happened, many Scottish National Party members argued against tendering for lifeline services, which they said could lead to a deterioration in services.

Derek Mackay: Does Margaret McDougall appreciate that investment, timetables, fares and the vessels themselves will remain in public control and ownership, irrespective of the legally required tendering process, and that there is therefore no need to scaremonger about ferry services to Arran?

Margaret McDougall: I welcome the minister's assurances, but there is a lot of scepticism out there. Will strong protection remain in place for the workforce? Will there be no compulsory redundancies under the new contract? Will the minister say what communication he has had with the European Commission on the tendering, given that SNP member of the European Parliament Alyn Smith has said in the past that there are alternatives to tendering?

I will take an intervention from the minister if he wants to come in.

Derek Mackay: I am delighted to take the opportunity to intervene again. Over the summer I met the trade unions, specifically to discuss employment matters. The unions are satisfied with the outcome of the discussions and feel the degree of protection that Margaret McDougall is seeking.

All questions about engagement with the European Union have shown that we have no choice but to undertake the procurement exercise that is going on. However, we are ensuring safety and the provision and continuity of service that everyone expects. If we had not undertaken the current course of action, Europe might well have had to intervene, which would have put all the island ferry services at risk. We have complied with all necessary legislation and engaged with Europe. I am also very positive about the engagement with the trade unions, which has ensured protection for staff.

Margaret McDougall: We will wait to see what happens in the tendering.

I could have mentioned many other issues, such as access to broadband, which Mike Russell talked about. Some areas in Arran still do not have

access to broadband, which is unfortunate. Due to time constraints, I do not have time to talk about other issues.

The matters that I have talked about are important to islands—not just in my region, but across Scotland—especially given the recent report that shows that we need, if we are to meet demand, to double the construction of affordable housing from 6,000 houses to 12,000 houses. Fuel poverty is also a serious issue throughout Scotland, but our island communities suffer the most. We need to do everything that we can to drive down costs and to provide energy-efficient affordable homes on our islands.

15:44

Dave Thompson (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP): I echo other members in welcoming this important debate, which follows the Scottish Government's launch of a consultation on its proposed islands bill and the our islands, our future campaign.

The bill proposes that island communities acquire additional powers and stronger representation in the Scottish Parliament, as well as the creation of a national islands plan. As an ex-islander—I spent 10 years in Stornoway—I very much welcome the section on island proofing, which will ensure that the Government takes into account the needs of the islands at the earliest possible stages of policy formulation. The proposed bill is a fantastic development—especially for my constituency, which includes many islands and remote coastal areas.

In considering the proposed bill, I have reflected—particularly on my nearly five years as the constituency MSP for Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch—and have concluded that there is an immensely strong case for the west Highlands and Islands region, from Uig on Skye to Glencoe in Lochaber, having its own local authority and its own Scottish Parliament constituency. Mike Russell is right to complain that the debate has been dominated by Orkney, Shetland and Na h-Eileanan an Iar. They are very worthy island groupings and authorities, and they are little different from Skye, Lochalsh and Lochaber in terms of the challenges that they face. I give notice to the minister that I am starting a campaign today to get such recognition for Skye, Lochalsh and Lochaber. In that, I have the support of Ian Blackford, who is the MP for Ross, Skye and Lochaber, and I will work closely with him to convince the minister and bring the proposal to fruition.

The electorate of Skye, Lochalsh and Lochaber is about 27,000, which compares to electorates of 22,000 in Na h-Eileanan an Iar, 18,000 in Shetland

and 17,000 in Orkney. Skye, Lochalsh and Lochaber has islands and remote mainland communities that are akin to islands, and they suffer from all the problems of connectivity that the three main island groups suffer from. The roads are often risible, the telecoms are terrible and the air services are absolutely non-existent. I hope that the minister will consider my proposal seriously, and I will respond formally to the consultation so that he can do so. I will also write to him, asking for a meeting to pursue the matter.

Of course, island communities such as those in Skye, Lochalsh and Lochaber need ferries. Since the Scottish Government came to Government in 2007, it has invested significantly to support lifeline ferry services, including in the commissioning of new vessels and in harbour infrastructure. A record £1 billion has been invested, and the fact that the road equivalent tariff is now fully rolled out means that there will be a reduction in the cost of ferry travel for all passengers, coaches and small commercial vehicles to all Scotland's islands. I also very much welcome the ferry fare freeze for 2016-17.

On top of all that, we have had the recent excellent news from CalMac that new direct daily return sailings will be put on between Lochboisdale on South Uist and Mallaig, and that there will be an increase in the number of sailings between Mallaig and Armadale on Skye. However, although the increase in the number of sailings between Mallaig and Armadale is to be welcomed, I caution the minister that the total capacity must also be maintained and even increased.

All those improvements exemplify clearly that the Scottish Government is committed to essential ferry services for our island communities that rely on them, thereby ensuring that our islands remain attractive and accessible to visitors.

Devolution for the islands is not just about essential ferry services; it is also about air services. As I said, air services to Skye, Lochalsh and Lochaber are absolutely non-existent, but there is hope on the horizon. The fly Skye campaign group has been promoting the case for restoration of passenger air links to the island of Skye for a number of years, and there is no doubt that the reintroduction of air links from Skye to the central belt would benefit the economy of Skye and Lochalsh, bringing it into line with the economies in other regions that have populations that are similar to that of Skye. We already have a range of transport options.

Take Wick, for example. It is on the mainland and is about the same distance from Edinburgh as Skye is, but it has a well-used passenger airport. All that we are talking about is equity. The capital cost of such a service would be no more than £2.8 million, and it is estimated that it would result

in an additional annual spend in the local economy of about £300,000 and would create numerous jobs. I would welcome support from the Government for that, because I believe that a fully functioning air service to Skye is long overdue.

The bill will give everyone an important opportunity to help to shape a fairer and more prosperous future for our islands. Through the bill process, people will have an opportunity to help to shape important islands-specific legislation that will have a significant impact on the lives of islanders for years to come.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (John Scott): You must close, please.

Dave Thompson: Here is an opportunity, that we should not miss, not only to consolidate island groups such as Orkney, Shetland and Na h-Eileanan an Iar, but to create a new peripheral and island local authority and parliamentary constituency in the west Highlands from Uig in Skye to Glencoe in Lochaber, which would be a huge step forward for the people of Skye, Lochalsh and Lochaber.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The clock is running down, so speeches should be of no more than six minutes.

15:51

Angus MacDonald (Falkirk East) (SNP): The more observant members in the chamber will be aware that there are no islands in my Falkirk East constituency, apart perhaps from a roundabout that Falkirk Council has designed to look like a Hebridean island, which I have to admit does not resemble any Hebridean island that I have ever visited. Needless to say, the locals have christened it Tracy Island or Fantasy Island; those who know the workings of Falkirk Council will understand why. However, as a born and bred Leòdhasach—someone who hails from the Isle of Lewis, for those who are unfortunate enough not to have any Gaelic—I could not resist contributing to today's debate.

At the outset, let me say how pleased I was to see the islands bill consultation being announced, and its concentration on equality and empowerment for our island communities is very welcome indeed. Proposals for additional powers, stronger representation and the creation of a national islands plan are all welcome steps in the right direction, and I hope that islanders in the northern isles and the Western Isles will seize this tremendous opportunity.

As someone who hails from the Isle of Lewis and who has had his own business and has helped to run family businesses on the island, I am acutely aware of the challenges that island

communities have faced in the past and those that they face currently. As part of its evidence taking on the Land Reform (Scotland) Bill, our Rural Affairs, Climate Change and Environment Committee has visited islands as diverse as Orkney, Islay, Jura and Skye. Over and above the evidence that we took on land reform, we heard at first hand of major challenges that face each and every island that we visited.

We visited Orkney in early summer, when farmers were having to consider selling off their breeding stock, because there was no grass as a result of the prolonged period of exceptional weather, but it is not just Orkney that has been affected. Most of our islands have been affected by poor weather this year, albeit that the impact on Orkney farmers and crofters has been particularly harsh. Cattle have been sold early, the quantity and quality of silage are poor, and it is estimated that the harvest is at least 30 per cent down on last year.

The cost of bringing straw to Orkney or Lewis is substantial—an average load costs between £2,000 and £2,500, of which the haulage costs are more than half. In a normal year, I believe that around 30 loads of straw are brought into Orkney, but this year more than 220 have been brought in.

Although the agricultural sector on the islands faces many challenges, there are many positives, too. Before I move on to the positives, I must highlight an issue that has already been raised and which is becoming more prominent—the far-too-regular delays on Loganair and Flybe flights. Unfortunately, the issue is one that frustrated members of the Rural Affairs, Climate Change and Environment Committee experienced recently. Delays of two to three hours on flights to and from the islands are becoming increasingly commonplace, and I am reliably informed by that bastion of local democracy, the *West Highland Free Press*, that the islands minister himself was delayed en route to Stornoway last week when he was heading up to announce the launch of the consultation on the bill.

Derek Mackay: That is true.

Angus MacDonald: I am glad that the minister said that action is being taken to address reliability. I hope that islanders will experience a return to better air services in the near future.

Those are just two examples of the myriad challenges that are faced by our islanders. However, if the further powers proposed for the islands are approved, I hope that some of those challenges can be addressed and dealt with locally, rather than the Scottish Government being called on to intervene at every turn.

Since the launch of the our islands, our future campaign in 2013 a welcome, positive working

partnership has been formed between the Scottish Government and the islands councils to address some of the challenges that islands face. It will be proof positive that joint working can pay off, to the benefit of local communities. In addition, the fact that the First Minister created an islands minister when she took office sends the strongest signal possible to island communities that the Scottish Government takes the future of Scotland's island communities extremely seriously.

One of the most important aspects of the consultation is the section on island proofing—the measures that the Government could take to ensure that the special circumstances of the islands are always taken into account during the early stages of policy development. The consultation also seeks views on what additional powers should be devolved to the islands councils to benefit the islands and recognise their special status. There is also a proposal, which I welcome, to statutorily protect the Scottish Parliament constituency boundary of Na h-Eileanan an Iar. That is a no-brainer and I hope that the feedback to the consultation will agree with the proposal 100 per cent.

I vaguely remember from my younger days the crazy situation whereby Lewis was in the Ross-shire county council area and Harris was in the Inverness-shire county council area. That was a ludicrous situation and I believe that the best thing that happened to the Western Isles was the creation of a unitary local authority covering the whole of the Outer Hebrides. I therefore agree whole-heartedly that the parliamentary boundary should be protected in an act of Parliament.

