



OFFICIAL REPORT
AITHISG OIFIGEIL

Meeting of the Parliament

Thursday 29 June 2017

Session 5



The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

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Scottish Parliament

Thursday 29 June 2017

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

General Question Time

Forestry Commission (Trade Unions)

1. **Oliver Mundell (Dumfriesshire) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government when ministers last met representatives of Forestry Commission trade unions and what issues were discussed. (S5O-01185)

The Minister for Transport and the Islands (Humza Yousaf): Fergus Ewing, the cabinet secretary, last met representatives of Forestry Commission trade unions on 10 May 2017. The meeting was arranged to share with the unions decisions about future organisational structures, in advance of the public announcement that accompanied the publication of the Forestry and Land Management (Scotland) Bill on 11 May.

Oliver Mundell: Is the minister aware of forestry staff's concerns about the way in which the Forestry Commission's current appraisal system is working?

Humza Yousaf: Yes, the Government is aware of some of those concerns. Subsequent to that conversation a meeting was arranged—I think that it was on 8 June—with senior management of Forest Enterprise Scotland and the trade unions.

I will say a few things to give Oliver Mundell some element of reassurance. First, an aspect of the review of deer management in the national forest estate will be to identify core competencies and complete a skills gap analysis for wildlife rangers, wildlife rangers' managers, deer management officers and forest management officers. We should give that review the time and space needed for it to be undertaken.

I know that the relationship between FES, FCS and the trade unions is very good, positive and constructive. If Oliver Mundell or other members wish to raise further issues, the Government will impress on FCS and FES the need to listen closely to those concerns.

Gail Ross (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP): What guarantees can the minister give that existing skills and knowledge will be retained during the transfer of staff?

Humza Yousaf: A range of things can and will be done. I will try to give Gail Ross some reassurances on that.

First, we have tried to allay some of those fears by confirming that there will be no compulsory redundancies in the Forestry Commission and FES as a result of the completion of the devolution of forestry. All staff in FCS and FES will be in the scope of transfers to new structures.

Some of the important reassurances that we can give are around the local skills that Gail Ross talks about. I can confirm that the local office network will remain, ensuring continued focus on local engagement and knowledge.

Gail Ross will probably be aware that the transfer is being taken forward under COSOP—the Cabinet Office statement of practice—which is similar to the Transfer of Undertakings (Protection of Employment) Regulations. The rights and existing terms and conditions of staff will be protected on transfer. Any changes to that or any alignment to Scottish Government terms and conditions would very much be subject to consultation and negotiation with the union.

New Belford Hospital

2. **Kate Forbes (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on plans to build a new Belford hospital in Fort William. (S5O-01186)

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Sport (Shona Robison): NHS Highland has started work on the service redesign aspect of the project, and it is working on the clinical brief and the establishment of the service planning data for the existing services in Lochaber. It is developing a business case and undertaking an option appraisal exercise that considers how the services can be delivered, with the assumption being that the balance of care will move towards community health services. Once that work has been further progressed, the business case will be submitted to the Scottish Government for review.

Kate Forbes: In 2008, the Scottish National Party Government designated the Belford hospital as a rural general hospital, which provided additional support and services for healthcare professionals and the local community. Will the cabinet secretary assure my constituents that the current level of care will be enhanced and that the new Belford will be retained as a rural general hospital?

Shona Robison: The replacement for the Belford will be a rural general hospital and its services will be provided as part of a wider redesign across Lochaber. NHS Highland will look to enhance the current level of local services where it is safe and sustainable to do so. I will be very happy to keep Kate Forbes updated on the progress being made.

Donald Cameron (Highlands and Islands) (Con): One of the issues that local groups in Lochaber have raised with me is the very slow progress that is being made. For example, they speak of a series of cancelled meetings. Will the cabinet secretary impress on NHS Highland the need for early and regular engagement with the local community and, in particular, the steering group?

Shona Robison: Yes, I will do that. It is important that local communities are engaged in the discussions going forward, but I am sure that Donald Cameron will appreciate that this is quite a complex project. There are procedures laid out, whereby the business case that is submitted must be robust. The capital investment group will look forward to receiving the business case.

I will be happy to keep Mr Cameron updated, and I will relay his comment to ensure that local people are kept fully informed.

Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab): Lochaber—Fort William, in particular—is regarded as the outdoor capital of Europe. The Belford hospital has built up a lot of expertise in treating accidents associated with outdoor sport. Can the cabinet secretary reassure people that it will keep and, indeed, develop that expertise?

Shona Robison: Yes, I certainly want to make sure that that happens. I appreciate how many major mountain biking and other outdoor events take place in the area. The nature of some of those events is such that some people who have taken part in them have suffered accidents and been taken to the local hospital, where they have received excellent treatment. That is a very important aspect of the service that the Belford provides.

I will relay Rhoda Grant's comment, but I certainly see the new hospital maintaining that high level of care for accidents and emergencies that arise as a result of such events.

Public Sector Pay Policy

3. **Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green):** To ask the Scottish Government what recent discussions it has had with unions regarding the future of its public sector pay policy. (S5O-01187)

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance and the Constitution (Derek Mackay): The First Minister and I regularly meet trade unions to discuss a range of matters, including public sector pay policy. The First Minister has already indicated that the existing pay cap is becoming increasingly unsustainable, and we will be looking to take a different approach in the 2018-19 public sector pay policy. As in previous years, we will engage with unions during the development of the policy, both at ministerial level and at official level, and we

expect to publish it as part of the draft budget towards the end of the year.

Patrick Harvie: I am pleased to hear the minister say that the pay cap is unsustainable and that the Government has indicated that it intends to move away from it, but I think that we all deserve to hear a little more detail. When pay restraint was first introduced, it was seen as a short-term measure to avoid job losses in the face of United Kingdom Government cuts. Since then, pay levels have been eroded year after year, and the Scottish Government has gained the powers on taxation and borrowing to allow it to make different choices from those that the UK Government has forced on it in the past.

Now that the Scottish Government has those options, will it at least commit to ensuring that everybody who earns the average full-time salary or below will get an above-inflation increase in the next year? Is that not a basic minimum that we have a right to expect?

Derek Mackay: Patrick Harvie is right to say that many of the decisions have been taken in the context of fiscal policy that has been largely led by the UK Government. Of course, the financial position has changed as regards the economic levers we have and the choices we can make. I will consider the use of those levers as we go forward.

Yesterday, we had the latest Tory U-turn on the matter—in fact, I understand that there were a number of U-turns over the course of the day, and it was decided that the Tories' magic money tree did not extend to public sector workers. The Scottish Government has committed to lifting the pay cap. We will engage with the trade unions. I cannot make a determination today but I will, of course, engage positively with the trade unions. I have committed to having a meeting with the Scottish Trades Union Congress.

We understand the situation of people in the workforce on the lowest incomes, whose spending power has reduced as a consequence of rising inflation. That is why we have a position that will take account of the public finances and the cost of living. The First Minister has made it clear that it will not be assumed that the 1 per cent pay cap will be maintained next year or in future years.

In addition, we have targeted support at the lowest paid. Our policy diverges from UK pay policy when it comes to our position on progression and targeting support at the low-paid. Our work on the living wage, our social policies and our position on no compulsory redundancies are in sharp contrast to the policy south of the border. I look forward to positive engagement with other parties and the trade unions.

Colin Smyth (South Scotland) (Lab): Yesterday in the United Kingdom Parliament, Scottish National Party MPs who are not in power at Westminster voted in favour of a Labour motion to scrap the pay cap on public sector workers. Can the cabinet secretary explain to those public sector workers in Scotland why, in the Scottish Parliament, where the SNP is in power, every SNP MSP voted against a Labour motion that read:

“This Parliament believes that the NHS pay cap should be scrapped and that NHS staff should be given a real terms pay rise”?

Derek Mackay: Colin Smyth clearly did not listen to a word I said in my answer to the question I was asked by Patrick Harvie. The Scottish Government will take into account inflation in the future pay policy. Remember that what the Labour Party proposed was basic rate tax rises for the workers of Scotland, including public sector workers. We will take a reasonable approach that absolutely recognises that the time is up for the 1 per cent pay cap. Not only will the SNP commit to that, but we will do it.

Road Works on Motorways (Meetings)

4. Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what recent discussions it has had with BEAR Scotland and Transport Scotland regarding the management of road works on motorways. (S5O-01188)

The Minister for Transport and the Islands (Humza Yousaf): BEAR Scotland manages and maintains the M90 motorway under the trunk road term maintenance operating company contracts with Scottish ministers. Transport Scotland holds monthly meetings with all its operating companies, including BEAR Scotland, to discuss the programming of works, including road works on motorways, in each of the units. Further meetings are arranged as necessary.

Liz Smith: In the minister's next set of discussions, will he include some discussion about the importance of gantry signs and the relevance of the information on them? As he knows, the M90 has had understandable delays because of the Queensferry crossing, however, there have also been considerable difficulties around the Kinross road works where many of the gantry signs have not been appropriate and have not had the relevant information about the extent of the road works and the decisions that drivers have to make. Will the minister include those points in his next discussions?

Humza Yousaf: I will. I thank Liz Smith for raising the issue, as she has raised it at previous question times. I can confirm that a number of upgrades to our variable messaging signs are taking place, and those will provide more functionality. It is not just about variable

messaging signs; it should also be about getting information out to local radio stations, over social media and so on. We are always working with the operating companies to see what more we can do to give drivers and road users as much notice as possible, particularly when disruption is inevitable because essential road works are taking place.

I give Liz Smith a commitment to raise the issue at the next meeting that I or my officials have with BEAR Scotland.

NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde (Meetings)

5. Sandra White (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government when it last met representatives of NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde. (S5O-01189)

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Sport (Shona Robison): Ministers and Scottish Government officials regularly meet representatives of all health boards, including NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde.

Sandra White: Now that the Scottish Government has unveiled its dementia strategy, which is very welcome, is it the Government's intention to encourage NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde and other NHS bodies to engage with the dementia carer voices project's "You can make a difference" campaign, led by the Health and Social Care Alliance Scotland—which has campaigned tirelessly on behalf of people who are affected by dementia?

Shona Robison: I welcome the launch of the dementia strategy, which builds on the considerable good work that has already been done, particularly by third sector organisations. The Government is pleased to support the dementia carer voices project's work, and we are providing funding until April 2018. We recognise the importance of leadership by local NHS boards in taking action to support that work, and I will reiterate that to them. In partnership with the Health and Social Care Alliance, work is under way with all NHS boards to develop a programme for that work. Events have already taken place in NHS Ayrshire and Arran and NHS Western Isles.

Annie Wells (Glasgow) (Con): Statistics that have been published this week show that Glasgow royal infirmary has the worst-performing accident and emergency department in Scotland, with only 87.9 per cent of patients being seen within four hours, against the 95 per cent target that was set by the Scottish Government. What action will the cabinet secretary take to improve waiting times at the hospital?

Shona Robison: A and E performance has improved significantly over the past few months, due to a lot of work taking place with boards on unscheduled care performance and work with the

Royal College of Emergency Medicine. The actions that are being taken in every hospital have resulted in improvements in A and E performance, including at the Queen Elizabeth university hospital. Glasgow royal infirmary has faced some challenges over the past few weeks, which is why support work that is tailored to that hospital is under way. We want to ensure that the work that has begun to produce results at the Queen Elizabeth, particularly over the last few weeks, is supporting staff in the Glasgow royal infirmary to do the same.

I hope that Annie Wells will find it within herself to acknowledge the progress that has been made on A and E performance across Scotland, which is now significantly better than performance elsewhere in these islands. Perhaps she could welcome that occasionally.

Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab): At least a dozen service reviews are in train, which is causing continuing uncertainty at the Vale of Leven hospital. Maternity service proposals are on pause, and this week 300 people attended a public meeting expressing real concern about cuts to out-of-hours services. The cabinet secretary tells me that she is committed to the Vale of Leven hospital, but when will she tell that to Greater Glasgow and Clyde NHS Board, and when will she come and listen to my local community?

Shona Robison: The health board and I are committed to the Vale of Leven hospital. Of course, it was the Scottish National Party Government that saved the Vale of Leven hospital from the closure that would undoubtedly have happened under the Government in which Jackie Baillie was a minister.

The chief executive and the chair of Greater Glasgow and Clyde NHS Board are working hard to maintain out-of-hours services, but it is challenging. As Jackie Baillie will know from her discussions with the chair, there is a challenge in respect of general practitioners' willingness to work out of hours. We need to work through that, so I hope that Jackie Baillie will help to encourage local GPs to go on to out-of-hours rotas. I am sure that she will do that, because she will want to be constructive in these matters.

I would have thought that Jackie Baillie would welcome the pause in the review of maternity services and that she would want NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde to examine delivery of maternity services across the area and, therefore, to pause progress on the proposals for the Vale of Leven hospital and Inverclyde royal infirmary. Perhaps, occasionally, Jackie Baillie could welcome actions that the board takes to ensure that the right decisions are made.

Review of Student Support

6. Iain Gray (East Lothian) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on the review of student support. (S5O-01190)

The Minister for Further Education, Higher Education and Science (Shirley-Anne Somerville): The independent review of student support, which is chaired by Jayne-Anne Gadhia, has reached its midway point. A consultation to gather a wide range of views on how students across Scotland access, receive, manage and understand the support that they receive will soon be published. I look forward to receiving the review's final report in the autumn.

Iain Gray: Figures that were published a couple of weeks ago show that, on average, the debt with which Scottish students leave university is now twice what it was in 2007, when the Scottish National Party came to power promising to abolish the debt altogether. Will the review go any way to righting that wrong?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: The aim of the review is to assess the effectiveness of the support system for all students in further and higher education. Its entire purpose is to ensure that the system is equitable and fair, and that it supports all students, especially those who face disadvantage. The review is independent of the Government, so it will come to its own conclusions on that.

I am afraid that I will take absolutely no lessons from Iain Gray on the issue, because it was his party that introduced tuition fees in higher education in Scotland. When students across Scotland look south of the border to England, where student debt in higher education is now on average £32,000, they will be glad and thankful that the Scottish Government ensured that that did not happen here, and they will look to the Labour Party to admit that if it had been in power in Scotland, students here would also have been facing that level of debt. Thanks to the SNP and our continued support for free tuition, that will not happen here.

Offensive Behaviour at Football and Threatening Communications (Scotland) Act 2012

7. James Kelly (Glasgow) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government what its position is on calls to repeal the Offensive Behaviour at Football and Threatening Communications (Scotland) Act 2012. (S5O-01191)

The Minister for Community Safety and Legal Affairs (Annabelle Ewing): Offensive, hateful and prejudicial behaviour associated with football, and online threats of violence and hatred,

continue to be a problem. I share the concerns expressed by equality groups that repealing the 2012 act in the absence of a viable alternative will send entirely the wrong message to the public—that expressions of prejudice and hatred at football matches are somehow condoned and decriminalised.

Police and prosecutors need appropriate tools to tackle hate crime, which is why I commissioned the independent review of hate crime legislation in Scotland. I look forward to hearing the outcomes of the review next year, and I remain opposed to repealing the 2012 act.

James Kelly: It is clear, following the consultation on my proposed member's bill, that there is massive support for repeal of the 2012 act. It is also clear that there is a majority in Parliament in favour of repealing the act. With that in mind, will the minister agree to work with me on a sensible approach to repealing the act? Will she also work with parties in Parliament and groups outside it on developing a positive approach to behaviour at football matches and tackling sectarianism?

Annabelle Ewing: This Government stands on the side of the tens of thousands of football fans throughout Scotland who simply want to go to a football match with their family and friends and not be surrounded by tainted, prejudicial and hateful behaviour.

I have to say that I find it very strange indeed that, at a time when our society faces so many challenges, Labour's number 1 priority for legislation is to repeal the Offensive Behaviour at Football and Threatening Communications (Scotland) Act 2012 without offering a viable alternative. What a strange set of priorities, and what contempt those priorities display for people who are targeted by hateful, prejudicial and abusive behaviour.

First Minister's Question Time

12:01

Engagements

1. Ruth Davidson (Edinburgh Central) (Con): To ask the First Minister what engagements she has planned for the rest of the day. (S5F-01442)

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

Ruth Davidson: Last week, I asked the First Minister three times whether her Government had contacted the European Commission to seek an extension to the deadline on farm payments, and three times she refused to answer. We now know that her Government had contacted the Commission to do so, and we also know that the First Minister was aware of that. Why did she try to hide it when she came before the Parliament last Thursday?

The First Minister: What I said in the chamber last Thursday was that we continue to discuss contingencies with the European Commission. That is what a request for an extension is: a contingency that we are seeking to put in place. [*Interruption.*]

I do not want anyone, particularly those who are working to deliver the system, to think that we are in any way relying on getting an extension, so that we take our foot off the pedal in any way in delivering the payments. That is why last week I stressed—and this week I stress again—what we are doing to deliver the pillar 1 payments by the deadline, which is midnight tomorrow.

Let me give the Parliament an update on that work. Rapid progress is being made on a daily basis. To put that into context, two weeks ago, on 16 June, 58 per cent of payments, by value, had been made; by last Friday, that had risen to 76 per cent; and this morning, it was 82 per cent, which means that £347 million of pillar 1 payments have already been made.

The last point that I make—because this is what matters to farmers and crofters across the country—is that all farmers who are eligible were offered a loan. The vast majority of farmers took up the offer of a loan payment and so received 80 per cent of the amount that they were due last November, pending payment of their full payment. This is not a case of farmers not getting the money that they are due.

This Government will continue—just as I said last week—to make sure that the payments are made and that farmers get the support that they deserve.

Ruth Davidson: We have all just heard what members made of that answer.

There is a reason why I am raising this again today. It is because there is a principle at stake about the conduct of ministers in this Parliament and about the transparency of this Government. [*Interruption.*] I asked the First Minister a simple question in the chamber last week and she refused to tell Parliament what she knew to be the truth.

Let me read out what the ministerial code of conduct says:

“It is of paramount importance that Ministers give accurate and truthful information to the Parliament, correcting any inadvertent error at the earliest opportunity.”

Does the First Minister think that her conduct and the conduct of her ministers on this matter in the past two weeks has met that standard?

The First Minister: Yes, I do. Last week, I said that we were discussing with the European Commission contingencies around the issue. That is exactly what we were doing; and it is what we continue to do. Seeking an extension in case we require it is exactly that: a contingency. What I stressed last week is exactly what I will stress this week—and with the greatest of respect to Ruth Davidson, I think that this is what farmers the length and breadth of the country are interested in: we are working flat out to deliver the payments.

I noticed that Ruth Davidson did not comment on the substance of the issue, which is, first, that we are seeing rapid daily progress in making the payments; and, secondly, that in November last year, we put in place a system of loans for farmers so that those who are eligible for pillar 1 payments actually got 80 per cent of all the money that they were due—that is something that we did at the specific request of the National Farmers Union.

We will continue to deal with the substance of the issue and to make sure that farmers get the money that they deserve. We will get on with the job and leave Ruth Davidson to continue playing politics.

Ruth Davidson: I and my party have been pursuing this Government’s failures on the substance of the issue for three years and it is still not making the payments on time.

Here is what the First Minister apparently thinks is accurate and truthful conduct. On Tuesday last week, Fergus Ewing told the Scottish National Party Cabinet, in private, that he would be applying to the European Commission for an extension to the deadline on farm payments. On Wednesday, he wrote in private to the European Commission to seek that extension. That afternoon, he was asked in Parliament to confirm whether that was the case and he failed to do so.

On Thursday, I stood here and repeatedly asked the First Minister to confirm that, and she refused to answer the question. It took journalists emailing the EC itself for the facts to come out.

Last week, the First Minister had to apologise to farmers for messing up their payments again—that was the substance of the issue. Now she owes Parliament an apology for not being straight about that. Will she give it?

The First Minister: In Parliament last week, I made it clear that we were discussing contingencies with the European Commission. That is what we were doing last week; it is what we continue to do this week. That is what seeking an extension is. We hope that we do not require to use it, but it is a contingency in case we do.

The most important message that I wanted to send last week—and the message that I want to send this week—is this: we are working flat out to get the payments into the bank accounts of farmers. We are seeing progress being made on that on a daily basis, up to the deadline, which is midnight tomorrow.

The point that Ruth Davidson never wants to recognise is the point that I have now made twice about loan payments to farmers. We took action to make sure that, notwithstanding the difficulties that we have encountered with the system, farmers are actually getting the bulk of the money that they are due. That is the kind of action that farmers expect to see, and it is the kind of action that people across Scotland expect to see, from this Government.

Ruth Davidson mentioned apologies. There is an apology due to the people of Scotland this week from Ruth Davidson for allowing her members of Parliament at Westminster to do two things. First, she should apologise for allowing them to sit back while Scotland was denied the same extra funding that went to Northern Ireland. Secondly, she should apologise for the MPs in the House of Commons last night who voted to block a pay rise for public sector workers. Perhaps that is the apology that people in Scotland want to hear.

Ruth Davidson: Recess cannot come soon enough for the First Minister. We have just seen a First Minister whose first response to failure is to try to hide it and who then stands up and asks for applause when she tries to fix her own mess. This week, we heard a message to voters that said, “Let us just ignore what they said when they took 500,000 votes off us. Let us just ignore the fact that they took 21 seats. Let us just double down on our plans. And let us just ask for applause when we try to fix up a mess that we keep making.” It is not good enough.

Later this afternoon, we will have a debate on the findings of the commission on parliamentary reform. That commission, which was made up of MSPs and experts, took evidence on the workings of the Parliament and how we need to improve them. Here is what it says:

“Inaccurate or poor answers damage the reputation of Parliament ... and ... damage people’s trust in Parliament.”

If that is the case, on this episode, does the First Minister not realise that she and her Cabinet are guilty on both counts?

The First Minister: No, I do not. I have already set out exactly what the position on that is. If Ruth Davidson really wants to talk about a lack of transparency in answers given to a Parliament, perhaps she will go and watch the video of Theresa May in the House of Commons yesterday refusing to answer the simple question: did the Secretary of State for Scotland lobby for Scotland to get the same money that went to Northern Ireland? Yes or no?

Perhaps Ruth Davidson will answer that question, because the fact is that no amount of camouflage will hide the point that, while she rides along on her one-trick pony, going on and on about a referendum, her MPs are selling Scotland down the river. They sold Scotland down the river when it came to £3 billion of extra funding and they sold Scotland down the river when it came to public sector workers. When it comes to Ruth Davidson, it is all mouth and no trousers—camouflage or otherwise. She should be ashamed of herself.

Engagements

2. Kezia Dugdale (Lothian) (Lab): To ask the First Minister what engagements she has planned for the rest of the week. (S5F-01438)

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

Kezia Dugdale: After a decade in charge of Scottish education, last night, the Scottish National Party voted for unwanted school reforms without any promise of additional money. They are policies straight from the 1980s of which Margaret Thatcher would have been proud. It should deeply worry the First Minister that she can only get those reforms through with Tory votes but, just before she voted with the Tories last night, her Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills told the Parliament that school funding was going up. [Interruption.]

The Presiding Officer (Ken Macintosh): Order, please. Order.

Kezia Dugdale: Was he correct to do so?

The First Minister: I think that I am correct in saying that the outturn figures for local government spending will show that spending on education has gone up.

Kezia Dugdale talks about the Government’s reforms coming without additional funding. She is downright wrong about that and, even worse, she knows that she is downright wrong about it, because the attainment fund is putting £750 million extra into schools across this parliamentary session and, this financial year, £120 million of extra funding is going directly to headteachers to allow them to take action to improve attainment in our schools. Of course, all that is happening while Labour councillors, such as those in North Lanarkshire Council, vote to get rid of classroom assistants in our schools.

Kezia Dugdale: I am delighted that the First Minister has mentioned the outturn figures. I have them in my hands. I have looked at them and, crucially, so has the Scottish Parliament information centre. I will tell her the actual numbers. Her own Government’s figures show that, this year, spending on education is going down again in real terms. Under the SNP, spending on pupils is going down again in real terms. I will tell her just how real it is.

The SNP has cut spending by hundreds of pounds on every single pupil, and it has cut spending on each secondary school pupil by more than £1,000. That is a 7 per cent cut by this SNP Government since 2010. It is not Tory reforms that our schools need; it is cold, hard cash. Why can the First Minister not see that the real problem in our education system is that our schools are skint?

The First Minister: The problem for Kezia Dugdale is that I have figures in front of me as well. Data published on 27 June shows that councils are planning to spend £144 million more on education this year than they planned to spend last year—that is 3 per cent in cash terms and 1.3 per cent in real terms. Of course, that includes the planned spend on the pupil equity fund of £120 million that I spoke about. Those are the facts.

This Government is taking tough action to reform our education system, to get more powers into the hands of headteachers and teachers and, crucially, to get more resources into their hands. I note that Kezia Dugdale does not want to address the fact that her own council colleagues in parts of Scotland are taking decisions that run directly counter to that. Perhaps Labour should get its own house in order before it comes here to criticise the Scottish Government.

Kezia Dugdale: The problem for the First Minister is that her numbers are wrong, and the independent SPICe will confirm that today. Until the First Minister commits more funding to our

schools using the powers of this Parliament, her promise that education is her top priority is utterly meaningless.

Teacher numbers are down, support staff numbers are down and class sizes are going up. I have come to the chamber time and time again to tell the First Minister that her Government has taken £1 billion from our schools. I was wrong. New figures show us that it is at least £230 million more than that—£1.23 billion has been taken out of schools on the SNP's watch.

This week, teachers are going on their summer break. Is it not the case that what they really need is a break from this Government?