I welcome each and every proposal in the consultation and I look forward to the feedback from it. This is an opportunity for island communities to secure additional powers for themselves and to flourish, and I hope that they will grab it with both hands.

15:57

Lewis Macdonald (North East Scotland) (Lab): Island communities are special. The very existence of living communities of men, women and children in so many Atlantic islands is a tribute to the toughness and tenacity of past generations. Sustaining those communities into the future is the responsibility of the present generation, not just in those islands but across the whole of this island.

Today's debate is about how that is to be done. It is a subject close to my heart. I was born on the Isle of Lewis; my father was born in North Uist; his father was born in Berneray; my mother was evacuated to the Isle of Arran during the war; my wife's mother comes from Shetland; and my wife's father's family came from Orkney. I have lived in

or visited many of Scotland's inhabited islands and quite a few of those that are inhabited no longer. I know that islanders view the world in a very distinctive way.

Like many people from island cultures, I attach great importance to historical context. Understanding the long view is important to getting policy right for the future. Islands today are disadvantaged by geography. The sea marks the limit of island communities. Most journeys today are journeys by land. Historically, it was very different. Communities were linked, not separated, by the sea. It was easier to travel along coastlines than across country, so Orkney was at the crossroads of the north Atlantic world and Shetland was strategically placed. The Lordship of the Isles formed a bridge between the Scottish and Irish Gaidhealtachds and was a principality in its own right.

It is wrong to think of Scotland's islands as intrinsically remote or isolated or less important than Scotland's mainland. If we recognise our islands as being of equal importance, we can design policy accordingly.

When I was a boy, Lewis and Harris were divided not just by the steep climb up and down the Clisham or by the sea lochs on either side, but by a line on the map. As Angus MacDonald said, Lewis was in the county of Ross and Cromarty and Harris was in Inverness-shire, and both islands felt that they were governed remotely by mainland councils far away.

The creation of Comhairle nan Eilean Siar was one of the great success stories of local government reorganisation in 1973. For the first time in centuries, political decisions at local level were taken in the islands themselves, not on the east coast of the Scottish mainland. That was a truly revolutionary change. Bringing power home to the islands released tremendous energy and creativity, from completing the chain of causeways joining so many islands together to the revival of pride in the Gaelic language and culture.

Another revolution was accomplished in the north-eastern quarter of Lewis as long ago as the 1920s, when the people of the parish of Stornoway acquired ownership of the land. It is no coincidence that the one Hebridean community to enjoy the benefits of community ownership for most of the 20th century has also been the most successful in retaining its population. It is no wonder that so many other communities have wanted to follow suit. Devolving both political and economic power strengthens and sustains island communities: that is the lesson of the Stornoway Trust and of Comhairle nan Eilean Siar. Much the same conclusions can be drawn from the recent history of Orkney and Shetland.

In the context of today's debate, the principle of subsidiarity offers the political power that the islands need, and protecting the parliamentary representation of the Western Isles can be part of that. Economic power can come from the double devolution of the economic assets of the Crown Estate to give island councils control of the sea bed and foreshore where they do not have that already.

As Labour's amendment suggests, however, effective empowerment of island communities does not stop there. When I was Deputy Minister for Enterprise, Transport and Lifelong Learning in Scotland's devolved Government, we worked night and day to protect Clyde and Hebrides ferry services from privatisation, and we succeeded. European Union rules were much the same then as they are now, so it is deeply disappointing that the present Scottish Government has failed to achieve the same outcome.

There is little point in talking about community empowerment and then leasing out the right to provide lifeline transport services to a private profit-making company.

Derek Mackay: Is Lewis Macdonald seriously suggesting that the Labour Party's position is that we should not have undertaken a procurement exercise, and should instead have incurred the wrath of Europe and potentially put all those services in jeopardy as a result of failing to comply with what we have clearly established is a necessary legal process?

Lewis Macdonald: As the minister knows, CalMac has been in public ownership since 1948 and we have been in the European Union since 1973. No previous Government has allowed itself to be boxed into a position or chosen to take a policy decision to privatise those services. If this Government makes that choice, it will be responsible for doing so.

Sustaining a provider within the public sector is the only way to allow people in the islands the hope of having any direct influence on their single most strategic public service. Ministers should therefore give that objective the highest priority.

Stewart Stevenson was right to highlight—as a number of us did in a members' business debate a couple of weeks ago—the issue of discriminatory charges for parcel deliveries to Highlands and island communities. Many islands face very high fuel prices and suffer from exceptionally severe fuel poverty, but they could solve those problems—and go further—if they were able to realise the full potential of energy from their own resources of wind, wave and tide.

Enhancing the electricity transmission and distribution networks to enable island generators to produce heat and power cheaply for local

consumption and to sell power to the grid would make a major contribution to the economies of many of our islands and help to tackle fuel poverty. In developing an islands strategy, the Scottish Government should assess what more it can do to support investment and development by communities and local councils in renewable energy projects, and look at what can usefully be included in the islands bill in order to make that happen.

If we address the issues of lifeline services and economic opportunities, we can go beyond good intentions and institutional reform and address the issues that matter most if we are to deliver a sustainable future for Scotland's islands.

16:03

Rob Gibson (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP): Much has been said about issues such as connectivity and fuel poverty, so I think that it would be a good idea to look at some of the things that have worked, and some that have not, during the lifetime of the Scottish Parliament.

In the first four years of the Parliament, we saw the introduction of land reform proposals that allowed for a lot of community buyouts—the communities in the Western Isles in particular have benefited most in that respect. People on the mainland need to learn that lesson a good deal more strongly than they have done. Nonetheless, community ownership does not make it easier for communities in the Western Isles if they cannot link to the mainland as they do not have the connectivity that they require from the transmission system.

We have at least heard some praise for the fact that the Government has been doing its best to make sure that the links can be made. When we think about it, there are possibilities for the export of electricity from community-owned projects that could mean that those communities would be able to raise income directly and not rely on state handouts or the local government settlement. That is the area in which local authorities could add the most value to the money that they have to spend in those areas. We can already see that South Uist and Gigha have an income from renewables. When people control the electricity, there is an opportunity to use it.

One of the things that we should talk about is the development of ferries and a greater ability to store and use the electricity that is produced in the islands to power the next generation of ferries. Some small, partly electric, ferries are being used to go to Raasay and so on. We have got to have more of those ferries in, for example, Orkney's northern and southern isles. I expect that Liam McArthur wants to speak about that just now.

Liam McArthur: Mr Gibson is perhaps aware of the surf 'n' turf project in Orkney that is looking at that issue. It is at its early stages, but it is a step along the way towards the hydrogen economy and being smarter about the way in which we use natural resources to provide the lifeline services, such as, in this case, ferries.

Rob Gibson: I am aware of that. I am also aware that charging points are needed at the pier on the mainland, such as the one on the way to Rousay. That was one of the things that we noticed on our visit to Orkney.

During our visit to Orkney, the development director—I think that that is right—Paul Maxton suggested to the Rural Affairs, Climate Change and Environment Committee that, at that time, there were no proposals to devolve the Crown Estate beyond the council. However, thanks to the discussions in our islands, our future, people were beginning to change their minds about that. The Smith commission suggests that it is not just Orkney, Shetland and Na h-Eileanan Siar: other areas seek such responsibilities and they should be given them. The Scottish Parliament has to make sure that that can happen, not just for the harbour boards but so that the smaller islands can control the seas around them.

In that respect, it is important to recognise that we have had the several orders around Shetland, which have been an important 10-year experiment in local management of the inshore waters. We have not talked much about fishing but perhaps there is a need for that kind of democratic control and some assessment of it. I have mentioned this before but I believe that it can add to the value of living in the islands and make many more incomes for people there.

I should warn that it is necessary to keep together the renewables development skills that have been built up by the Crown Estate. In the evidence received by the Rural Affairs, Climate Change and Environment Committee, it has been shown that the people who do that job need to be able to empower the islands, but they will probably be based on the mainland somewhere and might be a part of Government in future. That is why what is discussed in the Scottish Parliament about how we structure the Crown Estate in future must involve the mainland and the islands.

There is a degree of amnesia among the Labour and Liberal speakers today. Decentralisation of power to the islands was not discussed fully in the first eight years of the Scottish Parliament and I am glad to say that the SNP Government has taken it forward. It is important to recognise that, although land reform was proposed, there was not going to be a change in the tax structure. We have a tax commission now and, next year, it should be possible for us to have the means to raise more of

our taxes at local level. If we get the land reform proposals correct, we might be able to tax large landowners who do not pay any tax except for their council tax. If we were able to do more of that on the land that is not owned by communities, it would be an added bonus for local authorities.

I represent several islands: the Crowlin islands, which are in the middle of a torpedo range; Isle of Ewe; Gruinard, which used to have a test range for anthrax; the Summer Isles, which people cannot live on because the sea is too choppy; Handa, which is a bird sanctuary; Garvie Island, which is bombed regularly by the Ministry of Defence; and Eilean nan Ròn and Stroma, which were evacuated. Even in the small islands around my constituency, there is the possibility that people could use them better and perhaps live on them in future.

The debate is useful and it is not just about the three big council areas that we talked about earlier.

16:10

Jean Urquhart (Highlands and Islands) (Ind):

I, too, welcome the debate and the consultation on the islands. I am delighted that we have a minister for the islands in Derek Mackay, and I know that so far he has done a remarkably good job. A lot of the obvious issues have been covered, including transportation and the accessibility of all the islands, including the archipelagos and small islands of the Argyll and Highland local authority areas.

One of the access issues has been around the provision of broadband and superfast broadband. I have a slightly different take on that. We are always very keen to talk about how open and accessible this Parliament is and about how we want clarity of government and so on. It seems to me that there is a real opportunity to engage with all the people on the islands by using technology but this Parliament is the stumbling block in many cases.

Through the University of the Highlands and Islands, there is a fantastic network of videoconferencing across the islands and mainland Highland. NHS Highland, too, has very good communications, and it is now quite commonplace for doctors or specialist consultants to consult using videoconferencing. However, that is not so for parliamentary business. Although people can of course tune into the parliamentary stations and so on, we have a number of cross-party groups—about 100, I think—on specialist issues, many of which are relevant to people living on the islands. There is a case to be made that we can surely attract their attention.

Stewart Stevenson: Just to help the member, she may be aware that the technology in our meeting rooms can now be used for Skype teleconferencing for cross-party groups and was introduced for precisely that purpose.

Jean Urquhart: I am aware of all the rooms that have upgraded the IT systems. I have to say to Mr Stevenson that enabling one person to Skype creates restrictions on any other visual presentations. Also, only a few rooms have that facility—not all the rooms that are used by CPGs have it. I know that a number of people in the Parliament know about such facilities, but I think that it would be an enormous gesture if we started to engage with more people from the rural Highlands and Islands in that way.

I believe that a resurgence of political interest has come about because of the referendum. Without the referendum, I doubt that there would have been an our islands, our future campaign at all. In my experience of being in the very privileged position of representing all the islands—with the exception of Arran—I know that that political debate was definitely a result of the discussions that went on around the referendum. We are fools if we do not all recognise what could be described as the repoliticisation of councils.

Although I hear the case that is being made for having devolved powers in every case, with centralisation being used—or abused—as a stick to beat the Scottish Government with, there have been, over the past four and a half years that I have been involved in the islands, many examples of Scottish Government policy being preferred to local government policy. To sound a note of caution, I say on behalf of all the people who live on the islands that, when it came to keeping small schools open, there is no doubt where they turned to for help—they got it through Scottish Government education policy.

However, I absolutely support everything in the consultation and I will certainly encourage people to respond to it. There are many issues that can be addressed through it. Given that there is an election next year, Government and party policy on many of the issues will still be to the fore, and people should pay attention to that.

Early in his speech, the minister mentioned that the islands have a distinct culture and language and so on. I ask whoever is in government in Scotland to engage with the whole of Scotland to show, whether through school trips, sports trips or cultural groups, just how special the island communities are. We should not deny any child who is growing up in this country the chance of at least once and possibly twice during their education visiting the islands on some of the wonderful ferries that we have.

16:16

Dennis Robertson (Aberdeenshire West)

(SNP): I welcome the opportunity to take part in the debate. Like many other speakers, I am not an islander, although I have had the privilege of visiting islands on many occasions and for many reasons. When I worked for Guide Dogs, I had the great privilege of working in Shetland, Orkney, Mull and one or two other islands to assess people for guide dogs. I think that we still have guide dogs in most of the those islands. My other visits to islands were generally for pleasure and leisure, when I was sailing. Mr Macintosh talked about the fair weather aspect of going to the islands. As a sailor visiting many of the islands in a force 9 gale, it was great to get some shelter—and that was during the summer.

At the outset, the minister said that the consultation is about empowering people in the islands and giving them a voice so that they decide, they make the decisions and they shape the future. That does not come from the Government or from Mr Mackay, and I am sure that Mr Mackay welcomes the opportunity for people to have their say.

One challenge for our minister is perhaps to visit the 93 inhabited islands in his portfolio. I am not sure how many he has managed to get to so far, but 93 is certainly a high target. Perhaps he can become an island bagger, as opposed to a Munro bagger.

We have heard about some of the challenges in the islands, and I take on board Michael Russell's points in that regard. I was slightly surprised that he did not mention what the Government has done for rural schools to try to ensure that they do not close under its auspices. I think that a certain Michael Russell had something to do with that particular aspect of legislation in the Parliament, so I was surprised that he did not put a light on himself during his speech.

Many of the speeches have reminded me of my constituency, especially some of the remote and rural aspects of it. We have the same sort of issues regarding connectivity, whether that is to do with transport or digital connectivity.

I welcomed what the minister said about improvements to mobile phone and broadband connectivity in the islands and the need to ensure that people can be connected. I hope that that same commitment can be shown to some of the remote and rural parts of Scotland that perhaps do not enjoy the levels of connectivity that some of the islands enjoy at the moment.

Connectivity gives our islanders more connection with the NHS, which will prevent them from having to take flights or ferries to places such as Aberdeen, because the consultations can be

done digitally. Quite often, people have to move around the islands to go to a hospital for a consultation but, provided that the digital connectivity is there, the doctors and the patients can have that conversation without travelling. Conversation is the crux of the issue that we are discussing, whether we are thinking about health or social care. I believe that the islanders are being given a chance during the consultation.

When we ask people to enter a consultation process, we must ensure that they have the ability to do so. I mentioned broadband and connectivity, but we must ensure that people who do not connect in that way can also have their voice heard.

It is incredibly important that we listen. I believe that this is a Government that listens. Mr McArthur listed many things that were not said by the minister, but he also said that he was glad that at least it was Derek Mackay who is taking things forward. He seems to trust the minister to be a listening minister. I believe that he is, and I am sure that he heard Dave Thompson's plea for an airport on Skye.

16:22

Michael McMahon (Uddingston and Bellshill (Lab)): As many speakers this afternoon have mentioned, our island communities are well recognised as a special part of Scotland. They make a huge contribution to our country's economy because their natural beauty causes them to be of major benefit to our domestic tourism industry.

When it comes to holiday options, I am quite partial to a staycation because I find the natural assets of Scotland's breathtaking landscapes hard to resist—indeed, 30 years ago, my honeymoon was spent touring the Highlands and Islands. However, going there as a tourist rather than as a politician has blinded me somewhat to the issues that are faced by the Scottish islands. It was only recently, when I went to Arran as a member of the Finance Committee, that the scales fell from my eyes and I appreciated the practical problems facing island communities and businesses.

Like many people, even when I arrive at a holiday destination that I have chosen in order to get away from the everyday routines and find peace and quiet, I am guilty of immediately checking whether I have a good signal for my phone or good wi-fi access. I switch off on holiday but I have to confess that knowing that I can be contacted if necessary or that I can keep an eye on what is happening in the wider world is reassuring. That is how I felt this year on my summer vacation in Tenerife. There I was, stuck out in the Atlantic Ocean in a quiet holiday resort

with a slow-paced local culture and the hurly-burly of urban Lanarkshire left thousands of miles behind. How good it was to know, though, that I had wi-fi access and a strong telephone signal available at all times.

However, one day while I was on holiday it occurred to me that that was in stark contrast to the visit to Arran that I had been on with committee colleagues some months earlier. On that trip, we were barely a few miles off the mainland, with the west coast always in sight, yet we were totally cut off from the internet and seldom in a position to make a phone call due to the lack of a strong signal. The many challenges that that causes people on the island were repeatedly driven home to us as we took evidence from community representatives, business leaders, educationists and others. It really is hard to comprehend that broadband connection on the island is almost primitive in comparison with that which people take for granted only a few miles away across the Firth of Clyde, yet that is what we were told.

It is barely believable that, in the modern high-technology communication era, when we can receive signals and images from NASA missions on Mars—and even as they leave our galaxy on their way through the rest of the universe—on Arran, the broadband cables are regularly broken by workers trimming the hedges because the cable companies did not bury the lines underground as they do elsewhere but merely laid them on top of the hedgerows that run along the sides of the roads around the island.

It is hardly credible in this day and age to hear businesspeople tell us that their supplies are regularly delayed because they cannot get internet downloads for days on end.

The people we heard from were understandably frustrated, if not downright angry. However, although it falls to Government to ensure that such island communities are equipped to deal with issues such as connectivity, it struck me that the strength of feeling that was conveyed to us was aimed more at getting us to acknowledge that empowering local democracy was the best way for the community to realise its full potential.

That is why I completely support the work of the our islands, our future campaign. In recent years, it has made a strong case for empowering our island communities to address the problems that their communities face. Therefore, I will be very interested to see whether the much-anticipated islands bill will meet the island communities' expectations.

We must commit the Parliament to using the powers that it will receive through the changes that will result from the Smith commission process to

devolve more power to our island communities. That is what people demanded when I was on Arran. They want to be given the power to make decisions for themselves as a local community, in a way that reflects the uniqueness of that island community. As a lifelong Lanarkshire man looking in from the outside, I can see no valid reason why that should not be the case.

16:26

Tavish Scott (Shetland Islands) (LD): Alex Salmond used to attack me in leaders debates for saying that self-determination does not begin and end in Edinburgh. The minister is right that islands now have options. They have had options for a long time but, by gosh, they certainly have options now. Some people in my part of the world would quite like to go back to being ruled by Norway. That is perhaps a bit extreme although, at times, I can understand it.

When Liam McArthur and I were in Jersey this summer to support team Orkney and team Shetlands in the NatWest island games, the options that are available to islands that think about their future came across to me in a discussion with the Chief Minister of Jersey. I am grateful to the Minister for Transport and Islands for starting the process. I am not sure where it will finish, but that is a good thing.

We sent our biggest-ever team to Jersey and won more medals than we have ever won before in a fantastic week of sporting excellence. What really came across to me, as I met ministerial and parliamentary friends from islands from throughout the world, was the camaraderie of all of us who share the same broad issues and our desire to find the best solutions to those problems.

I thought about that the other night when I was in the Voe hall in the north of Shetland listening to Ross and Ryan Couper playing fiddle and guitar in the way that only they can. Sport and music are two of the enshrining attributes of much of island life. I hope that the minister will add his political pressure to that of his colleagues as we argue for financial assistance to enable our sporting teams to take part in competitions on the Scottish mainland and get to the same level as people such as Andrea Strachan, who represented Scotland in the highly successful Glasgow Commonwealth games the other year, have reached.

I acknowledge the role that Derek Mackay has played as a minister who understands that constituency MSPs are just doing their jobs. I respect him for that. I will not quite take the idea that he is the first islands minister. Ken Macintosh and I knew Alasdair Morrison well and my recollection is that, under the Donald Dewar

Administration, he was an islands minister. I seem to remember that the SNP welcomed that post. Alasdair Morrison and Derek Mackay are probably two very different characters, but the less said about that, the better.

The debate is now not only about the big picture of what could happen in the future but about island proofing. As Liam McArthur and others argued, those of us who live on the islands and argue for sensible and constructive change that helps the people whom we are in the Parliament to serve will certainly apply that test to the Government's proposals and actions. It is the actions that matter most, particularly—if I may say so—in the run-up to an election, when everything is seen through the prism of electoral politics.

I strongly welcome the minister's announcement on the ferry fare freeze and the air discount scheme increase, although I would rather that he had also increased the eligibility for the ADS back to what it was before, when Stewart Stevenson sensibly continued the policy of the previous Administration. It was a good policy and I encourage Mr Mackay to go back to his colleague's policy at the time.