The First Minister: The problem for Kezia Dugdale is that the figures that I read out are not my figures—they come from councils. They are the councils' predicted figures and I read them out as they are.

But there is a bigger problem for Kezia Dugdale in this exchange, is there not? Everything that she said ignores one important fact. I am going to point to the council that I have already mentioned twice—North Lanarkshire Council. In case people listening do not know, North Lanarkshire Council is run by Labour, supported by the Tories. It runs schools, and in its recent budget it decided two things of relevance to this discussion. First, it decided not to use the powers that it had been given to increase the council tax; it decided to freeze the council tax. Secondly, it decided to cut the number of classroom assistants—in other words, to sack the very support staff that Kezia Dugdale is talking about.

This Government will continue to invest in and reform education and to deliver the changes that our education system needs, and we will do that in spite of Labour councils across the country, not because of them.

The Presiding Officer: We have a couple of constituency questions. The first is from Pauline McNeill.

Pauline McNeill (Glasgow) (Lab): Students at the City of Glasgow College are being charged tuition fees of £428 for a third of a term if they drop out before 1 December in the academic year in question. That seems to be due to a Student Awards Agency for Scotland rule that it will not fund them. The charge is passed on to students, who are unaware of the obligation until they are pressed with a bill for which they are pursued vigorously by the college, as if it were a debt.

I appreciate that the First Minister is probably hearing about the matter for the first time, and I apologise for that. However, given the apparent unfairness of the situation, would the First Minister be prepared to look into it to see whether it is

consistent with a no-fees policy and whether it is fair to students? Students are finding that they are being pressed for the money as though it were a debt pursued by a bank or a financial institution. All that they have tried to do is go to college, when, for one reason or another—we do not know the reasons—they have had to drop out. They also lose that year of their studies.

The First Minister: I am grateful to Pauline McNeill for raising the issue with me. I am not aware of the detail or the circumstances, but if she wants to furnish me with that information—in fact, whether or not she wants to furnish me with it—I am happy to give a commitment that we will look into the matter and come back to her as soon as we have had the opportunity to do so. Our commitment to enabling all young people in Scotland to access education without having to pay fees is, as everybody knows, an absolutely solid one, and I do not want to see anything run counter to that, so I am happy to look into the matter and to come back to Pauline McNeill in due course.

Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP): I am speaking on behalf of a Syrian family—mother, father and four siblings—who were granted asylum earlier this year and are now reside in my constituency. However, one son has not come to Scotland and is trapped in Lebanon, having moved there to obtain work to provide for the family just before their move. In the process, his asylum application lapsed. Now he is trapped not only in Lebanon but in reams of red tape and in a war zone where his life is at risk. The family are distraught—they have already lost one son in the Syrian conflict. I wrote to the First Minister earlier this week, but I ask her if she will do what she can to accelerate his reapplication through what is a labyrinthine process.

The First Minister: I am grateful to Christine Grahame for writing to me earlier in the week with details of that case. I am certainly very sorry to hear about the plight of that family. I know from my own meetings with refugees from Syria of their great worry and anxiety for relatives who remain in Syria and, indeed, in neighbouring countries. Many local authorities are supporting Syrian refugees in their areas to reunite with family members, and I commend the support that they give in that process, which can be long and difficult because it involves both the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and Home Office assessment, and all the many logistical arrangements that people have to make. I hope that that family will be reunited soon. I understand that the issue might be that the registration of new refugees in Lebanon by the UNHCR has been suspended at the request of the Government of Lebanon. Nevertheless, I would be

happy to write to the Home Secretary in support of the family's case and to consider what further action we may be able to take to help them reunite as soon as possible.

Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con):

This week, we saw the Royal Navy's largest ever warship, the Queen Elizabeth, leave the dock at Rosyth to commence sea trials in the Forth and the North Sea. Will the First Minister join me in paying tribute to the workforce at Rosyth for the completion of that magnificent piece of Scottish engineering, and in wishing them well as they go on to complete the Queen Elizabeth's sister ship, the Prince of Wales?

The First Minister: Yes, I will. I commend all those at Rosyth and elsewhere in Scotland who have contributed to the construction of the Queen Elizabeth. I thank them for their efforts and wish them well as they move on to their next assignment, so I have no difficulty, for once, in agreeing with Murdo Fraser.

Cabinet (Meetings)

3. Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green): To ask the First Minister when the Cabinet will next meet. (S5F-01443)

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): The Cabinet will next meet over the summer. Since 2008, we have met 44 times the length and breadth of Scotland in 26 different local authority areas, so we intend to get out and about again over the summer recess.

Patrick Harvie: After the opening exchanges, it is perhaps difficult to remember that, once upon a time, the last First Minister's question time before summer was a moment when all party leaders struggled to find a little consensus and good will, so I offer the First Minister and her staff and members on all sides of the chamber all the best for the summer. [*Interruption.*] I am astonished, Presiding Officer, that members do not like that sentiment, even at a moment like this.

However, I would like to offer the First Minister something constructive to reflect on over the summer months. The Child Poverty (Scotland) Bill is one that should concern us all, and the report that was published today by the Scottish Government indicates that the scale of child poverty in our society is likely to worsen over the coming years as a result of tax and welfare changes that we in this Parliament no longer have to put up with or tolerate.

Last week and this week, my colleague Alison Johnstone, who sits on the committee that is scrutinising the bill, successfully moved amendments to strengthen the legislation. The amendments did not gain the support of Scottish National Party members, but they did gain the

support of all other parties on the committee. The First Minister now has a couple of months before the bill reaches its final stage. Will she give a commitment that, when the bill reaches stage 3 after the summer, the Government will not seek to reverse the progressive changes that we have made to it?

The First Minister: First, I thank Patrick Harvie for his summer greetings; I, too, wish everybody a happy and relaxing summer recess. I take no ministerial responsibility for the fact that summer appears to have disappeared completely today—let us hope that it reappears.

On the Child Poverty (Scotland) Bill, I take a very close interest in the issue of whether the commission that we create will have a statutory underpinning and I have been discussing it at length with Angela Constance. I will give a little bit of background. The Government's concern over the amendment—we will be not only thinking about this over the summer but looking to discuss it with others—was not about statutory underpinning for the commission; I personally would have no difficulty whatsoever with a commission being enshrined in statute. The concern that we had, which has been echoed in some ways by stakeholders here, is that, if that is done in this particular bill on child poverty, we will potentially restrict the commission's remit to looking only at child poverty and not at poverty more generally, which is the commission's objective. That is the issue that we are grappling with just now.

I very much hope that we can find a way forward that recognises the desire for statutory underpinning but which, in doing so, does not unduly restrict the remit of the commission, because I do not think that anybody would want that.

Patrick Harvie: The report that the Government published today clearly shows how, over the coming years, the income of families with children in particular will be hit hardest. We should be bold in ensuring that the legislation that we pass is as strong as it can be.

I once again urge the First Minister and her colleagues in the Cabinet to consider retaining and respecting the amendments that have been passed by the committee, rather than seeking to reverse them. One of the amendments merely calls on the Government to keep the door open to the option of a top-up to child benefit—it does not even insist that the Government exercises that option. The research is clear that a £5 top-up to child benefit would remove 30,000 children from relative poverty—that is a 14 per cent reduction. Can the First Minister confirm that the option is open, and that the door is not being closed to the policy choice of a top-up to child benefit? That

would enable us to use the powers that this Parliament now has for an objective that we should all share, which is to reduce—and, we hope, to eliminate—child poverty in Scotland.

The First Minister: First, the bill is bold. It will, when it is passed—as we hope it will be not long after the summer recess—leave Scotland as the only part of the UK with binding targets to reduce child poverty on the way to eliminating it. That is important.

We have already made it very clear that one of the uses that we will make of the new social security powers will be to introduce the new early years grant and increase the value of those payments, recognising that money in the pockets of families is the most effective way of dealing with child poverty.

I hope that we can conclude the bill and come to an outcome where we all agree that we are doing the best things possible. The door is not closed to anything that has been suggested, but in return I make a plea to Patrick Harvie and his colleagues, and indeed to members across the chamber, to engage properly on the substance of the bill. As I outlined with regard to the commission, the Government is not opposing something for the sake of it—there are real issues in trying to get to an outcome that allows the bill to do the job that it is intended to do and which allows the poverty commission that we are going to establish to do the job that it is intended to do.

With that proper engagement, based on a joint shared objective and commitment not just to reduce but to eradicate and eliminate child poverty, we will, I hope, be able to get to that outcome.

Cabinet (Meetings)

4. Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): To ask the First Minister what issues will be discussed at the next meeting of the Cabinet. (S5F-01463)

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

Willie Rennie: Last week, I asked the First Minister about the latest problems in the police. She told me that she had that under control. This week, we discover problems with the chief executive of the Scottish Police Authority, a botched recruitment process and a flawed forensic service. Is there anything else that she has not got under control?

The First Minister: I think that to trivialise those issues in the way that Willie Rennie is doing does not do him any credit. He mischaracterises the answer that I gave him last week. What I actually did last week was go into detail about some of the work that had been done, including the report by

Her Majesty's inspectorate of constabulary in Scotland that looked at the improvements that have already been made in the workings of the SPA and in the relationships between the SPA, its executive and Police Scotland.

This week, Willie Rennie refers, among other things, to the report on forensics services. Much of the report talks about the high quality of forensic services, but it also sets out areas where the SPA requires to deliver further improvements.

With Michael Matheson in the lead of this work, we have taken action with the SPA and Police Scotland, all of which is overseen by HMICS to ensure that the improvements that require to be made are being made.

I give credit to Willie Rennie, because he has raised police issues consistently in the chamber, and he is right to do so. However, although anybody who has the degree of interest that he has in those issues will continue to point to the issues that require to be improved and resolved, in all fairness they will probably also give some credit to the police for the significant progress that has already been made.

Willie Rennie: That is about as convincing as David Mundell on the Barnett formula.

It is not just the police that the First Minister's fingerprints are all over. The Fraser of Allander institute is warning that we could be just 140 hours from recession, the Royal College of Nursing says there are more questions than answers on the national health service workforce plan, and we have just heard that Scottish farmers are angry that the First Minister did not bother to tell them that they are not to get their money on time. All of that has happened in just seven days.

The First Minister has faced questions on competence on the economy, education, policing and farming. Is that the reason why she abandoned her ministerial reshuffle this week? Did she work out that the problem might not be them but might be closer to home?

The First Minister: That proves that Willie Rennie lives in a wee world of his own most of the time. Sometimes it sounds like quite a fun one, so maybe I will join it one day and take some of whatever he is on.

I will quickly go through the serious issues that Willie Rennie has raised. The Fraser of Allander institute put out an important report this morning that shows challenges for the Scottish economy. What it forecasts, though, is that the Scottish economy will grow this year, next year and the year after. The big shadow that is hanging over the performance of the Scottish and the United Kingdom economies, of course, is the on-going Brexit negotiations.

On NHS workforce planning, the report that we published this week focuses on the NHS workforce, and further parts will focus on how we integrate workforce planning in social and primary care. The current report looks at 1,600 more nursing places, added to the 1,000 that we had already committed to over this session of Parliament, as well as measures to encourage nurses who have left practice to return to it. It is serious, substantial, comprehensive work that looks at how we build on the record numbers of staff in our national health service and make sure that it is sustainable for the future.

On the common agricultural payments issue, which I have already talked about at length, the fact is that, notwithstanding the issues in the system, the vast majority of farmers have received the money that they are entitled to—or 80 per cent of it.

On all those issues, whether it is in the last week, over the recess or after the recess, this is a Government that is getting on with delivering for the people of Scotland. We will get on with doing the job that we are here to do—improving our public services, helping to grow our economy and lifting people out of poverty. We will let the others continue with their bad jokes—in Willie Rennie's case—and political point scoring. We will get on with the job.

The Presiding Officer: I understand that there are a few more supplementaries.

Clare Haughey (Rutherglen) (SNP): Yesterday, the Prime Minister repeatedly failed to confirm whether David Mundell made representations over Scotland receiving its fair share in funding following the Tory and Democratic Unionist Party deal. Does the First Minister agree with me that it is now obvious that he made no such effort?

The First Minister: I think that it is obvious to anybody that David Mundell, the Secretary of State for Scotland, did not lift a finger to try to make sure that Scotland got additional funding in the same way that Northern Ireland got additional funding. If the normal rules had been applied here, Scotland would be looking at additional funding of almost £3 billion, but thanks to David Mundell not lifting a finger and thanks to the 13 Tory MPs who, just a couple of weeks ago, we were told were going to be ruling the roost in number 10 and in London, but who instead have gone absent without leave, Scotland has not got a single penny.

Shame on the Scottish Conservatives, and shame on the Secretary of State for Scotland. I watched him yesterday trying to wriggle his way out of the fact that, just a few days ago, he was saying that he would never stand for something

that gave money by the back door to Northern Ireland. It seems that, when he was asked what he did to stand up for Scotland, the answer was simply this—when the Tories came to shaft and sell out Scotland, all that David Mundell did was to try to make sure that they did it transparently. I think that people have the right to expect a lot more from the so-called Secretary of State for Scotland.