While the ferry fare freeze is welcome, people in Orkney and Shetland have noticed—believe me, they have noticed—that the Government has spent money, money and more money on reducing fares in the Clyde and the Hebrides and not in my part of the world and that of Liam McArthur.

Only Mike Russell could assert that RET has been fully delivered. I would hate to think how he would define what the Royal Mail delivers these days, if that is his definition of the full delivery of RET.

Michael Russell: Will the member give way?

Tavish Scott: I probably asked for this.

Michael Russell: He might not have asked for it but he is going to get it.

The reality is that the commitment that the Government entered into was to deliver RET in services in the Hebrides, the Western Isles and the Clyde by the end of this session of Parliament. The final part will be in Mull later this month. Therefore, it has been delivered.

Tavish Scott: Something about commercial vehicles comes to mind, but there we are. I will leave Mr Russell to argue about that with his minister. I am sure that he is more than able to do that.

In the context of island proofing, other issues confront islands. As Liam McArthur has argued, one such issue is the attainment fund. I spoke to teachers this weekend. No constituency member

could but listen to their arguments about how helpful that fund would be. The attainment fund is a really good thing for a Government to do, but it should be applied across the country and to all local authorities, including those in the islands.

Similarly, on health funding, the Government's formula is underfunding health boards—for example, NHS Shetland is being underfunded to the tune of £900,000 a year. If the Government is going to island proof, it has to island proof across the board.

Many colleagues have mentioned broadband. I suspect that we share a common desire over the policy objective. However, I and others have argued for some time that the policy is the wrong way round. Should we not start with the hardest-to-reach areas before concentrating on the main population centres? That contract needs a jig—it needs to change. Community broadband Scotland, which Mary Scanlon and others mentioned, needs more support to do exactly that.

There are two other areas where the minister could make a difference in his role in respect of the islands. One of those is the seafood industry, which Rob Gibson mentioned and which has not had a lot of attention this afternoon. It is worth £351 million to the Shetland economy, yet the discard plan for our white-fish industry is—without doubt—challenging. The same applies to the new common agricultural policy, which represents a challenge in all the areas that we represent. I am extremely concerned that the way in which the Government is implementing its reclassification of land is causing significant concerns for crofters and farmers in some areas.

I finish with a point about the Crown Estate. It is pretty simple, really. Rob Gibson was right: paragraph 33 of the Smith commission report says that

“responsibility for the management of those assets will be further devolved to local authority areas”—

that is not the revenues, but the full responsibility. John Swinney signed up to that; I hope that his Government will, too.

16:33

Alex Johnstone (North East Scotland) (Con):

I feel something of a fraud standing up to speak in a debate about islands. My colleague Jamie McGrigor would have been here had he not been in Brussels—he is returning today—to represent the interests of his constituents in the Highlands and Islands.

I have visited some of Scotland's islands, but I am a long way short of bagging the full 93. However, it is enough to know that our island communities are vibrant, economically successful

and, culturally, one of the stars in Scotland's firmament. For that reason, we must praise successive Governments over many years for the work that has been done to secure the viability of Scotland's island communities.

It is only fair that the Government and the Parliament should find themselves today discussing ways in which we can improve the situation in the future. The Conservatives intend to vote for the amendments and for the Government motion regardless of whether it is amended, but there have been one or two times during the debate when consensual views have given way to a more confrontational approach. I think that my colleague Mary Scanlon made it clear to Mike MacKenzie that he came very close to tipping her over the balance. However, we will work together today to ensure that the motion is passed.

There have been some interesting key points. I will first touch on ferry services. I am delighted that the Government has taken steps to introduce road equivalent tariff, although the fact that it is not available to commercial vehicles causes some concern and has some impact on prices in some of our islands.

I am delighted to hear that a ferry price freeze will be carried over to next year, because that will give predictability and continuity to those who use our ferries, who might have been concerned about the impact of potential price rises.

The main issue that has been raised regarding ferry services is the accusation—I find it hard to understand, although it comes regularly from the Labour Party—that the Government is somehow on the verge of privatising ferry services to the Western Isles. Would that it were true. The Government has failed to deliver what could be delivered for ferry services if it embraced the concept of competitive tendering and did so in a way that would reduce costs. We need to get every penny's worth of value from the money that we use to support ferry services. We need to ensure that both the taxpayer and the fare payer get value for money, while we have the best services possible.

I hold up as an example the privately run, unsubsidised ferry services that operate on the Clyde and on the Pentland Firth. When we lost a ferry service for a whole month two years ago, the unsubsidised Pentland Firth service took up the slack and ensured that Orkney remained connected to Scrabster in a way that did not cost the taxpayer a penny. That demonstrates to me that Scotland has some successful small ferry companies. If we wish to have a successful ferry industry, we ought to be tendering services in such a way that those small ferry companies can become involved in the process.

Liam McArthur: Will Alex Johnstone give way?

Alex Johnstone: Excuse me, but not at the moment.

I criticise the minister—I do so unashamedly—for failing to live up to the expectations of those who wish there to be a truly competitive tendering process on a scale where there is adequate unbundling that allows our small ferry companies to participate. That is a missed opportunity, and I am delighted to criticise the minister for missing that opportunity. I am confused by the Labour Party's attitude to the issue.

The one thing that I ask the minister to do, if it is still possible, is to consider whether it is within his power to ensure that some market testing takes place on routes. If we can allow small companies to demonstrate the efficiency that they could generate on individual routes on a subcontracted basis, we can proceed knowing what it costs to run the ferry services and knowing what the subsidy levels will need to be.

I need to say a few things about air fares. The fact that air fares have been rising, largely because of fuel costs, has been a particular disadvantage to many people in our island communities. Like many members, I have been lobbied by people who wish air fares to be restricted and who wish the air discount scheme to be extended. I am delighted at the announcement that the minister made, but people who live on the islands are still left at a disadvantage.

Other things that were mentioned include grid connections, which I do not quite have time to go into, and housing—I think that all Governments recognise that housing has a higher cost on the islands than on mainland Scotland. Rural housing is expensive, and island housing is more expensive still. When we talk about all the problems that are associated with providing affordable housing, the islands situation needs to be at the top of our list of priorities.

The final issue that has been raised is the Crown Estate. It has been slightly peripheral to the debate, but one or two members have majored on it. The proposal to devolve the Crown Estate, which came from the Smith commission, had encouragement with it to devolve on down to local authorities. I understand that and support it in principle, but I have been heavily lobbied by people who are concerned that the expertise in the Crown Estate will be lost if it is divided up and passed on. I therefore urge the minister and others in the Government to consider seriously how that might be done with minimum impact on the successful and stable organisation that is the Crown Estate in Scotland.

16:41

Ken Macintosh: In my opening remarks, I did not have the opportunity to expand on the importance of jobs to the islands. I wish to do so briefly in closing.

The debate has allowed members across the chamber to voice our support for more powers and greater devolution to the islands. It is clear that we want islanders to have more say over their own lives. However, the proposals that the Scottish Government has brought forward in the motion do not touch on the issues that have most bearing on islanders' wellbeing and prosperity: their jobs, their homes, and their educational and training opportunities.

My personal experience of the village of Elgol on Skye, for example, is of a community that has been turned around by economic opportunity. Prawn fishing and, to a lesser extent, salmon and scallop farming have given young people in the village the chance to earn a good living, to buy—or, more likely, to build themselves—a house, to bring up and look after their family and, in turn, to boost the local primary school roll.

Those people want more say over the decisions that affect their lives. I dare say they have a positive view on island proofing legislation, and I am sure that they positively danced a jig when they heard that Mr Mackay had been appointed as the islands minister, but most of all they want the opportunity to work, earn, look after themselves and their families, and share in and contribute to Scotland's prosperity.

I turn to the debate. There has been an interesting exchange about the Government's devolutionary credentials. Liam McArthur began by offering a critical but entirely accurate assessment of the Scottish Government's approach to Scotland's islands. Essentially, the assessment was that the moves are welcome from an otherwise relentlessly centralising Administration in Edinburgh.

Several other members talked about the importance of reflecting the dispersed population in the islands themselves. Mary Scanlon said that it is very important that we do not just devolve power to Lerwick, Kirkwall and Stornoway, and she recounted her experience of a visit to Stornoway in 2000. I am reliably informed that people there are still recovering from that visit. She talked about the danger of jumping to inaccurate assumptions and about her experience of talking to women from Barra, who said that, if they faced the end of their life, they would rather go to Glasgow than Stornoway, but their choice was to stay in the islands.

Mike MacKenzie continued on very much the same theme—that solutions that may work for

Stornoway do not necessarily work for South Uist. Margaret McDougall and Mike Russell pointed out that those solutions do not necessarily work for the many non-Hebridean islands either. In fact, I found myself in danger of making common cause with Mr Russell on not just air services but much of his contribution.

I think that Mike Russell pointed out that he represents more islands than any other MSP. It is worth noting that the islands that have recorded the greatest drops in population have been in Argyll and Bute and North Ayrshire—I am not trying to make a link between Mr Russell's representation and people leaving in droves. He made the serious point that he is disappointed that there is no representation on the ministerial working group from the islands in Argyll and Bute and North Ayrshire. Perhaps the minister should pursue making an appointment.

Margaret McDougall talked about the islands of Cumbrae and Arran, and she repeated and highlighted the theme in my opening remarks of the importance of housing. She acknowledged, which I did not properly do, the recent contribution of Derek Logie from Rural Housing Scotland to the cross-party group on housing.

Margaret McDougall noted that, because there are fewer houses for social rent, there is even greater need for private housing. However, planning is difficult and land ownership patterns are such that little land comes forward for development. There is poor infrastructure from the utility companies, and building costs can be higher because of the need to, for example, transport material on the ferries. There are even higher management costs for local housing associations in dispersed communities.

I suggest to the minister that, as well as the islands bill, there are forthcoming opportunities in the planning review and in the Land Reform (Scotland) Bill to address the subject. Indeed, Rob Gibson made some very thoughtful remarks about the potential use of the Land Reform (Scotland) Bill.

On the same theme, Lewis Macdonald pointed out that more than half the land in Na h-Eileanan Siar is under community ownership. Community ownership has been recognised as an important factor in encouraging people to stay or to return to the islands. However, in the islands, there is a localised trend of movement towards the larger settlements, with the population in the outlying areas declining. It is no coincidence that the local authorities tend to own land that they can make available for social housing only in and around the larger communities.

Margaret McDougall also pointed out the staggering levels of fuel poverty in the islands in

the Clyde. Fuel poverty is a serious problem across Scotland islands. We know that they are often not connected to main gas supplies—people are far more likely to be dependent on more expensive forms of fuel—and too many houses are in dire need of better insulation.

We certainly must do more to ensure that people do not have to live in a cold, damp home. Last year, a report from Scotland's Rural College showed that, on average, 59 per cent of people aged over 60 in rural local authorities were experiencing fuel poverty compared with only 45 per cent in urban areas. The highest fuel poverty levels were found to be in Orkney and Na h-Eileanan Siar, where a frightening 75 per cent of over-60s were affected.

I am not sure, but the SNP seems to have given up on achieving the target set 15 years ago of abolishing fuel poverty as far as is reasonably practical by 2016. If that is the case, the minister should say so openly. If that is not the case, he urgently needs to review the steps that he is taking, particularly on those hard-to-treat rural properties.

On air services, I was particularly pleased by Dave Thompson and Dennis Robertson's remarks. I have always dreamed of an air service to Skye. I hope that I can make common cause with Dave Thompson and Ian Blackford to make that happen.

Stewart Stevenson made his usual fascinating contribution on air services. He made a serious point about improving the reliability of services. He also pointed out that multi-engine planes are more dangerous than single-engine planes, which is a point that he should have perhaps made to the minister before the minister highlighted that he had bought several Twin Otter planes—planes that have twin engines.

Stewart Stevenson: All the aircraft are very, very, very safe. It is merely that single-engine planes have an extra "very".

Ken Macintosh: I hope that the travelling public is suitably reassured by those remarks. I will be getting the ferry with Rob Gibson the next time that we are heading to Islay. [*Laughter.*]

I thought that the minister was at his most animated when ferries were mentioned. On their every mention, he seemed to leap to his feet, except when Alex Johnstone talked about the subject. Margaret McDougall and Lewis Macdonald were simply trying to highlight that there is a great deal of anxiety about the situation. Lewis Macdonald just pointed out that, under a Labour-Liberal Administration when he was the transport minister, which was under exactly the same EU procurement terms, we were able to maintain and keep the ferry service in public ownership. Accountability to the public matters to

our islanders. The minister was not able to offer the reassurance that that will happen. I hope that he will take those points on board.

Jean Urquhart: Will the member take an intervention?

Ken Macintosh: Do I have time for an intervention, Presiding Officer?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: No, you do not.

Ken Macintosh: I apologise to Ms Urquhart.

Scottish Labour is, as is so often the case, taking a constructive and consensual approach, where possible, to the Government's proposals, but we will not shy away from highlighting the work that needs to be done, the public services that need to be supported, the homes that need to be built and the jobs that need to be delivered. If the Government is equally willing to work with us, then perhaps our islands can have a secure future.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call on the minister, Derek Mackay, to wind up the debate. Minister, you have until 5 o'clock.

16:49

Derek Mackay: I say first that it is the Government's intention to accept the Labour amendment. There we go: the spirit of co-operation and cross-party working has already begun. Sadly, we will not accept the Liberal Democrat amendment, but I am sure that the constructive relationship that we have will continue to work for island communities.

I am advised that Alasdair Morrison's position in a previous Scottish Executive was Deputy Minister for Highlands and Islands and Gaelic, whereas I am the minister for islands and the transport system in the whole country. However, I am very focused on islands issues, which are of course rightly connected to the transport agenda because that is clearly a critical issue for our island communities.

I am sorry if Ken Mackintosh felt that I became animated when ferries were mentioned. It is just that, when we spend over £1 billion on public services, we do not like people raising anxiety, particularly when it is caused by the Labour Party winding people up quite unfairly about the current procurement exercise. I am in no more of a position to prejudice the outcome of a procurement exercise than the previous Scottish Executive was, and I had to go through the exact same procurement exercise and reach a conclusion.

Tavish Scott: Will the minister take an intervention?

Derek Mackay: Okay, but I must move on after that.

Tavish Scott: I completely sympathise with the minister on the procurement exercise. However, as Ken Mackintosh might ask too, can the minister maybe have a word with Fergus Ewing because he did exactly the same scaremongering when we were going through exactly the same procurement exercise?

Derek Mackay: I am the minister responsible for transport and conducting the procurement exercise, and I think that I have put in further safeguards in relation to the independent procurement panel and further engagement with the trade unions involved. Even with regard to waiting for consideration of the procurement exercise, I believe that I have improved the process to get the right outcome for everyone involved.

I thought that Margaret McDougall made a very helpful contribution to the debate, particularly on the issue of fuel poverty. However, our new fuel poverty scheme from warmer homes Scotland is called the home energy efficiency programme Scotland—HEEPS. It was launched on 14 September and is being delivered on a regional basis by the managing agent, but I reinforce the point that it includes a separate island region to ensure that the more remote parts of Scotland receive the same level of service as urban areas. Margaret McDougall's point on fuel poverty in that connection was well made.

Dave Thompson has given me a heads-up—a warning—that he is embarking on a major campaign for transport improvements in his constituency and will commit to the same level of correspondence as Michael Russell MSP engages on in relation to transport matters.

I think that Stewart Stevenson stretched my technical expertise on aviation again. Although I thought that I understood his wider points on reliability, air fares, connectivity, operational matters and the relationship with HIAL, clearly I have a bit more to do on the technical issue in relation to the Twin Otter planes. However, I think that they are working very successfully, and I know that I enjoyed an early landing on Barra. Stewart Stevenson's point on universal services and delivery charges was well made, too. We discussed that matter in Parliament recently, and I responded on behalf of the Government. I refer Stewart Stevenson to my remarks in that debate.

Michael Russell gave us a very helpful reminder of the fact that there are 93 inhabited islands in Scotland. Although the particular local authorities' our islands, our future campaign has been very effective, the work that the Government does touches on all 93 inhabited island communities.

That requires extra engagement by the Government to ensure that the commitments that are made apply to all islands as appropriate, although some are specific to individual islands. For example, there is the request and aspiration to have constituency protection for the Western Isles constituency in the Scottish Parliament.

Michael Russell: I am very grateful for that reassurance, which will be well received in Argyll and Bute. Can I press the minister to go one step further and confirm that there will be representation of Argyll and Bute in the new strategic ferry group that he announced earlier?

Derek Mackay: Yes, there will. The strategic islands forum will involve other island communities to ensure that it reaches out. I can assure the member that that is the case. The islands area ministerial working group is comprised of those who came from the our islands, our future campaign—that is the nature of that forum. I again give the commitment, as islands minister, that I consider engagement with all islands when I make commitments and decisions to do with delivering on the Government's prospectus.

A number of members said that the motion does not cover everything. It could not possibly do that. However, in the prospectus, "Empowering Scotland's Island Communities", we say much more about what we can do for our island communities in a host of areas. There is a monitoring framework and there is an action plan, which sets out what can be achieved in partnership across portfolios.

I noted Jean Urquhart's comment that as minister I am doing "a remarkably good job"—so far. I look forward to the future and to taking the prospectus forward. Jean Urquhart made valid points about culture.

Ken Macintosh's points about planning and land reform were well made, as was his point about unlocking the economic potential of communities to deliver a sustainable future.

Tavish Scott talked about legislation and the current consultation, on which there is consensus in the Parliament today. He said that he is not sure where the process will finish. In truth, nor am I, but surely that is a good thing. We are embarking on engagement to elicit the comments of elected members and, more important, local communities, about what powers they want to be transferred from London to Edinburgh, from Edinburgh to communities and within communities. That is an exciting and open-minded approach to take.

Angus MacDonald talked about the importance of having an islands minister to provide cross-portfolio focus on different matters.

The leaders of the our islands, our future campaign would admit that they were taking the opportunity that the Scottish independence referendum afforded to think about constitutional matters and how we might do things differently. Although the Government did not get the answer that it wanted in the referendum, we are still seeing through the commitments that we can deliver through continued devolution to support our island communities.

We have been able to do that through, for example, the Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act 2015, which unlocks local potential and creates new schemes to be delivered locally. We will continue in that vein with the Crown Estate, in relation to which we have made a commitment about the benefits of revenues and resources that derive from local communities.

Jayne Baxter was very fair in her remarks about the consultation on further empowerment. She said that the consultation asks reasonable and pertinent questions about what more can be done to support island communities and about island proofing. Mary Scanlon asked for more transparency on island proofing.

Members asked what powers it will be appropriate to transfer as we empower our island communities, about the potential for a national islands plan to show what Government and its agencies can do to calibrate our investments and decisions to support island living, about constituency protection for the Western Isles, and about electoral ward flexibility.

With the best will in the world, electoral ward flexibility could not be implemented by 2017. However, there is potentially an opportunity to take local government closer to the people and communities by changing how we do business and having multimember wards with fewer than three or four councillors, so that we can more accurately represent island communities, particularly the smaller ones. Arran is a particularly good example of an island where such an approach would apply.

I have enjoyed a good relationship with all six local authorities. There is more to do on land reform in the context of extensions to community ownership. There is more to do on energy, housing and digital infrastructure, which I covered in my opening speech. I look forward to the island communities conference, which will bring together island communities to share best practice and show how local communities can be sustained.

I am delighted that Alex Johnstone criticised me for not privatising the Clyde and Hebrides ferry services, or CalMac services, as some members said. I will happily take that criticism. On aviation, I point out that the Government is supporting island

communities through the air discount scheme, while Alex Johnstone's party's Government in the UK is undermining communities through air passenger duty. That shows the difference between the Scottish Government and the UK Government.

Our comments today on freezing ferry fares, extending the air discount scheme from 40 to 50 per cent, progressing the islands bill, providing more powers and protection, delivering and in some cases exceeding the commitments in the islands prospectus, delivering on road equivalent tariff, purchasing new ferries, developing new infrastructure and renewing our focus on digital and energy, all represent a clear commitment to our island communities. If the relative consensus in the debate is anything to go by, I think that in the next session of the Parliament we will be well placed to take forward legislation to support our island communities.

Decision Time

17:00

The Presiding Officer (Tricia Marwick): There are three questions to be put as a result of today's business. The first question is, that amendment S4M-14448.2, in the name of Ken Macintosh, which seeks to amend motion S4M-14448, in the name of Derek Mackay, on empowering Scotland's island communities, be agreed to.