Jamie Greene (West Scotland) (Con): Scotland is in the height of its lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex pride season. Does the First Minister agree that it is unacceptable for schools to deny young people the right to express their identity or support the LGBTI community?

The First Minister: Yes. I believe that all young people should be able to express their identity freely without fear of discrimination or bullying in any way, and I do not think that schools or any other parts of society should prevent them from doing that.

I congratulate the time for inclusive education campaign in particular for reaching its second anniversary this week. We are currently working with TIE in the working group that has been set up to promote an inclusive approach to sex and relationship education in our schools, and we look forward to continuing work to progress that through the working group in the weeks and months to come.

Alex Rowley (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): I want to return to the Child Poverty (Scotland) Bill. I understand what the First Minister says about the commission, and Labour will work with the Government over the summer to try to find a way forward. However, what work is being done to identify the costs of addressing child poverty? Does she accept that, unless we make new moneys available to invest to tackle child poverty, targets will not be met?

The First Minister: First, I welcome Alex Rowley's commitment to work with us. From my conversations with Angela Constance, I think that he understands the issue here, in terms of the statutory underpinning of the commission. That is not the problem. The issue is whether we want to restrict the commission's remit to child poverty as opposed to poverty more generally. I think that there is a view on the part of some stakeholders that we should not do that, but I am certainly keen that we work with others to find the right way forward on that.

There are two further points that I would make. Yes, I agree that we have to invest to lift people out of poverty. That is why, as we take on our new social security powers, this Government is looking to do exactly that. I mentioned earlier the early

years grant and the money that we already spend—the tens of millions of pounds every year that we spend on mitigating some of the welfare cuts that, if we were not doing that, would be hitting families and children much harder than they already are.

My third and last point is this. Notwithstanding how welcome the additional social security powers are, the vast bulk of the budget around social security will remain in the hands of Westminster, and as long as we allow that to be the case, we will be at the mercy of a Tory Government that is intent on ripping up the social security safety net. That is why all of us who care about these things, and I include everybody in this chamber in that, should be arguing for, campaigning for and demanding to have more social security powers in the hands of this Parliament so that we can use them to lift people out of poverty and not drive more people into it.

Gender Pay Gap

5. John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP): To ask the First Minister what action the Scottish Government is taking to close the gender pay gap. (S5F-01453)

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): We are transforming early learning and childcare to support more women back into work; we are taking measures to challenge pregnancy and maternity discrimination; we are encouraging employers to pay the real living wage, which will particularly benefit women; and we are funding returners programmes to help women to update their skills after a career break.

Statistics show that progress is being made on reducing the gender pay gap in Scotland. It is currently 15.6 per cent, which is down from over 20 per cent in 2007, but we know that there is much more still to do, which is why we are taking the action that I have outlined.

John Mason: The First Minister may know that, this week, the Economy, Jobs and Fair Work Committee published its report on the gender pay gap, which contains a lot of interesting information. One of the committee's findings was that although good numbers of women are coming into professions such as law and accountancy, they are not getting into senior positions. Does the First Minister think that it is simply a matter of time before that changes, or should positive action be taken to get more women into senior positions?

The First Minister: I believe in positive action. Although a lot of progress is still to be made, I do not think that we would have made the progress in, for example, politics, that we have made without the positive action schemes of some—but not all—parties in this chamber. If we look around

at the gender balance across the different groups in this Parliament, we will see the evidence that positive action works. Frankly, we will see evidence of where positive action might come in very well in improving gender balance.

As I said, I believe in positive action, but it is important that we take action across a range of areas, which is why the partnership for change 50:50 by 2020 campaign is so important. We already have a lot of big private sector organisations signed up to that. It is also about culture and working practices; it is about all those things. However, we must all dedicate ourselves to the simple belief and principle that if we had a society in which everyone was able to get on on the basis of merit, we would already have a 50:50 balance between men and women across all areas of our society. It is because there are systemic barriers to women that we do not have that. If we are to overcome those systemic barriers, we must take action in the range of ways that I have spoken about.

Gordon Lindhurst (Lothian) (Con): The Economy, Jobs and Fair Work Committee also heard evidence that, in some areas, men suffer from a gender pay gap in relation to women. While that may be less of a problem than that affecting women, what steps is the Scottish Government taking to ensure a balanced approach that addresses the issue where it affects men?

The First Minister: Currently, Ruth Davidson is slowly sliding under the desk in front of her. [Laughter.] The whole essence of equality is that men and women are treated equally so, yes, in the spirit of consensus, I kind of accept the underlying premise of the question. However, anyone who can look at the problem of the gender pay gap or the gender inequalities that exist in other parts of our society right now and conclude that we must do more to help men rather than women misses the whole point. Furthermore, it probably underlines that the Tories have got an awful lot to do here.

I looked at the detail of yesterday's Tory shadow cabinet reshuffle. I might not be getting the figures absolutely right, but there were only five women out of about 30 appointments. That is shocking. Rather than come up with such convoluted questions, the Tories need to go away and take a long hard look at themselves when it comes to gender balance.

2016 Common Agricultural Policy Payments

6. Finlay Carson (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con): To ask the First Minister whether the Scottish Government will meet the 30 June deadline for the processing of 2016 CAP payments. (S5F-01451)

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): As I have already outlined today, we are doing all that we can to make the vast majority of pillar 1 payments by the 30 June deadline. We are making daily progress on that. As at Friday 16 June, which is fewer than two weeks ago, we had made 58 per cent of the value of all payments; by last Friday, that figure had risen to 76 per cent; by this morning, it was 82 per cent, which is a total of £346 million paid out.

Rapid progress is being made daily; we will continue to make that progress.

Finlay Carson: I was hoping for a yes or no answer, but that is maybe too much to ask for. Rural Scotland has lost all faith in this Government. It has let down farmers, it has let down crofters and it has let down rural businesses the length and breadth of the country. This fiasco must come to an end. It is beginning to resemble a poor movie sequel. Last year, we had payment fiasco 1. This year, we have had payment fiasco 2. Next year, will we have Nicola Sturgeon and Fergus Ewing playing the baddies once again in the sequel, payment fiasco 3?

Right now, right here, will the First Minister give rural communities and this Parliament a guarantee that her Government will learn from the shambles of the past two years and that farmers will be paid in full and on time in next year's round of CAP payments?

The First Minister: Let me tell the member what a fiasco is. It is a Secretary of State for Scotland who forgets to stand up for Scotland. A fiasco is a Government that cannot even manage competently to deliver the Brexit into which it is so recklessly leading the country. The Scottish Government will continue to deliver for farmers and for others across Scotland. This week, one thing is beyond any doubt whatsoever: the Scottish Conservatives have let down everyone in Scotland.

Commission on Parliamentary Reform (Report)

The Presiding Officer (Ken Macintosh): The next item of business is a debate on the commission on parliamentary reform's report on the Scottish Parliament. I call John Finnie to open the debate on behalf of the commission.

12:47

John Finnie (Highlands and Islands) (Green): I am delighted to open this debate on the report and recommendations of the commission on parliamentary reform.

When Donald Dewar made his opening speech in the Scottish Parliament, he remarked:

"The past is part of us. But today there is a new voice in the land, the voice of a democratic Parliament. A voice to shape Scotland, a voice for the future."

It was with looking to the future in mind that the commission on parliamentary reform set about its work.

As you know, Presiding Officer, the commission was established by your good self, with a remit to consider Parliament's ability to act as a check and balance on Government; how Parliament engages with those outwith Parliament; and Parliament's identity, as distinct from the Scottish Government's identity.

The commission was made up of five party representatives—Fiona McLeod, Johann Lamont, Jackson Carlaw, John Edward and myself; five representatives from civic Scotland—Katie Burke, who is a member of the Scottish Youth Parliament, Pam Duncan-Glancy, the Very Reverend Dr Lorna Hood, Geoff Mawdsley and Professor Boyd Robertson; and our chair, John McCormick.

I was delighted to be one of the members of the commission and was particularly keen to ensure that recommendations to support members of the Scottish Parliament as parliamentarians were considered.

The commission has taken an interesting journey, perhaps not the most thrilling part of which was a three-hour stoppage on the Inverness to Edinburgh train—which I see that Mr Carlaw remembers fondly—that resulted in our getting in at 2 am.

However, there has been a lot of really meaningful engagement. A part of that was to hear the views of people outside the Holyrood bubble—as Burns would say:

"To see oursels as ithers see us!"

So we did just that—speaking with and hearing from over 1,200 people across 50 events. One

message was loud and clear: that the Parliament and its members are well respected and valued and that the Parliament is now embedded in Scottish life. That is a considerable achievement for a Parliament that is just 18 years old. While people were quick to highlight their very positive experiences, we also heard how the Parliament could improve further.

We sought the views of parliamentary colleagues, old and new, and those in the Holyrood bubble—or, as they were often described, the “usual suspects”. Their views and experiences have particularly informed our recommendations about parliamentary proceedings and how effectively the Parliament can hold the Government to account.

We also sought the views of those with less direct involvement with the Parliament, who are often described as “the hard to reach”. I think that we agreed—this was in one of our submissions—that they are an easy-to-ignore group. They are our people—our constituents—whose lives are affected by the decisions that we make in this institution, and their views about what they expect from Parliament and from their relationship with Parliament are at the heart of our recommendations.

I thank everyone we met over the course of the nine months—from Skye to Easterhouse and from Dumfries to Fort William, and at many points in between. People embraced the opportunity to tell us about their Parliament: they saw it as their Parliament. Some people we met just wanted more information about the Parliament, its business and members, and some questioned why the Parliament works in a particular way—why, for example, Opposition leaders ask diary questions at First Minister’s question time. We heard that today. That was described as “tedious and pointless” and not holding the First Minister to account. By the way, we agree with the recommendation that those diary questions should be scrapped. Others had more radical views, such as setting up a second chamber or creating more MSPs. We consider that both of those might be options for consideration, but only after the reforms that we have recommended have been implemented. We viewed it as important that a workload analysis be done and that we maximise the existing resources before those options are considered.

Our report contains 75 recommendations. I cannot do all those recommendations justice in the short time I have, so I will focus on some of the key ones. I know that my colleague Johann Lamont will focus on other aspects of the report that are no less important.

On the Parliament’s ability to hold the Government to account, we have made a number

of recommendations that are aimed at strengthening the Parliament. A stronger Parliament will not only help to clarify its identity as distinct from that of the Scottish Government; it will result in better policies to improve the lives of the Scottish people.

We recommended smaller committees, with conveners who are elected by the Parliament to provide openness and independence, with a renewed focus on engaging with users of public services as part of the scrutiny process. We recommended that those committees should seek a better balance between meeting people in committee meetings and speaking with those who are affected directly by the issues that we seek to address. Those voices can enhance scrutiny by reflecting how policies affect those on the ground.

We found that people had realistic expectations about how often committees should go out to communities to hear their views, but they wanted their views to be taken on board more often in their communities and in more dynamic and innovative ways than they are at present. We therefore recommended greater use of emerging digital technologies and piloting deliberative ways of seeking views so that the Parliament can evolve and seek to engage with people who are remote from it.

We recommended an expanded five-stage legislative process to mainstream pre-legislative scrutiny. That will enable draft legislation to be considered earlier in the process—we heard that more influence could be exerted then. Including post-legislative scrutiny as a final stage would ensure that legislation is doing the job that it was intended to do.

We want to reinvigorate the role of MSPs as parliamentarians—not just as party members, but as individuals—to act in the interests of the Parliament and improve policy making. To that end, we recommended opening up the Parliamentary Bureau to make how it works and decides on business more transparent, and especially to allow parties greater flexibility to reallocate speaking times and introduce the opportunity for questions on the forthcoming business programme.

We recommended providing greater opportunities for back-bench MSPs to influence and inform parliamentary business and the establishment of a back-bench group or committee, and we recommended that the Presiding Officer and party representatives agree key principles on when party discipline is appropriate in the parliamentary process and, perhaps more important, when it is not.

Neil Findlay (Lothian) (Lab): One issue that I saw in the report concerned the way in which

committees operate. That relates to discipline. I understand that at least one party in the Parliament operates a committee whip. That goes against the whole principle of what we are supposed to do on committees. Did the commission take any evidence on that?

John Finnie: Yes, indeed. That was a recurring theme. It is about understanding the distinct role of the parliamentarian in scrutinising the Government, regardless of party, and we commented on that in the report.

Over the past few months, it has become clear that the Parliament faces greater scrutiny challenges related to its already enhanced powers and the demands arising from the United Kingdom's exiting the European Union. We returned to the issue of the Parliament's capacity to meet those challenges head on time and again when we spoke to people. Our recommendations on how to fully utilise existing capacity provide a package of measures that can be used to meet those challenges. We recommend greater flexibility in how Parliament time is used. Our recommendation that committees be able to meet at the same time as the chamber will open up more committee time for scrutiny and for meeting away from the Parliament, and it should reinvigorate chamber debates. It will provide greater flexibility to those committees that meet on Thursday mornings, the business of which is currently curtailed at 11.40.