Amendment agreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The second question is, that amendment S4M-14448.1, in the name of Liam McArthur, which seeks to amend motion S4M-14448, in the name of Derek Mackay, on empowering Scotland's island communities, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

For

Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Baker, Richard (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Baxter, Jayne (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Beamish, Claudia (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)
 Brown, Gavin (Lothian) (Con)
 Buchanan, Cameron (Lothian) (Con)
 Carlaw, Jackson (West Scotland) (Con)
 Chisholm, Malcolm (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (Lab)
 Dugdale, Kezia (Lothian) (Lab)
 Fergusson, Alex (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
 Findlay, Neil (Lothian) (Lab)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Goldie, Annabel (West Scotland) (Con)
 Gray, Iain (East Lothian) (Lab)
 Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Hilton, Cara (Dunfermline) (Lab)
 Hume, Jim (South Scotland) (LD)
 Johnstone, Alex (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Kelly, James (Rutherglen) (Lab)
 Macdonald, Lewis (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Macintosh, Ken (Eastwood) (Lab)
 Marra, Jenny (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Martin, Paul (Glasgow Provan) (Lab)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
 McDougall, Margaret (West Scotland) (Lab)
 McInnes, Alison (North East Scotland) (LD)
 McMahon, Michael (Uddingston and Bellshill) (Lab)
 McMahon, Siobhan (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 McTaggart, Anne (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Milne, Nanette (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Murray, Elaine (Dumfriesshire) (Lab)
 Pearson, Graeme (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Pentland, John (Motherwell and Wishaw) (Lab)
 Rennie, Willie (Mid Scotland and Fife) (LD)
 Scanlon, Mary (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Scott, John (Ayr) (Con)
 Scott, Tavish (Shetland Islands) (LD)
 Simpson, Dr Richard (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Smith, Drew (Glasgow) (Lab)

Smith, Elaine (Coatbridge and Chryston) (Lab)
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)

Against

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
 Adamson, Clare (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Allan, Dr Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
 Allard, Christian (North East Scotland) (SNP)
 Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Biagi, Marco (Edinburgh Central) (SNP)
 Brodie, Chic (South Scotland) (SNP)
 Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
 Burgess, Margaret (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
 Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
 Crawford, Bruce (Stirling) (SNP)
 Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)
 Don, Nigel (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)
 Eadie, Jim (Edinburgh Southern) (SNP)
 Ewing, Annabelle (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP)
 Fabiani, Linda (East Kilbride) (SNP)
 Finnie, John (Highlands and Islands) (Ind)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee City West) (SNP)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Gibson, Rob (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
 Grahame, Christine (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
 Ingram, Adam (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)
 Keir, Colin (Edinburgh Western) (SNP)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 Lyle, Richard (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 MacAskill, Kenny (Edinburgh Eastern) (SNP)
 MacDonald, Angus (Falkirk East) (SNP)
 MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
 Mackay, Derek (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP)
 MacKenzie, Mike (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 Maxwell, Stewart (West Scotland) (SNP)
 McAlpine, Joan (South Scotland) (SNP)
 McDonald, Mark (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
 McKelvie, Christina (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP)
 McLeod, Aileen (South Scotland) (SNP)
 McLeod, Fiona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)
 McMillan, Stuart (West Scotland) (SNP)
 Robertson, Dennis (Aberdeenshire West) (SNP)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
 Russell, Michael (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Salmond, Alex (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
 Stevenson, Stewart (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
 Thompson, Dave (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP)
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
 Urquhart, Jean (Highlands and Islands) (Ind)
 Watt, Maureen (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)
 Wheelhouse, Paul (South Scotland) (SNP)
 White, Sandra (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)
 Wilson, John (Central Scotland) (Ind)
 Yousaf, Humza (Glasgow) (SNP)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 44, Against 60, Abstentions 0.

Amendment disagreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The third question is, that motion S4M-14448, in the name of Derek Mackay, on empowering Scotland's island communities, as amended, be agreed to.

Motion, as amended, agreed to,

That the Parliament welcomes the publication of the Scottish Government's consultation paper on measures for inclusion in a future islands bill; notes that the paper seeks views on issues including the concept of "island-proofing", devolution of further powers, the possibility of a national islands plan, statutory protection for the Western Isles Scottish parliamentary constituency boundary and whether the Local Government Boundary Commission in Scotland should have discretion to recommend wards with fewer than three councillors so that populated islands are not placed in an electoral ward that contains a significant proportion, and often a majority, of mainland population; recognises that the publication of this paper is a further signal of the Scottish Government's support for island communities following the creation of the Island Areas Ministerial Working Group in 2013, the publication of the *Empowering Scotland's Island Communities* prospectus in 2014, and the creation of a specific ministerial post with responsibility for island issues, giving a voice to all of Scotland's 93 islands at the heart of government; acknowledges the importance of the Our Islands Our Future campaign, which has highlighted the contribution of the island communities to Scotland, and recognises the immediate challenges that all island communities face in areas such as housing, fuel poverty and transport connectivity.

One Hundred Years of Women in Policing

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Elaine Smith):

The final item of business today is a members' business debate on motion S4M-13739, in the name of Linda Fabiani, on 100 years of women in policing. The debate will be concluded without any question being put.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament notes that 2015 marks 100 years of women in policing, following Edith Smith being appointed in August 1915 as the first female officer in the UK with full powers of arrest; notes that this milestone is being celebrated by Police Scotland with a series of events around the country; thanks the retired officers, Dorothy Parker and Barbara McNally, who are both from East Kilbride, for sharing their memorabilia and memories at what it considers a successful event in the town, which was hosted by Police Scotland Lanarkshire Division on 22 June, and recognises the diverse policing roles that women now hold and the positive role women officers have played, and continue to play, in keeping everyone safe in their communities.

17:03

Linda Fabiani (East Kilbride) (SNP): I thank everyone who signed the motion. I see that we have Graeme Pearson, a former police officer, with us. Although he is not very old, he will be familiar with the struggle that women have had in ensuring parity in the police force over the years.

As the motion states, this year marks a century since Edith Smith was appointed as the first female police officer in the United Kingdom with full powers of arrest. That milestone is being celebrated by Police Scotland, and the Lanarkshire division held a successful event in East Kilbride in June to mark the occasion. It was a fascinating event and I was enthralled by the memorabilia on display, courtesy of George Barnsley of the Lanarkshire police historical society. I was also fascinated by the stories behind that memorabilia, and I thank two thoroughly modern officers, Chief Inspector Gillian Scott and Chief Inspector Louise Skelton, who were instrumental in ensuring the event's success. I thank them both very much.

The history of women in policing in Scotland and the UK as a whole is absolutely fascinating. It was in 1883 that the Metropolitan Police employed, on a licence and under police supervision, a female visitor to visit women convicts. The women's police service was founded in 1914 by Nina Boyle, who was a suffragette journalist, and Margaret Damer Dawson, who was an anti-white-slavery campaigner. It was staffed by volunteers.

The way in which women's involvement in policing came about is really interesting, because

all those things were controversial. Edith Smith's appointment was controversial. The Home Office advised that women could not be sworn in, because they did not count as proper persons in the eyes of the law. However, in Grantham the chief constable and the watch committee continued to give Ms Smith their full support, because they thought that her work was vital, given the very particular problems that the town faced as a result of war conditions.

It was after the conclusion of war that it was felt that women could start to play more of a part in the police force but, even then, public opinion and the opinion of the establishment militated against that, and there was still huge resistance, despite what women had done during world war one, when they had had to take over many of the roles that men had previously carried out. Even then, it was stated that the duties performed by women should be restricted to those involving females and child victims or complainants. It was up to local police authorities to decide whether women were needed in their area.

The women in Scottish policing timeline is interesting. In the period 1915 to 1918, Emily Miller joined the City of Glasgow Police and Jean Thomas joined Dundee City Police. In 1918, chief constables were asked to consider appointing women "where necessary". In 1922, the chief constable of Dundee City Police was forced to publicly deny that he had a woman working as a constable, even though he did. I was fascinated by that—I do not know what he did with her or how he managed to hide the fact that she was there. I could not find out any further information—there is a job for our former police officer, Graeme Pearson.

Times moved on, and in 1924 women constables were granted the power of arrest in Scotland. In 1940, Jean Malloy was promoted to detective sergeant and became the first woman in Scotland to gain rank. In 1954, a woman was promoted to chief inspector. At the same time, we had the first uniformed sergeants. It was not until 1962 that policewomen who were attached to the criminal investigation department were recognised as detective constables, and it was only in 1968 that policewomen were allowed to remain in post after marriage. *[Interruption.]* It is all right, Fiona—my colleague Fiona McLeod is having a problem with that.

That timeline brings me back to the event in East Kilbride, at which Christina McKelvie and I were privileged to meet and talk to two smashing ladies—Dorothy Parker, who is still resident in EK, and Barbara McNally, who is resident in Bishopbriggs but who served as a sergeant in East Kilbride. I spoke to Dorothy last night just to make sure that I had right the story that she told

Christina McKelvie and me that day. Although I said that in the late 1960s policewomen were allowed to stay in post after marriage, she told me that in 1972 she had to ask the chief constable for permission to stay. I can see that Mr Pearson is nodding away, so he is older than we all thought.

Dorothy recalled that women officers had different duties from the men, and there was only one woman on every shift, who was to deal with women and children. Even after she had passed the full driving course, Dorothy was allowed to drive only if a qualified male was in the car. She also told me that women officers were not allowed to wear trousers; I will not go into the stories of what she used to do when she had to chase felons down the street.

Then we got on to the story of Barbara McNally, who was fascinating as well. She really hit against the glass ceiling of the time. She was promoted to sergeant in East Kilbride in the mid-1960s and then went to the CID in Shettleston. She had started out as a typist in the police force in Rutherglen in the 1950s and then moved into the force itself. She told me that she still has her last pay slip from being a typist in the police in Rutherglen, where she got £3 a week. She used to put two shillings a week in the holiday fund to pay for her holidays every year.

When Barbara moved into being a police officer she was on £7 a week, which included a plain clothes allowance. All the women police officers' uniforms had to be made to measure because there were not enough of them to warrant having off-the-peg uniforms.

From that point, things really moved on. In 1976 police women came to be known as constable, sergeant and so on, rather than WPC or W sergeant. That created a form of equality with male colleagues.

In 1995, Sandra Hood became the first woman in Scotland to hold the rank of chief superintendent. In 2006, Margaret Barr was appointed director of the Scottish Police College at Tulliallan. In 2008, Norma Graham became Scotland's first female chief constable in Fife and, of course, in 2012, Rose Fitzpatrick was appointed as the first female deputy chief constable of Police Scotland.

Across the UK, there are now more than 40,000 female officers, and almost 40 per cent of Police Scotland recruits this year are women, which is the highest proportion ever. However, I believe that we have to look back to Dorothy Parker, Barbara McNally and all their contemporaries, who fought against the system at the time and followed a vocation. We also have to recognise the diverse policing roles that women now hold and the positive role that women officers have

played and continue to play in keeping everyone safe in their communities.

17:12

Annabel Goldie (West Scotland) (Con): I am delighted to participate in this evening's debate marking 100 years of women in policing and I thank Linda Fabiani for bringing it to the chamber.

Over the past 24 hours, the headlines have been dominated by the tragic death on the front line of PC David Phillips in Liverpool. As the Prime Minister said, it serves as a stark reminder that

"there's no such thing as a safe day if you're a police officer."

I take this opportunity to pay tribute to the men and women who put themselves in danger, day in, day out, to keep our communities safe because we are truly indebted to them. I thank them for all that they do.

As we celebrate 100 years of women in policing, I am struck by the fact that Edith Smith, the first ever woman to become a police constable, was sworn in during the first world war. I also note that she was sworn in at Grantham in Lincolnshire—a town not unfamiliar with the achievement of females, as it was of course the town that was to produce Britain's first female Prime Minister.

However, 1915 reflected dark and desperately unsafe times. It was testament to Edith Smith's immense strength and bravery that she led the way as the first woman to have policing powers commensurate with those of her male counterparts. That is all the more remarkable as women did not count as proper citizens in the eyes of the law in the early 20th century, as Linda Fabiani pointed out. Without doubt, pioneering people such as Edith Smith have helped change the discourse surrounding women aspiring to the workplace over the past 100 years.

In celebrating Edith Smith's achievements, we should reflect that opening a path for women in the police force was not necessarily synonymous with championing the rights of women. I am sure that Edith Smith was personally committed to doing that, but the very nature of her specialist duties, to which Linda Fabiani obliquely referred, meant that she was often engaged in the moral regulation of her female peers, such as conducting surveillance on behalf of servicemen with doubts about spousal fidelity.

Edith Smith's appointment was not a fait accompli for female equality—far from it, in fact. It is worth remembering that women were not admitted to policing on the same pay, terms and conditions as men until the sex discrimination and equal pay acts of the 1970s.

It is positive to learn that today almost 40 per cent of recruits at the Scottish Police College are women. I hope that more women will pursue policing as a career in the future.

Scottish Police Authority data from December 2014 show that women are underrepresented in senior posts across the single force. I do not seek to diminish in any way the achievements to which Linda Fabiani referred. However, I note that women make up 17 per cent of superintendents; 10 per cent of detective superintendents; 24 per cent of chief superintendents; and 13 per cent of detective chief superintendents. We cannot feel complacent about those figures. I am not advocating that women should be promoted on anything other than merit, but the figures raise some questions.

Women are now involved—at least to some extent—in every aspect of Scottish policing, and we must ensure that the environment encourages able female officers to stay so that they can move up the ranks. The survey that was published last week indicated a somewhat disquieting element with regard to officers who want to leave the force in the next three years. The intake of more women recruits will go some way towards redressing the existing gender imbalance in the future, but the long-term impact will be lost if staff leave. There is therefore a huge obligation on the SPA chairman, Andrew Flanagan, and the new chief constable of Police Scotland to be sensitive to the needs of staff and to create a working environment that fosters long-term careers for all officers, regardless of gender.

As Linda Fabiani indicated, and as her motion confirms, women in the police force have a distinguished record of service in Scotland. We need to look at the situation across the board, because we can do better, and we owe it to Edith Smith to try to achieve that aim.

17:16

Graeme Pearson (South Scotland) (Lab): I thank Linda Fabiani for giving me the opportunity to support her motion for debate this evening. I begin by acknowledging the murder in Merseyside of Dave Phillips, who leaves behind two beautiful daughters, a wife and family, and friends. He made the ultimate sacrifice that can be offered by a police officer in merely performing his duty.

That death comes barely three years after Fiona Bone and Nicola Hughes were murdered in September 2012. Both police officers were mercilessly gunned down as they, too, performed their duties on behalf of the public. For every family and every friend who has suffered personally the impact of a police officer's death on duty, the distress of this week's news will once

more kick off the impact of their own individual tragedies.

In that light, it is particularly poignant that we are celebrating 100 years of women in the police service across Britain. Much has been delivered by women officers in that time, but much more needs attention in order to ensure that policing in Scotland, as elsewhere in the UK, is capable of enabling and empowering women to play their full part.

In 1970 I arrived at Maitland Street police office in Glasgow to begin policing in the north and east end of the city. My shift comprised entirely men, who were mostly veterans of the war. Many were of Highland extraction, and they were all huge in build and focused on street duties rather than administrative duties. A few women operated in the police station as officers. A couple were attached to the CID, and occasionally I caught sight of a policewoman from headquarters, where—I was told—an entire policewomen department existed, although merely a handful of women were based there. At that time, the department was led by a formidable woman whose reputation went before her, and with whom no one tangled. The department dealt with missing persons, sex crimes involving children and a host of caring needs to which the police responded.

By 1974, women detective constables and—very unusually—women sergeants were becoming more visible in the service. At that point I was transferred to the drugs squad, to be told that I would “neighbour”—which is shorthand in the service for “work alongside”—a woman detective constable. Her name was Brenda Flynn. As a man in a male-dominated culture, working on the streets, I duly felt horrified at the prospect. However, in the coming days, weeks and months I learned how fortunate I was to have a woman as a colleague, and how lucky I was to have a colleague as professional as Brenda Flynn.

The experience was an early lesson to me: it is not the gender of a person that matters; it is their value, commitment and professionalism that prove their worth to the public. In the intervening three decades, I have met a significant number of impressive women who no longer operate specifically as women officers, but as part of the main stream of police officers. The service now relies on women to deliver. Two years ago women represented 37 per cent of the Scottish police service. It could not operate without women in its ranks.

The debate is brief, but I could not finish without saying that women still have much to do to maximise the benefits that they bring, and men in the service have much to do to enable that to occur. In promoted ranks, representation of women falls dramatically from 20 per cent to 9 per

cent as we move up through the ranks. As with the armed services, the police service has a chequered history of managing the issues that arise from men and women working together in what was previously seen as a man's world.

Fiona Bone and Nicola Hughes, along with others, should put an end to the notion that policing is a man's world. Policing is a complex and challenging environment that needs all the skills that men and women bring to it. I commend Linda Fabiani for raising the issue and I hope that women around the country will take pride in those who represent them in the police service.

17:21

Alison McInnes (North East Scotland) (LD): I also thank Linda Fabiani for securing a debate marking 100 years of women in policing. At the time when the first female officer with full arrest powers was appointed in England, across the United Kingdom about 4,000 women were already taking on policing functions as voluntary patrols. The appointment of Edith Smith, however, started a new chapter when a lot of opportunities were opening up to women due to the human cost of the first world war.

I am pleased to note that one of the first women officers in Scotland, Jean Thomas, was from my region, and joined Dundee City Police shortly after Edith Smith was appointed. I am less pleased to note that years later, the chief constable of Dundee was forced to publicly deny that he had a woman working as a constable. Times have certainly changed.

As we know, at the very beginning, women officers were paid less, were required to leave the force after they married and had separate service titles to men, but they were there and were beginning to make a difference. Many things have changed in the relatively short time since then. Today in Scotland we have a female deputy chief constable, in Rose Fitzpatrick. As other members have said, this year's intake at the Scottish Police College in Tulliallan was nearly 40 per cent women. In September, Laura Collins was named special constable of the year after putting in a phenomenal 1,200 hours of volunteering. Women are now able to do any job within the police service and are treated as equals to their male counterparts in their terms and conditions of employment.

Challenges remain, however. According to figures that were published by the Scottish Police Authority in 2014, only 31 per cent of recruits were women. In a Scottish police staff survey, which was published just last week, 63 per cent of female respondents said that they felt like they are being treated fairly at work, which means that

more than a third of the women who responded do not feel that way. We should be concerned about that.

Although I recognise that women hold such diverse roles as firearms officer, counterterrorism officer and investigator, there is still a way to go. The Scottish women's development forum, an organisation that aims to tackle the gender gap within Police Scotland's ranks, estimated that in 2014, only 29 per cent of all police officers were women, only 20 per cent of promoted posts were taken up by women, and only 36 per cent of special constables were women. The numbers clearly show that we need to do more to encourage and foster women to take up posts within the police, and to help them to rise through the ranks. That means tackling the biases in the system. Workplace policies and practices need to be reviewed to ensure that the police service is a fair place to work for everyone. As in other sectors, the need for flexible working is particularly important for women officers who have caring responsibilities.

It is also worth recognising the importance of female civilian staff. According to SWDF figures, 62 per cent of that employee group in 2014 were women. The civilian staff bring specialist expertise, allowing police officers to spend more time engaging with their communities. Civilian staff provide an important part of the service and have a crucial function in the operation of our police force.

It is therefore shocking that, according to the figures that were published by the SPA in 2013, a staggering 87 per cent of police service staff who receive salaries that are less than £15,000 per annum are women. In the meantime, between 60 per cent and 70 per cent of staff members receiving £65,000 and over per annum are men. The terms of employment may be equal, but the reality is not yet so.

It is so important that we make the necessary changes so that women feel that they are treated fairly. We need our police force to reflect the society that it works to protect. We need to make sure that we have women police officers who can inspire young girls to want to be involved so that we have not only a rich history but a vibrant future for women in our police force.

17:25

David Torrance (Kirkcaldy) (SNP): I thank Linda Fabiani for securing the debate in Parliament on this memorable issue.

Every day, our police force in Scotland does a remarkable job in protecting communities. It not only covers an area of more than 30,000 square miles, but last year successfully managed the

Commonwealth games and the Ryder cup. It is of great importance that the police force, in doing that job, reflects Scotland's diverse society. Looking back at its past, that has not always been the case. Traditionally, the police force was a male-dominated institution. Today, I want to recount some of the historic developments that have led to the greater inclusion of women. I also want to talk about how far the police force has come in endorsing as well as incorporating equality and diversity.