Using our research on the business of Parliament, we have identified opportunities for Parliament to change its meeting pattern, such as dedicating some weeks to committee business and having other weeks focus on chamber debates, better reflecting the scrutiny demands of parliamentary business.

I take this opportunity to thank each of my colleagues on the commission for their good company, enthusiasm and commitment to undertaking this work. Each of us came with different experiences and perspectives that informed our work and enriched our deliberations, and I hope that our recommendations reflect that.

I particularly thank John McCormick for his excellent chairing, his hard work—it was considerable work over a prolonged period, which reflects his long-standing public service—his adept handling of our expansive remit and his delivery of such comprehensive and, we think, workable recommendations, which is noteworthy.

Our 75 recommendations are the first steps in the process of parliamentary reform. I hope that the momentum we have gained over the past nine months will be maintained by the Parliament in the implementation group that we have recommended. It will be for us all to consider and

agree what must happen next. This debate is the beginning. What is clear from all those we talked with—I particularly enjoyed my engagement with young people in Falkirk and being lured there to engage with them with the offer of pizza; maybe we could suggest that other groups consider doing that—is that the Parliament now needs to move on in the way that it works. We will face future scrutiny challenges—they will come—and now is the time to prepare ourselves. Our report helps us do just that and I hope that all members will support our recommendations.

The Presiding Officer: Before we come to the open part of the debate, I welcome to our gallery a number of guests, including General Nick Ashmore, the head of the Army in Scotland, and his family; and members of the commission on parliamentary reform, including its staff, John Edward and its chair, John McCormick. *[Applause.]*

12:57

Colin Beattie (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP): The report is timely and will move parliamentary committees forward. I congratulate Professor John McCormick and the other members of the commission.

I will return to the report's content in a moment. First, I would like to draw members' attention to a small but significant omission from the report. The report deals with parliamentary committees and the appointment, membership, and management of those committees. There is, however, another unique organisation that Parliament directly appoints and to which political parties nominate members: members will immediately understand that I am referring to the Scottish Commission for Public Audit. It is the only statutory commission that Parliament possesses and it consists of five MSPs from across the political spectrum.

The commission chooses to follow most of the same processes as the parliamentary committee system and is supported by the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body in carrying out its work. In some respects, it is ahead of the parliamentary committees; for example, in 2016 for the first time it elected its chair. I remind members that the commission's function is to appoint non-executive board members to Audit Scotland, to appoint the chair of the board, to appoint the accountable officer for Audit Scotland, to appoint auditors to Audit Scotland, to receive its audited accounts, and to scrutinise, comment on and recommend or not recommend Audit Scotland's budget proposals.

Perhaps in respect of my comments on the commission I can ask whether consideration might be given to requiring that it be included in any

changes that are agreed, because it might otherwise be left behind in some aspects while the parliamentary committee system gradually moves in a different direction. I acknowledge the relative independence of the commission, but it is sufficiently close to being a parliamentary committee in its essential attributes that the argument to include it is strong.

I turn to the report by the commission on parliamentary reform. Parliamentary committees are important in supporting the efficient and effective running of Parliament. It is my strong impression that committee members are increasingly under time pressure as the business of Parliament expands, in terms of the complexity of the on-going business that is being handled and in terms of the additional work that will come as a result of further devolved powers coming to this Parliament.

I fully agree with the conclusion that committees should consist of no more than seven members. I am a member of a committee of seven members and of a committee of 11 members and I am convinced that the smaller committee is just as effective and can even get through rather more work, because there is less time pressure resulting from all members being required to take it in turn to ask questions of witnesses. Our having smaller committees might also release members to be redeployed on potential new committees.

Although I understand the rationale behind the proposal to consider remuneration of conveners, there would be risks in that. The last thing that any of us would want would be for a member to seek a convenuehip merely because it attracted an extra cash benefit. Those of us who have been local government councillors will understand the dynamics that can drive such situations and the disharmony that can be created.

Johann Lamont (Glasgow) (Lab): Does the member share the concern that people might seek ministerial office for the same base reasons, rather than to serve the public?

Colin Beattie: I am sure that there are arguments on that.

I am unconvinced that the offer of more money will provide better conveners or a better committee system.

I have been fortunate that the committees of which I am a member have sought to meet and to seek evidence outside the Parliament. The recommendation that committees should spend more time seeking views in different ways—including at local and regional levels—is welcome. There would be a cost to that, of course, and not just in terms of the cost to Parliament: there would be a cost to each attending member, because a substantial amount of additional time would

usually be needed in order that they could attend such meetings. I am convinced that there is merit in improving such alternatives, and would welcome those options being developed.

Given the time pressure on committees, it is appropriate that they should have the ability to decide when they wish to meet, even if that is at the same time as the chamber is sitting. Having said that, I believe that it might prove to be a challenge to arrange for the full attendance of members because of the calls on members' time.

Unfortunately, I do not have time to comment on everything in the report—my time is up—but I commend it, and I am sure that it will take the committee system forward.

13:01

Ruth Davidson (Edinburgh Central) (Con): I start by thanking the Presiding Officer, John McCormick and all the commissioners for the work that they have put into pulling the report together.

The Scottish Parliament has been in existence for 18 years, so it is right that we take stock, reflect critically on its operation and allow it to change for the better. I think that it must change—not least because in the past few years it has benefited from the biggest transfer of powers since it was reconvened. It is our responsibility to ensure that the Scottish Parliament, which is the most powerful devolved legislative body in the world, works for the benefit of all of Scotland. Therefore, I am sure that MSPs from across the chamber recognise not only that the task of compiling the report was an important and challenging job of work, but that the recommendations of John McCormick and the commissioners are largely balanced and welcome.

I also think that it is important that we discuss the commission's work in the chamber today and, indeed, in the future. Some of the recommendations require broader scrutiny and proper debates, and it goes without saying that Parliament as a whole needs to have a say on its own future.

I am pleased that some of the commission's recommendations include things that Conservative members have been asking for for quite some time. For example, our Strathclyde commission report, which was published more than three years ago, suggested that there should be guaranteed slots for Opposition spokespeople during portfolio question time. The commission on parliamentary reform, too, has now recommended that. That step, among others, will undoubtedly improve Parliament's ability to hold the Government of the day to account.

There are other recommendations that I am especially pleased to see in the report, including the proposed steps to make committees more powerful and independent, the proposal that there be more flexibility around the sitting times of chamber plenary meetings and committees, and the recommendation that there be a more rigorous legislative process. With regard to that recommendation, in particular, I am pleased to see the suggestion that much greater emphasis be placed on post-legislative scrutiny. Scottish Conservatives asked for post-legislative scrutiny to be specifically included in the remit of one of our mandatory committees; making that a dedicated stage of all bills' legislative process ties in with that very well—indeed, it takes our suggestion even further.

However, there are recommendations that I believe require more careful thought. I am not suggesting that there should be a direct rejection of the recommendations in question, but there should not be rushed adoption of them, either. Some of the reforms to the format of First Minister's question time, for example, might produce unintended consequences. Every week at First Minister's question time, as well as answering questions from Opposition party leaders, the First Minister answers questions from back benchers. We know that with the television cameras watching, the party leader bit can sometimes seem to be a bit knockabout, but First Minister's question time serves a wider purpose: it enables Parliament to hold the Executive to account. It exists for MSPs to get meaningful answers from the First Minister on a range of issues, whether they are policy or constituency matters.

We need to have a discussion about the purpose and nature of First Minister's question time. Question time is supposed to provide the disinfectant of sunlight on the workings of Government. For me, above all, its purpose is to elicit information. My concern is that with no pre-submitted questions—which is one of the proposals that are made in the report—all the answers might lose their meaningful content.

Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab):

One of my concerns is that First Minister's questions would be treated differently to other question times. There is an important point about whether there needs to be consistency between question times, rather than FMQs being a special case.

Ruth Davidson: That is one of the things that we need to discuss. On the nature of First Minister's question time, the suggestion that there should just be names in the *Business Bulletin*, with no questions whatsoever, leads me to worry that the First Minister would be asked a question and would just say, "The member raises a very

important point, let me get the relevant minister to write back to you with the answer". In that situation, FMQs would lose all potency. We need to strike a balance between putting the First Minister on the spot every week—in my current position I enjoy the fact that we are able to do that—and allowing him or her to provide meaningful and informative answers on those pertinent questions.

Opposition members might seek a "Gotcha!" moment with the First Minister, but when we come to the chamber, more than anything we want answers. That is not meant as a criticism of the First Minister's ability to answer the questions, but is merely to acknowledge the limit of the level of detail that anyone can be expected to know. If the First Minister does not know whether the question will be on forestry or forensic pathology, what sort of chance would he or she have of being able to give out the facts that the member who asks the question seeks? It is an issue that requires further debate.

Another issue is that although some of the changes seem to be benign or small, cumulatively they would make a significant change in how Parliament operates. That requires further discussion. That is most apparent in relation to the recommendations on the changing role of the Presiding Officer. Cumulatively, those would constitute a huge and significant increase in the powers of the Presiding Officer in relation to parliamentary business, questions and MSP conduct.

There are suggestions that cause absolutely no worry, including the Presiding Officer having a stronger role in ruling on conduct. However, we need to have a discussion about proposals such as post-match refereeing on whether an answer was up to the required standard; about being able to depart from party balance in debates, so that Presiding Officers would be able to choose whomever they want to speak at any time; and about the idea that the parties first propose their business to the Presiding Officer before it goes to the Parliamentary Bureau for it to decide on times.

My worry is that such a significant extension of the Presiding Officer's powers might unintentionally politicise the role and would certainly politicise the selection of the Presiding Officer at the start of every session. I would say that in our short time in the Scottish Parliament we have seen a succession of very good and impartial Presiding Officers and Deputy Presiding Officers, who have commanded the confidence of the Parliament. They have commanded that confidence precisely because we have a neutral appointments system and have not seen politicisation of their work.

Those are just a few initial thoughts on the report. I look forward to engaging further with you, Presiding Officer, and with colleagues and MSPs from other parties as we move to the next stage. We must steer the process through the whole Parliament, rather than simply have an implementation group that introduces measures that are to be passed—or not—at decision time, without wider debate.

I firmly believe that the best days of the Scottish Parliament are ahead of it. I hope that, subject to the preference of the voters of Edinburgh, I will be permitted to play a small part in that future.

13:09

John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP):

My initial reaction to the report is very positive. There are no dramatic recommendations, such as a second chamber or changing the number of MSPs. I agree with that and that our emphasis should be on making improvements to the current set-up to ensure that we all make the best use of our time.

A major recommendation of mine on committees, which was referred to by my colleague Colin Beattie, is to reduce their membership from 11 to seven. In a committee with seven members, those members are more directly involved for most of the time whereas, once there are 11 members, it is almost impossible for the convener to let members question witnesses as fully as they want to and should. My feeling and that of the commission is that having seven members is more efficient and makes better use of members' time. It would also allow a committee such as the Rural Economy and Connectivity Committee to be split into two, as the rural economy and transport and connectivity are such big subjects in their own right that they deserve their own committees.

I broadly split the other recommendations into three categories, the first of which is those that I largely agree with. Recommendation 10 is about dropping the initial question for leaders at FMQs. That makes a lot of sense for public understanding although, as Ruth Davidson has just said, I am less sure about the implications for back benchers. For example, it would make supplementaries difficult if not impossible.

Recommendation 12 talks about reducing the number of portfolio questions. At portfolio questions yesterday, we got only to number 11, as the first question took 10 minutes. I accept that that was a slightly exceptional issue, but that gives a picture of our experience.

Recommendation 23 talks about reviewing standing orders towards the end of each session, which would be good.

Recommendation 36 is that committees should be able to meet at the same time as the chamber. As the commission recognised, that could create a conflict for some individuals, but in the past the approach has been too rigid when, for example, a committee has struggled to find time to finish a report or give adequate time to witnesses.

Recommendation 38 is that some weeks should have more committee time and some should have more chamber time. Again, that makes sense. It could be especially useful in the first year of a session when perhaps less legislation is coming through and we could have more time in committee. Similarly, as we have found in the past couple of weeks, as we approach recess, more time might be needed for stage 3 debates in the chamber.

The second category is recommendations that I am open to looking at but which need to be looked at more thoroughly. Recommendation 15 talks about a five-stage process for legislation. An example of where we have almost done that was with the Scottish Fiscal Commission Bill, on which the Finance Committee did pre-legislative scrutiny and then went on to a normal stage 1. However, that became very repetitive and we seemed to go over the same ground again and again. Therefore, I would need some convincing that all bills need all of that process.

Recommendation 33 talks about engaging youngsters who are over 14 and who do not do modern studies. That is an issue, because many of us go into schools just to speak to modern studies classes. However, the practicalities for schools would need to be looked at, because they have a lot of challenges and a lot of things on their plate.