As we celebrate 100 years of women in policing, I believe that it is crucial to remember those brave women who set important milestones for future generations. After Edith Smith became the first female officer in the UK, the first two Scottish officers, Emily Miller and Jean Thomas, were appointed by the City of Glasgow Police and Dundee City Police between 1915 and 1918. That certainly marked a remarkable turning point for women.

However, segregation was very common within the police force in terms of distinct tasks, rank structures and even separate offices. Nevertheless, from the late 1960s onwards, several important changes have taken place. Since 1968, policewomen have been able to remain in their posts after marriage and since the 1980s, women have been allowed to wear trousers as part of their uniform. The Equal Pay Act in 1970 established the principle of equal pay for women. Most notably, in 1976, women police ceased to exist as a separate body and were integrated into the general police system.

In recent years, an increasing number of women have assumed leadership positions within the police force. Norma Graham was appointed Scotland's first female chief constable at Fife Constabulary in 2008. Since 2012, Rose Fitzpatrick has served as deputy chief constable of Police Scotland.

I am delighted to say that Police Scotland is fully committed to the principles of equality and diversity. With the formal establishment of Police Scotland in 2013, the values of integrity, fairness and respect have assumed a key role in the delivery of its services, which aspire to reach high quality, consistency and accessibility in order to promote justice for all.

To monitor how well Police Scotland integrates those values and principles into the organisation's everyday work, a high-level action plan—"Equality and Diversity in Police Scotland 2013"—was created. That report allows Police Scotland to look forward and enshrines how equality and diversity will influence its services.

Additionally, an Association of Chief Police Officers in Scotland working group—the Scottish

women's development forum—was formed. A main part of its remit is to advise Police Scotland, the Scottish Police Authority and the Scottish Government on issues of gender equality in the service. Its membership is open to everyone who seeks to improve the working environment in the police force to enable all staff members to reach their full potential. Each year, the Scottish women's development forum pays tribute to the input, efforts and achievements of women officers and staff members. The award ceremony highlights the diversity of excellent initiatives, as well as the breadth of roles that are undertaken by women in the police force.

In celebrating the 100th anniversary of women in policing, we can look proudly at recent statistics. In 2014, 29 per cent of police officers were women—an increase of 11 per cent since 2003. That number is predicted to rise in the future, as nearly 40 per cent of all new recruits are women. Twenty per cent of promoted posts were given to women. That shows that there is still room for improvement. However, I believe that those statistics indicate that no rank is now unattainable for women in the police force.

I am confident in saying that those developments show clearly how far the police force has come in transforming the organisation and taking it towards achieving greater equality. It is an honour to speak about our police force and especially about women in policing. I wish all members of Police Scotland and the Scottish Police Authority the best of luck in their future endeavours.

17:30

Elaine Murray (Dumfriesshire) (Lab): I, too, congratulate Linda Fabiani on securing the debate. It is notable that the first female officers were appointed during the first world war. It is often the case that, during times of war when men are away, women get opportunities that would not otherwise have been offered to them. We should remember that, when the first women police officers were appointed, we did not even have female suffrage—women did not have the vote. As Alison McInnes said, there had already been women police volunteers and the voluntary women's patrols in England at the beginning of the war. Interestingly, they were often headed up by suffragettes. That was part of the demonstration of women's ability to do the same jobs as men and their worthiness of being given the suffrage.

As members have mentioned, Emily Miller joined the City of Glasgow Police in September 1915 and Jean Thomas, the second woman to join the police, joined Dundee City Police in 1918. However, there had apparently previously been a court sister in Aberdeen in 1914. A lot less is

known about that lady, but she had many of the same responsibilities as a police officer. By all accounts, she was a very formidable lady—apparently, she weighed something like 18 stone and was quite capable of picking up recalcitrant male offenders and throwing them into the dock if necessary.

As Linda Fabiani said, there was considerable public resistance to the idea of female officers. In addition to the chief constable in Dundee denying that he had a female officer, the town clerk of Stirling around that time said something along the lines of, “We have no need of them and we do not want them.” People did not want women officers out there. However, things are much better 100 years on. We celebrated 100 years of women in policing in June, and women now comprise about a third of the force.

In Dumfries and Galloway, there were two events to celebrate the centenary—one in Port Rodie in Stranraer and the other in Cornwall Mount in Dumfries. As it happened, on 26 June, I had a meeting arranged with the V division commander, Mike Leslie. When I arrived at Cornwall Mount, Mike told me that I would be interested in the exhibition that was on, and he asked Sergeant Nicola Robison, who had organised the exhibition, to show me round it. It was absolutely fascinating, particularly as I was shown round by a serving police officer and spoke to other police officers. There was a lot of memorabilia from the legacy Dumfries and Galloway Constabulary museum, with photographs showing women police officers in knee-length skirts. When I observed those, I thought how difficult it must have been to undertake some of the duties of a police officer while wearing such a skirt.

There was also a photograph purporting to be of the court sister in Aberdeen—the one who used to hurl people into the dock. She was sitting in a long dress and smoking a clay pipe. I have to say that I certainly would not cross her if I met her anywhere near a court. There was an array of equipment, some of which I picked up and found to be pretty heavy. People have to be pretty fit to be a police officer. They no longer have to be tall—someone my height could probably be a police officer nowadays—but they have to be fit as well as very courageous. The exhibition was well attended. One of the purposes was to allow former female police officers to come back and meet their colleagues and have a chat about their time in the force.

As members have said, we must not forget that women are underrepresented, particularly at senior levels. It is important that role models of women police officers, particularly senior women police officers, are promoted. Of course, the post

of chief constable of Police Scotland is up for filling. I have suggested to Assistant Chief Constable Kate Thomson, who comes from Dumfries and Galloway, that she should put her hat in the ring. She did not say that she would not, so I am hopeful that she will apply.

I wonder how many little girls in the early stages of life say that they would like to be a police officer. Obviously, people say that later on in life, but I would like to see the sort of gender equality that would allow young girls, as much as young boys, to aspire to be a police officer.

17:35

The Minister for Youth and Women’s Employment (Annabelle Ewing): I start by paying tribute to all our police officers, who provide a sterling service to each and every one of us and our communities day in and day out. In that regard, I, too, on behalf of all my colleagues, offer sincere condolences to the family, friends and colleagues of PC David Phillips.

I thank Linda Fabiani for securing this debate on the important milestone of 100 years of women in policing, and I thank all members for their interesting contributions. I had the privilege of speaking at a passing-out parade at the Scottish Police College in Tulliallan in June, at which we celebrated 100 years of women in policing. I am also aware that each of the 14 divisions in Police Scotland have held local events to celebrate this landmark year, and we heard about the successful event that was held in East Kilbride, in Linda Fabiani’s constituency, in June.

The history of women in policing shows that the integration of women into all aspects of the profession has taken many years, as many members have highlighted. New recruits to Police Scotland enter a completely different service to their volunteer counterparts 100 years ago, but we should not forget that it was not that long ago—in fact, it was the 1980s—when female officers were still restricted to wearing skirts and carrying handbags. Progress has been slow and not without obstacles.

A point that was not mentioned tonight is the fact that, until 1937, female police officers were barred from taking fingerprints. That struck me as odd, as did the curious case of the chief constable in Dundee in 1922 denying the very existence of his female constable. Why was that? We need more information about that. Of course, we heard from Elaine Murray that it was not just Dundee, and that Stirling was at it, too. I do not know what was going on there, but by the time that Graeme Pearson started his service in 1970—in Glasgow, I believe—we had moved on some 48 years and were at least recognising the role of women police

officers, albeit there were a number of significant restrictions on what they could do.

I know that Police Scotland fully supports diversity in its workforce and aims to embed equality and diversity into every aspect of the service, allowing all female officers to have the same opportunity to develop and progress in the service. As a result, thankfully, women now play a pivotal role in all aspects of policing, albeit that more needs to be done. That progress has been largely due to women challenging the status quo, and we should pay tribute to the female officers who have taken personal and professional risks to stand up for their rights, and the rights of other women—a point that was referenced by Annabel Goldie and David Torrance.

Over the past century, women have increasingly taken on the range of responsibilities and demands of policing and have sought greater access to specialist roles and the freedom to seek promotion to the highest ranks. We should recognise that the freedoms that female officers enjoy today have been hard won, whether through sheer determination and persistence or through court challenges.

Police Scotland recognises that, to gain the full potential from new recruits and to deliver a service that truly reflects the diverse communities that it serves, it must have accessible recruitment options and working practices that, as Alison McInnes highlighted, allow flexible working and access to all aspects of its work. In that regard, there are now three women in the Police Scotland executive team, and women have the opportunity to join any of the specialist units

At the parade that I attended in June, 37 per cent of the new recruits were female, and there are currently around 5,150 female officers in Police Scotland. That figure represents approximately 29 per cent of serving officers. Police Scotland also recognises the challenges that it faces within our communities, but its commitment to mainstreaming equality matches the Scottish Government's commitment to work within our powers to help women fulfil their potential in the labour market.

In the past year, female employment in general has reached record levels in Scotland. It is now the second highest in the European Union, but we are not complacent. We know that there is much work to be done to tackle occupational segregation and the continuing pay gap. We are committed to tackling inequality in all its shapes and forms in Scotland. Harnessing the potential of everyone in society makes us not only stronger but a much more successful society, so the Government will continue to take action to ensure that more women are able to make informed

choices about careers and pursue those careers successfully throughout their working lives.

I acknowledge in particular the efforts of Dorothy Parker and Barbara McNally, one of whom is a constituent of Ms Fabiani's. I also acknowledge the stories that they were able to tell of their time in the force and the actions that they had to take to ensure that their progression in the force happened. Although their senior officers did not deny their existence, they still had to take much action to make their way in the force. I commend them for the service that they provided to our communities.

I recognise the enormous contribution that women have made in policing over the past 100 years. I again thank Linda Fabiani for ensuring that the Parliament duly recognises that milestone. I have no doubt that, in the years ahead, women will continue to make a powerful contribution to Scotland's policing and many more women will progress to the very top of Police Scotland—where they should be, in my opinion as Minister for Youth and Women's Employment.

Meeting closed at 17:41.

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