Recommendation 50 is about flexibility in allocating speaking time. With some bills, such as Scottish Law Commission bills, we certainly struggle to get speakers because the subjects are so intense. As a member of the Delegated Powers and Law Reform Committee, I have spoken on all three such bills that the committee has considered. I thought that we could start on that recommendation today and that I could take a minute of Kenny Gibson's speaking time and he could have a minute less.

The third category is recommendations that I am less keen on. Recommendation 37 is to have second debates at the same time as main debates. That seems to me to be a bit like aping Westminster Hall debates down south. I have been to quite a number of those debates and, frankly, they are not that well attended. We have members' business debates, which serve much the same purpose.

Recommendation 58 is that committee conveners should be paid more. If somebody has to spend more time on a committee, they will have to reduce their work on either other committees or other duties, so I question why we would need money to be spent on that.

I welcome the commission's work, especially the work of John McCormick, who headed it up and whom I have found to be very accessible. I commend the report to members for discussion and further consideration.

13:13

Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab):

I echo the thanks that other members have given to the commission and to John McCormick and others for their work.

It is vital that we see reform not just as a one-off but as an on-going process. I grew up in the 1990s and, when I became interested in politics, that was very much in the context of the constitutional debate and the arguments for devolution. The prospect of a new Parliament bringing new politics was very exciting. It says much about this place and what we have achieved that the critics and detractors of the possibility of a devolved Parliament have been silenced. Across the different parties, there were critics, but those people and parties are now very supportive.

However, having come to this place last year as a new member, I have noticed a creeping sense that some things happen because that is how they have always been done. I think that we need to fight against that. To be frank, sometimes what happens in this place seems procedural, dictated by process, and scripted.

The commitment of the commission to consider how we can ensure that the Parliament is open, relevant and—above all—authentic, so that what we say in here resonates with people out there, is important. It is important that we look at our processes, and I say to members that it is important that we take our duties as parliamentarians seriously and do our bit to achieve those things. Like other members, I think that we need more opportunities to discuss the details of the findings in the commission's report.

I will focus on three key areas. Overall, the focus on ensuring that there is enhanced scrutiny is right. The report makes the key point that the principal duty of the Parliament is to hold the Government to account. That is absolutely right. In that context, the proposals on an ability to recall ministers in a number of circumstances are good.

It is also right that we look at how the legislative process works. I bear in mind what John Mason just said about some of the consequences of

having a five-stage process, but I think that the ability to return a bill to a committee should be considered. Likewise, the idea that committees should have the opportunity to make statements in the chamber is interesting in the context of opening up the Parliament, ensuring that it is relevant and ensuring its scrutiny function.

Above all, what is important is the principle that the Government is formed at the discretion of the Parliament. It is with our permission that the powers of this place are delegated to the Government. The Parliament does not exist at the convenience of the Government. That is important, and it is always a difficult line for Parliaments and Governments to tread.

Presiding Officer, what I am about to say is not just for your benefit: I welcome a lot of the proposals to enhance the PO's role, which could contribute a good deal towards the quality of debate, by ensuring that the PO could respond much more on issues to do with speakers' conduct and the relevance of contributions to debates. I am glad that James Kelly is not in the chamber while I say that removing some of the powers of business managers to set speakers lists and the order of speakers would also be helpful in that regard.

Richard Leonard (Central Scotland) (Lab): Hear, hear. [*Laughter.*]

Daniel Johnson: My Labour colleagues are going to clype on me later, I know.

The recommendations on committees deserve a lot more scrutiny and could be helpful. After all, committees were meant to be the centrepiece of this Parliament. Our committees have been of interest to other Parliaments, which have imported some of our practices. However, we need to look at how they function. Proposals on the size of committees will undoubtedly help, as members have said.

There is disquiet about the possibility of committees running in parallel with chamber business. The Education and Skills Committee has run meetings in a number of different formats—not always in formal session—which have been useful in enabling members to hear wider views. Informal engagement through focus groups, for example, could easily happen at the same time as chamber business. It would be sensible to let committees decide whether they can operate in the afternoons, in parallel with chamber business.

The report makes an excellent start. The focus on scrutiny and quality is right, but we need to take things further, to ensure that there is more openness and wider relevance to the public.

The Presiding Officer: I remind members that we are trying to keep speeches to four minutes.

13:18

Ben Macpherson (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP): I thank everyone who was involved in the commission. I support the principle and concept of on-going reform.

Last week, on Friday, I welcomed to the Parliament some young people—some were my constituents and some were Ruth Davidson's—from the Broughton runners, who are a local running group for primary school children. The young people sat in the public gallery, while I and a tour guide told them about the Parliament. It was the first time that I had sat in the public gallery since I was elected. I encourage all members to pop up there from time to time, to get that perspective and try to remember how others see us. The report that we are considering embodies a lot of that.

Ruth Davidson has already spoken about many of the points that I was going to raise, but I will elaborate on FMQs. As the report rightly says, for much of the Scottish public, FMQs are the only way—certainly the most prominent way—in which they have contact with or access to what goes on in Parliament, whether it be through radio, television or online. FMQs are the shop window to this place for many of our constituents and most of the Scottish public.

Over the years, and since I have been elected, some people, including one party leader, have said to me that FMQs are just theatre and not representative of what happens here. That is true, but they are also the most prominent piece of parliamentary activity that people see, because of the exaggerated language, the amplified conflict, the knockabout, and the ambition to get a press headline or a good tweet. The report seems to contain an implicit ambition to change that and to reduce some of that tribalism and perhaps overamplified conflict. The report reflects the fact that, as has been my experience before and since being elected, there is an ambition among people in our communities to have FMQs that are more substantial and a more positive and constructive reflection of our democracy.

If we think of the issues that are confronting that generation of kids who were in the public gallery with me last week—climate change, Brexit, how we future-proof our economy—we have to ask whether the shop window of our democracy is as robust, constructive and intellectual as we would want it to be to confront those issues.

Daniel Johnson: I wonder whether we are in a catch-22 situation here. Part of the reason why people pay attention is because First Minister's question time is dramatic, and if it became less dramatic, people would pay less attention. What is the member's comment on that?

Ben Macpherson: I think that we, and people who are interested in party politics, are attracted to FMQs because of the drama. However, we need to understand that a lot of people are not attracted to the way in which party politics is right now; they are very negative and cynical about it. Recommendations 10 and 11 seek to address some of that.

I also share the concerns that were expressed earlier that an overconcentration of spontaneity might create less meaningful answers and reduce the ambition that is implicit in the report of creating a more constructive debate. There are other options for FMQs that we could explore that could maintain spontaneity and allow us to evaluate and scrutinise Government, while helping us to change our culture to create a more constructive approach to the shop window of our democracy. I do not think that that is just about us as politicians, incidentally. The press and other elements of our civic society have a role to play when it comes to our democracy.

13:23

Andy Wightman (Lothian) (Green): Like other members, I welcome the report and thank the commissioners. I also thank the staff, particularly the head of the secretariat, Jane Williams, who I see sitting at the back of the chamber. I look forward to welcoming her back to the Local Government and Regeneration Committee after recess.

I want to make three broad observations and then talk about some highlights in the report. There is a strong case for treating the recommendations in the report as a package. I am conscious that a lot of thought and debate has gone into the report, particularly from the non-MSP members and those who gave evidence, time and expertise freely and in good faith. We need to respect their intentions, so this should not become a cherry-picking exercise by members and parties in Parliament. We are responding in substantial part to the expectations of the people whom we serve and we should bear that in mind at all times.

The commission is right to stop short of radical reform at this stage, while proposing a range of modest reforms across a range of Parliament's work to increase effectiveness in how we operate.

The commission is also correct to urge Parliament to implement these recommendations during the current session.

I turn to some highlights. I am supportive of the proposal to increase the number of stages in legislative scrutiny. Passing legislation is one of our core functions.

My first experience of legislative scrutiny was with the Land Reform (Scotland) Bill back in the first session, when I was an outsider to the Parliament. I went into the bowels of my archives and dug out a musty copy of the Scottish Executive's paper "Land Reform: The Draft Bill". It was a hefty tome of 192 pages of the Executive's intentions, policies and explanation, including a draft bill that was published for public consultation before it came to the Parliament. The process was helped enormously by that, because interested parties could engage with a real statute and interrogate the real meaning and purpose of statutory provisions. The bill that was introduced was much better as a result. Therefore, I would go further than the commission's recommendation 15a and suggest that a revised stage 1 should be full pre-legislative scrutiny in the form of a draft bill.

I welcome the proposal that Parliament should take far more control of the parliamentary business schedule.

On committees, I am firmly of the view that conveners should be elected. At present, there is no evaluation by anyone other than the party hierarchy as to who is best qualified to convene committees.

The committees' work is vital to the Parliament's success and I am attracted by the proposal to have different meeting patterns for committees and chamber. That would clearly be a significant change but, for demanding committee work—including budget scrutiny—much more focused time spent in committee to undertake more concentrated work would be beneficial.

Parliament should take more control over its committee structure than simply following Government portfolios. For example, it is a matter of some meditation to me that the Economy, Jobs and Fair Work Committee on which I sit does not include "energy" in its title even though that is a substantial and important part of the committee's responsibilities.

On a question that the report does not cover, it might also be worth designating a week at the end of summer recess as a committee away-day week so that members can plan to be available for business planning and away-day meetings. I am conscious that many members cannot make it to committee away days because of holiday and other plans over recess.

Another recommendation that stands out for me relates to Scottish Law Commission bills. Some months ago, I asked the Government what plans it had to implement the SLC's recommendations on modernising the law of the foreshore and the sea bed—a topic that is of contemporary relevance, given the devolution of the Crown estate. The SLC was initially asked to consider the law back in late

1999 and it produced a final report and draft bill in March 2003 but the minister told me on 11 July last year—fully 13 years later—that there are no such plans. That is rather unsatisfactory, given that we have spent much of the past year not enacting any legislation.

On speaking in debates, I am aware that my allotted time is shortly up. On many occasions, members may welcome hearing no more than four or six minutes from any member but, on many other occasions, I and others would value listening to fuller contributions from members who make more substantial contributions to debates. Therefore, more flexibility on how time is allotted would add to the quality and flow of debate.

13:28

Mike Rumbles (North East Scotland) (LD): I put on record the thanks of the Liberal Democrat group to the chair and all the members of the commission, who have done great work. They have produced a fantastic report. With its 75 recommendations, we cannot do it justice in only four minutes, so I will concentrate on one aspect. Before I do that, I congratulate the Presiding Officer, because it was his idea to have an MOT of how the Parliament works after 18 years, which is a good thing to do.

I will focus on what is in the report, not on what is not in it. Several proposals that I and others made are not in the report. I will focus only on recommendations 43 to 45, which pertain to the Parliamentary Bureau procedures. As a current member of the bureau and a member of it in previous parliamentary sessions, I feel qualified to comment on those.

The first one, recommendation 43a, is to "enable MSPs to observe parts of"

the bureau's proceedings. That might sound incidental but I am astonished that, in a Parliament of openness and transparency, although MSPs can attend any committee meetings at all and can speak at them if they are called by the convener, they are not entitled to attend the bureau. It is a really good recommendation that MSPs be able to observe parts of its proceedings. I would like them to observe them all but I accept that the recommendation says "parts"—I am not straying from the recommendations.

The bureau was a mystery to me during the first two sessions in which I served. In the first, I did not know what the bureau did. On one occasion I was summoned to appear before the bureau—well, I felt summoned; I was requested to attend—to explain something from the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee. I thought, "What on earth is the bureau all about?"

We need to know what the bureau is about and we cannot make assumptions; MSPs should be there to observe parts of its proceedings.

Recommendation 43b is that we should

“ensure that the views of ... individual MSPs not represented on the Parliamentary Bureau ... are taken into account”.

That does not apply in this session but it did in previous ones and I think that that should have happened. I am pleased that we are addressing that now for the future.

Recommendation 43c is that we should

“enable each party or group to open and close debates but with the time allocated reflecting their party balance in Parliament”.

That is a very fair approach and I am pleased to see that reform in the recommendations. It adds something to the parliamentary debate if we have opening and closing participation from all the political groups recognised by the bureau, rather than the contributions being lost later in the debating process.

Recommendation 43d, that we should

“enable all parties or groups to be able to ask a question following a ministerial statement”,

is absolutely right, and we should also

“provide a more detailed business motion for the forthcoming three weeks of chamber business”,

as recommendation 43e states.

Recommendation 44 is that

“In order to foster a greater sense of ownership of the business programme, any member of the Parliamentary Bureau should be prepared to propose the business to the chamber”.

It is just through precedent and the way we operate that the Minister for Parliamentary Business does that. Others have proposed business before, and we should get back to that system.

Recommendation 45 is that

“Time should be provided in the chamber at the end of each week for questions on the forthcoming business programme.”

That is a very good suggestion.

I am conscious that I have only a few seconds left. I agree with Andy Wightman that it would be easy to cherry-pick the report and say that we like this or that recommendation. Actually, a tremendous amount of work has gone into the process and the report has been agreed on an all-party and non-party basis. The 75 recommendations should be implemented as best we can. Some of them will require changes to standing orders. The bureau ones can be done by

the bureau when we next meet and some will take a bit longer, but they should be taken as a package. We should be open and transparent, and the bureau certainly should be, as much as it can.

13:32

Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I add my thanks for the extraordinary work that everybody involved in the project has undertaken. I am very fortunate to be in my third session of this Parliament and I would like to focus my remarks on the committee system and how we can improve legislative scrutiny. I do so mainly because of some concerns I have had, especially at the time of majority Government, when in some instances, scrutiny was not as comprehensive as it should have been.

To illustrate that, I cite the example of an Education and Culture Committee meeting that was dealing with stage 2 of a complex bill. The committee papers were extensive, as were the appendices, all of which resulted in a very large number of relevant questions of both substance and semantic presentation. As we came to debate some of the most contentious and difficult amendments, a steward was commandeered from the room by a member of the whips' office of one particular parliamentary party and was delegated to hand envelopes to all that party's members on the committee. It became apparent that that was an instruction on how to vote, and yet none of those members participated in the debate.

That was not the only time that that happened, and I make the point for an important reason. If the result of the vote is to be a fait accompli, what incentive is there to undertake the necessary preparation for that committee meeting, and to scrutinise in detail? That makes for lazy politics and for lazy politicians.

That complex bill was what became the Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014. Politics completely aside, members will be aware that the information-sharing provisions within that legislation were blocked by the UK Supreme Court a year ago. That led to comment within the legal world that the situation would have been entirely avoidable had there been wholly competent and effective scrutiny of the legislation beforehand, particularly at stage 2.

The reform report states that

“It is crucially important that, in a unicameral parliament, the committees are robust and seen to be independent of government.”

I wholeheartedly agree with that, as I believe that it is very necessary to introduce greater objectivity to the committee process.

Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green): I take seriously Liz Smith's comment that the serious argument she is making should not be seen in too political terms, but if we were to make such a change, would it also be a requirement that members have access to some degree of impartial legal interpretation of legislation, which at the moment the Government and the Presiding Officer have, but individual members do not?

Liz Smith: Absolutely. Mr Harvie makes a very good point, and regarding some of the other recommendations in the report, particularly having five stages, I would like to see at the pre-legislative stage exactly that: informed and objective legal advice that allows all members, whether they are on that committee or not, to take a much more informed opinion. So yes, I do accept what he says.

I am not going to spend too much time on some of the other issues in the report, because I firmly believe that the best part of the Parliament is often within the committee system. We flourish as MSPs and as parliamentarians if we do that work in committees effectively, so it is for all political parties to take up cudgels in ensuring that we are debating properly and preparing properly, and that we are as informed as we possibly can be. If there is one recommendation that comes out of the report, it is to improve scrutiny in the committee system. I will leave it there, Presiding Officer, because that is one of the most important things we have to do.

The Presiding Officer: I call Kenneth Gibson. After Mr Mason's comments, you have only three minutes, Mr Gibson.

13:36

Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): Presiding Officer, your predecessor in the previous session was also keen on reform. The main changes that we saw were the introduction of topical questions and a move to three days of plenary, which no one really wanted but which only myself and Margo MacDonald did not vote for. As I see it, that resulted only in less time being spent by MSPs in their constituencies. The previous Presiding Officer suggested to the Conveners Group that committees have their membership reduced to only three or four MSPs. That was rejected on the basis of party balance, lack of scrutiny and workload, but only a week later, at the David Hume Institute, the same Presiding Officer suggested out of the blue that the current set-up should be replaced by four mega-committees with loads of members.

Changes should be implemented only if they will make the Parliament work more efficiently and effectively, and we should not be too hard on

ourselves. Compared with that ossified Parliament in London, where it can take 40 minutes to vote, where free snuff is available and members have a place to hang their swords, and yet need to queue for a prayer card to get a seat on busy days, we are positively enlightened.

Regarding the commission report itself, I am struggling to get too excited, although it makes many positive suggestions. There is, however, some navel gazing. No account appears to be taken of the workload of constituency MSPs vis-à-vis list members. Having been both, like a number of colleagues, I know that there is no comparison. Yet, with all the extra work anticipated by the reforms—of interest, in my view, mainly to those in the Holyrood bubble—no consideration appears to have been given to how the work needed to deliver those reforms on an on-going basis will impact on constituency members, especially in the light of more powers and the increasing workload that that will bring.

The election of conveners by the entire Parliament has again raised its ugly head. Last year, we had 51 new members elected. How could they possibly know the strengths and weaknesses of umpteen individuals going forward for so many positions? Political parties know best who their representatives and conveners should be.

Of course, the report has some good points. The remuneration of conveners is long overdue, although, sadly, the report fudges that. It is not surprising that, last year, the Conveners Group overwhelmingly supported remuneration. The dissenting voice was an MSP who announced the very next day that he would not be standing for re-election. Of course, the proposal did not get support, because the Conveners Group has to be unanimous. Convenership is a responsibility that I believe every convener takes seriously. I know that the Parliament voted against remuneration many years ago, in one of its hair-shirt moments, for fear of a dodgy *Daily Mail* headline, but remuneration should now be embraced.

One step forward that I think is important is that committees should abandon prepared questions. It is shocking that that still happens. I stopped it the minute I became convener of the Finance Committee in 2011. It meant that members had to actually read their committee papers, rather than turn up 15 minutes early—which I will not do—to be allocated a question written by the clerks. The result when members have to think for themselves is a better-informed committee that is more able to scrutinise independently, which is what many MSPs are deeply concerned about, as is the report.

Motions were not actually touched on in the report, but it is surely time to scrap those motions that congratulate every single organisation that is

given an awards-for-all grant each month, and which clog up our inboxes.

Lastly, I will touch briefly on questions. I am disappointed that the commission thinks that, for general questions and portfolio questions, the answer is fewer questions. My contribution, which was not named in the report, although it was submitted, was—as the Presiding Officer will know—to extend general questions from 20 to 30 minutes and portfolio questions from 40 to 60 minutes to allow more members to contribute. I do not believe that Opposition spokespersons should be guaranteed a supplementary: how does that square with the supposed aim of reducing the influence of the whips and party managers?

With regard to Neil Findlay's concern about one or more parties perhaps whipping a committee, I can tell members without fear of contradiction that that absolutely does not happen, and certainly never has happened in the Scottish National Party group. As for the suggestion that First Minister's questions not be published, I agree with the points that Ruth Davidson made. How can back benchers come in with supplementaries if they do not know what questions will be asked? That cannot deliver the better questions and answers that the commission would want.

I believe that we should not accept the report simply as a package of 75 recommendations—as Mike Rumbles highlighted, each recommendation is worthy of scrutiny. I thank the commission for the huge amount of work that it did in undertaking what has been a monumental task. The report certainly gives us plenty of food for thought.

13:41

Edward Mountain (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I, too, thank the commission and all those who worked on the report. I will cover two subjects: the first relates to committees, and the second relates to questions.

I absolutely concur with the commission that a strong and effective Scottish Parliament needs strong and effective committees. As the report states, committees are the “engine room” of the Parliament. The report goes on to state that some committees

“have not been as effective as ... anticipated”.

The reasons for that, the report states, are mainly to do with party discipline; a high level of work preventing committees from setting their own agendas; committees carrying out little or no post-legislative scrutiny; and the turnover of membership being too high.

The report goes on to say that there needs to be a way of loosening party control over committees. I have been in the Parliament for only a year, but

as the convener of a committee, I can say that my party has never told me what to do. I cannot speak to what other parties do—perhaps they need to exert influence on their committee members—but I do not believe that the Conservative Party has ever done that. Certainly, that has not happened in the short time that I have been in the Parliament.

In the short time that I have been here, I have come to see that a committee works best when party politics is left at the door. However, this is a Parliament: it is all about politics and party politics. To be frank, with the greatest respect, to expect politicians to ignore what drives them is—or might be, in my view—fanciful.

That brings me on to the key area that I want to look at, which is the appointment of conveners. Currently, once the split of the committee conveners has been agreed between the parties, the individual conveners are appointed by the party. The proposal is that the Parliament would elect the conveners by ballot. The suggestion is that any party member could stand to be a convener if they are in the party that it has been agreed will have the convenership.

In my humble opinion, that will not help. I cannot see any member standing for the convenership of a committee without the support of their party. For the sake of discussion, let us say that there were two candidates: one who had a deeply detailed knowledge of the committee's area of work and one who did not. Is there any doubt that the Government would direct its MSPs to vote for the weaker candidate to ensure that there is less scrutiny of it? In a Parliament where there is no majority, that might not be an issue, but that will not always be the case.

I do not really believe that the suggestion will make parliamentary committees less political and more effective or indeed that it will generate greater respect for conveners. I believe that the current system works well. The appointment of conveners is not something that a party does lightly.

Daniel Johnson: How does the member square that with the experience at Westminster, where the election of committee chairs has not really resulted in what he has just described?

Edward Mountain: To be truthful, I follow what goes on in this Parliament a lot more closely than I follow what goes on at Westminster. I strongly believe that the party ensures that it tries to get the best person for the job, for the simple reason that a bad convener will cause more problems than they solve and will quickly bring their party into disrepute.

I would also like to mention one further thing about committees. A big committee, as we have heard, is difficult to manage and results in

questions that are less detailed and less probing. I agree with recommendation 3, which states that a maximum of seven members would be optimal.

There is much else in the report regarding committees that I agree with, but, due to time, I will briefly mention one different matter.

Presiding Officer, when I accompanied you to the Canadian Parliament, we watched the procedure at question time. Time for questions and answers was strictly limited, which allowed more of both. What I have learned in this Parliament is that we seldom, if ever, get a straight answer to a question.

I would make this plea: let us ditch the long and verbose answers that we often hear—answers that often answer the question that the answerer wants to answer, not the question that has been asked.

I urge the Parliament to consider following the Canadian system, with the Presiding Officer operating a strict guillotine system. Politicians would soon learn how to be effective, stop dissembling and give short rather than long answers.

I thank the Presiding Officer for the opportunity to speak. I look forward to seeing how the commission's report proceeds.

13:46

Clare Adamson (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): I thank the commission for its work and for its members' attendance at the debate.

As the convener of the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee, I am very aware that a lot of the report's recommendations might come before my committee, but I want to make it clear that I am speaking on my own behalf today. The committee has made no determination on the report at this stage, although we might return to it later in the year.

It has been very interesting to hear people's recommendations. I am a bit confused by Mr Mountain's final comments about First Minister's questions, given that we have been talking giving people more time so that they were better able to give meaningful answers, to contribute and to debate. I am not sure that having a strict guillotine system would achieve the results that I know that he genuinely wants to achieve in terms of ministerial responses.

Edward Mountain: Perhaps I badly explained my point. In the Canadian Parliament, the Speaker sits in his chair, and as a question is answered, he moves his hand down so that the answerer can see how long they have before the hands stops. When the hand comes down, that is the end.

Politicians answer really quickly, because they are frightened of not getting their point across. Does the member agree that doing that would probably prevent long answers, which prevents back benchers from getting in more questions?

Clare Adamson: I take Mr Mountain's point and his interpretation of that procedure, but I have also listened to people say that when debate is constrained by timing, people are often disappointed that they cannot fully explain and deliberate on areas that they want to discuss. There needs to be more consideration and discussion of the matter.

We have very little time today to consider what is a major piece of work. I would like to comment on a couple of areas that have already been talked about.

Regarding the size of committees, I have not sat on a committee with a large number of members, but I have observed some and looked at the *Official Report* of their meetings. It seems that they can become unwieldy and when a member is pursuing a particular point meaningful questioning can be difficult. I agree that smaller committees are probably best.

I am very glad that the commission has looked at parliamentary timetabling. I am not as experienced as many members are, but I have gone through the move from having a committee day to having three plenary sessions. As someone who sat on a Thursday morning committee, I think that the time constraints were often detrimental to the committee's work, and today we have all talked about the importance of the work of committees.

I welcome some of the recommendations on the broadening of scrutiny. The opportunity to conduct post-legislative scrutiny is also very welcome.

As Ben Macpherson also found, many of the points that I was going to make have already been covered, but some of the wider issues that were raised by the commission have not been spoken about. One such issue is engagement, to which the commission gave a great deal of consideration. I am very glad to see that the commission looked at diversity and the opportunity for people for engage in the committee process. That is hugely important.

As someone from an information technology background, I commend recommendation 65, which is that the Parliament reviews its digital communication strategy. The National Assembly for Wales has done some significant work in that regard, and it is definitely something that this Parliament should consider.

Recommendation 30 looks at the human rights aspects of our Parliament, as opposed to our

committees or individual MSPs. We have uncertainty about where Westminster is in pulling away from human rights, and Brexit will have an impact on people's ability to access things such as the European convention on human rights. The commission proposes a stronger role for human rights within the Scottish Parliament and our legislation, and that is hugely important.

I thank everyone again for their efforts in producing the report.

13:50

Alexander Stewart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): Since 1999, the Scottish Parliament has gained more and more powers, and we as MSPs now have responsibility for more policy areas across Scotland than ever before. It is therefore incredibly important that we continue to evaluate the effectiveness of this place as a legislature and adapt things to reflect the way we are moving forward. I am pleased to commend the commission for parliamentary reform, which has given us an opportunity to look at the way the Scottish Parliament is evolving.

I came into the Parliament a year ago as a brand new member. As a fresh pair of eyes, I was happy to make a submission to the commission. I will highlight a few of the recommendations that I was pleased to see in the commission's report. Anything that gives us more opportunity and more capacity and strengthens the Parliament will be welcome.

I welcome the recommendation that committee conveners be elected. I fundamentally believe that that is a good way forward. It would allow members to set out their own agendas for scrutinising the executive, and it would strengthen the role of back-bench members by creating committee conveners who had their own distinct mandate for the direction that they wished committees to go in. The commission also discussed the timings, the format and the membership of committees, and those are all important matters for the Parliament to discuss and evaluate.

Moreover, I was pleased to see the recommendation that we move to a five-stage legislative process, which acknowledges and recognises the importance of pre and post-legislative scrutiny and asks for time to be set aside in the committee's work programmes for that purpose. That would be a good step forward.

Wider consultation and evidence gathering before the current three-stage legislative process, which has also been looked at, would help to ensure that legislation is of a higher quality. That is something that we must all embrace. We want to

ensure that the scrutiny that takes place here is of a high quality and standard.

Likewise, the proposed requirement for the Scottish Government to provide a post-legislative statement after a set period would ensure that any issues that have arisen were addressed. A greater focus on pre and post-legislative scrutiny will be important as we go forward with the United Kingdom's departure from the European Union. That will put more pressure on the parliamentary time that we have to engage, so we must ensure that we have the right processes. Parliamentarians' time is precious, as is everyone's time, so it is important to ensure that we engage with people as effectively as possible to get their views and make the most of their skills.

The increased flexibility that would be afforded by allowing committees to sit at the same time as the Parliament in the chamber would be welcome, and there is also potential for parallel debates to take place. Again, we have an opportunity to consider what we do with our timescales. It is fantastic to be in the chamber and see the debates that take place, but there are opportunities for things to happen outwith the chamber and at other times.

As time is moving on, I will conclude. I pay tribute to the commission for parliamentary reform for the work that it has done and the report that it has published. I look forward to seeing how it evolves and how we will progress. There is no doubt that we need to consider what we have done so far, where we are going and what can be achieved. There is a lot more work to be done, but the commission's report is a good step forward, and I look forward to participating in the process.

The Presiding Officer: Our final speaker in the open part of the debate is Neil Findlay.

13:54

Neil Findlay (Lothian) (Lab): I had not intended to speak in the debate, but I found myself pressing the request-to-speak button and I thank you for calling me, Presiding Officer. We need more of that. We need the flexibility whereby members are not on a fixed list from which they are called to speak. Members should be able to act spontaneously and get involved.

I thank the commissioners for their work, particularly John McCormick, who took part in a conference call with Alex Neil, Tavish Scott, Oliver Mundell and I. We had asked for a representative of the Green Party, but unfortunately the timings did not allow that to happen. The conference call happened during the consultation period—

The Presiding Officer: I ask Mr Findlay to check that his microphone is pointed towards him.

Neil Findlay: Yes, it is.

I hope that I am not dobbling in any of those members by mentioning the call—maybe their party managers did not know about it. [*Laughter.*]

The Presiding Officer: Are you sure that your card is in?

Neil Findlay: My card is in; my microphone is on. I usually do not have any problem being heard, but I will speak a bit louder.

The call was incredibly helpful. During that time, we wanted to put forward the case of back benchers and their rights and to seek change. A number of the issues that we raised and on which we made a number of suggestions have been addressed in report.

The overall principle that we suggested was the need for members to act as parliamentarians in the interests of the people they represent and—I balk a wee in saying this, because my party manager is sitting next to me—not to be hogtied and dictated to by party leaders, whips and business managers.

If we look at Westminster, we see MPs who have had brilliant parliamentary careers operating outwith ministerial office and even outwith committees, holding to account successive Governments, often acting and voting in opposition to their own party. They might be labelled as rebels or mavericks, but they are the epitome of the parliamentarians that we want to create—people who will speak up and represent the people who elected them.

If we look at how business is managed here, we see speaking time, debate slots, members' debates and committee appointments held in the vice-like grip of party managers, whips and leaders. That is how the system operates, for good or for bad. Members can make their own decision about that; I could not possibly comment. All right, I will. If this piece of work does anything, freeing up Parliament from that system and allowing members to act more in the interests of Parliament and the people they are sent to represent rather than in the interests of their party and whatever line is given from the top to the bottom—that affects us all; let us not pretend that it does not—would be the best thing that it could do.

The Presiding Officer: I call Johann Lamont to conclude on behalf of the commission on parliamentary reform.

13:58

Johann Lamont (Glasgow) (Lab): How long have I got, Presiding Officer?

The Presiding Officer: You have eight minutes.

Johann Lamont: It has been a while since I have had as long as that to speak in the chamber; I will try to make the most of it.

First of all, I thank the Presiding Officer for establishing the commission, I thank my party for nominating me to be part of the group and I thank my fellow commission members, both party and non-party representatives, for the way in which they involved themselves in the work.

It is important that the Parliament recognises the level of work that went into the report. Many of the points that have been made in the chamber were thought about, and some were agreed to, and others were disagreed to. However, members should not imagine that the work was done lightly or easily, particularly by the non-party commissioners. It is important that we take the report exceptionally seriously.

Of all the members who have participated in the debate, I think that it is only the Presiding Officer and I who have served in Parliament all the way through, since year dot. I am privileged to be in that position and suggest that, in football parlance, I have played in virtually every part of the pitch—as leader of my party, a troublesome back bencher, a committee convener and an Opposition front and back bencher; I am working on grandee status as we speak. [*Laughter.*]

Along with my fellow members of the commission, I tried to understand, first of all, the importance of the job that we were being asked to do and, secondly, why it mattered.

It matters not because there is a major problem with the Parliament but because the people of Scotland now recognise it as being part of the institutions of this country. We do not ever want to be in a place in which we can be told, as happens in other Parliaments, “You can't do that, because we've never done it that way.” It is precisely because we do not have a tradition of existence that it is all the more important that we are modern, forward looking and aware of the need not to stagnate and to have change.

I want to thank John McCormick, in particular, for his great patience, and my fellow commission members for testing every proposal that was put before them and for doing the heavy lifting of going out into the country and meeting a whole range of groups and organisations.

The non-party commissioners were keen to emphasise in the report that this is a Parliament that is working but could do better, as opposed to one that has major problems. We wanted to look at how the Parliament can strengthen its identity, deliver more effective scrutiny and engage better with the people of Scotland. We have delivered on that remit, with a report encompassing all areas of Parliament's activities and containing 75

recommendations—there could have been many more.

I want to comment on a couple of points that have not been raised, before I attempt to respond to some of the comments that have been made.

A theme that kept emerging as we looked at the various aspects of the commission's remit was diversity. It is important that all aspects of Parliament reflect the diversity of Scottish society. That applies to the MSPs who are elected and also to those whom the Parliament involves in its work. "You cannot be what you cannot see," was a phrase that we heard more than once during the commission's work.

While some progress has been made on gender, we consider that greater progress needs to be made. As a first step, we recommend that the Parliament reports more widely on key aspects of parliamentary business and MSPs by protected characteristic. The Parliament should then work with the political parties to agree benchmarks for diversity among candidates standing for election to the Scottish Parliament. The Parliament rules should also be reviewed to ensure that they are diversity sensitive and inclusive. We have also recommended extending the Parliament's recognition of gender by ensuring that committees themselves reflect the gender balance in the Parliament. That will not be easy, as it will require parties to work together, but we think that it is important.

We have recommended a number of changes to how chamber time is used, including changes to portfolio and question times, to reduce the number of questions but increase the frequency with which portfolios are scrutinised. That is not to say that we should ask ministers fewer questions; it just means that we should stop the nonsense of selecting a whole lot of questions that people know we will never get to, and that we should have a bit of rigour around the questions that are asked.

We have also suggested that the Presiding Officer should have a greater role in ensuring more effective debates and scrutiny in the chamber—in terms of both conduct in the chamber and the accuracy and adequacy of oral and written questions. Those recommendations are aimed at increasing effective scrutiny in the chamber and reducing the number of point-scoring exchanges—none of which I have ever been involved in, of course. [*Laughter.*] People did tell us that they happen, so there we go. On a serious note, people outside Parliament said that they put them off Parliament and politics, which must be our concern.

Our recommendations also recognise the frustration that we heard from former and current

MSPs, from across the chamber, about the sometimes poor quality of exchanges in the chamber. That is not new, but it is something that we must address. Where there are poor-quality oral and written answers, we are seeing people moving towards making freedom of information requests, which cannot be good for Parliament.

I welcome the positive comments that many members have made today. As the commission recognises throughout its report, the delivery of some of our recommendations will present challenges. An overriding message of our report is that Parliament has to loosen its stays on the d'Hondt system. We need to stop the arithmetical approach to parliamentary business. Is any individual party reduced in its influence by our ensuring that somebody who really cares about a particular issue is afforded the opportunity to ask a question or to make a speech? I believe that our being innovative in such ways and perhaps being a little more willing to take risks are important.

I will not be able to deal with all the specific points that have been made, but I will attempt to deal with some of them.

I heard what Kenny Gibson said and recognise his position, but I hope that, in general terms, we embrace the need to address what the commission has highlighted.

On First Minister's question time, the issue was not so much that specific questions would not be asked, but that the questions do not need to be read out. That takes up time, which does not allow more members to come in. We have seen the effectiveness of back-bench questions—even if I was not called today. Members come in without a scripted question, and that has been helpful.

On committees, the most important point was the debate about the need for a second chamber. We need committees that are absolutely committed to the scrutiny role and that will, in their own heads, contemplate the possibility that what has been proposed might not work, because the evidence that has come from elsewhere tells us that. We all have a duty to do that and to ensure that pressure is not put on committee members to diminish their scrutiny role by suggesting that it is not in the party interest for them to reflect on the evidence.

Ruth Davidson and other members raised the role of the Presiding Officers and there is the issue of the Parliamentary Bureau taking ownership of parliamentary business. The commission's view was that the Government of the day has too much influence in determining the debates in Parliament and then feels an obligation to fill up the space, so that we crush important debates into smaller periods of time. That cannot be a good use of our

time. The Presiding Officer should have a role in that.

We know that debates can be chopped up into four-minute bits but I remember that, when I was the party leader, I was given 13 minutes, whether I wanted it or not, when Dr Richard Simpson, sitting at my back, could easily have made a really thoughtful, longer contribution if I could have lent him four or five of my minutes or whatever, or Margo MacDonald, for example, might have added something to the debate. It is about flexibility. We believe—this is very important—that if a debate is going to be living and breathing, we all need to get away from those times when we are asked to make a speech on behalf of our party because the time needs to be filled. We will all have done that. Rather than filling the time, we need to use it effectively to raise issues that are of concern to people.

I will make a couple of final little points.

One of the problems with members' business debates is that there are not enough slots. A party such as mine will get X number of slots and a member will be lucky to get a chance to speak. More flexibility should be allowed. That is not a threat to anybody; there should be more such opportunities.

I welcome the comments from Andy Wightman and the Liberal Democrats. We should see the report as a package and work on the assumption that we will find a way of delivering on that package, because the report was presented as such. That does not mean that our interpretation of it cannot be flexible, but I urge all members, in recognising the work that has been done, not to look to the bits that will be difficult to deliver but to work on the assumption that we will deliver things, because they came from a consultation that went way beyond us. If, as people, we want to refresh and energise, we should all have a shared commitment to making the recommendations work.

I thank the Presiding Officer for establishing the commission, all the back-bench and front-bench members who contributed, my colleagues in the commission and the people of Scotland, who have shown great faith in this institution and want it to do well. We should build on that good will to ensure that we serve the people of Scotland as well as possible.

The Presiding Officer: I, too, thank all members for their contributions, and I add my thanks to the members of the commission, including John Edward and John McCormick, who are with us today.

Decision Time

14:08

The Presiding Officer (Ken Macintosh): Members will be pleased to hear that there are no decisions to be taken today. It simply falls to me to wish you all well for the summer recess. I look forward to welcoming you back refreshed and reinvigorated in September.

Meeting closed at 14:09.

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

Published in Edinburgh by the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body, the Scottish Parliament, Edinburgh, EH99 1SP

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