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Scottish Parliament

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

Portfolio Question Time

Transport, Infrastructure and Connectivity

Levenmouth Rail Link

1. Claire Baker (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab):

To ask the Scottish Government what recent discussions it has had with Transport Scotland regarding the Levenmouth rail project. (S50-02359)

The Cabinet Secretary for Transport, Infrastructure and Connectivity (Michael Matheson): Transport Scotland officials have met Fife Council officers and the appointed consultants, Peter Brett Associates LLP, regularly during the Levenmouth sustainable transport study. The Levenmouth rail link is one of the options that are being considered as part of that study. The most recent meeting took place on 12 September.

Claire Baker: I thank the cabinet secretary for that response and I welcome him to his new role. He will, I hope, be aware of the very active Levenmouth rail campaign. Levenmouth is the largest conurbation in Scotland that does not have a rail line, and is an area with below-average car ownership. The reintroduction of a rail service would offer passenger and freight opportunities, and would bring huge economic, educational, social and cultural opportunities to the area, which is in need of investment.

The campaign for the rail link's reintroduction has the support of Fife Council, as the cabinet secretary recognises, and of politicians from across all parties, who are convinced that it should be a priority investment for the Government. Will the—

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Christine Grahame): I hope that this is the question.

Claire Baker: This is the question, Presiding Officer.

Will the cabinet secretary agree to meet me and other interested members of the Scottish Parliament at the earliest opportunity to discuss the future of the project, and to understand the cross-party consensus that exists behind the plans?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Claire Baker. *[Interruption.]* I am so sorry. I call the cabinet secretary.

Michael Matheson: Presiding Officer, I will be more than happy if Claire Baker wants to answer the questions this afternoon. *[Interruption.]* Was that a yes? *[Laughter.]*

I am aware of the very active campaign by the Levenmouth group, which is keen to see the line being reopened. Claire Baker will be aware of the considerable amount of work that Transport Scotland and Fife Council have already done, working with the campaign group, in looking at the issue. I recognise its importance to communities in Levenmouth and the benefits that can, potentially, come from reopening the line.

I say to Claire Baker that it is important that we make sure that all the stakeholders who have a part to play in looking at the issue are working collectively together—that is, Transport Scotland, Fife Council and the other parties that have an interest. I have been encouraged by the way in which that has been taken forward to date. I am also conscious from the work that Fife Council is doing with Transport Scotland that those bodies are keen to see how further progress can be made on the matter.

On the question about whether I would be willing to meet her and other MSPs, I am, of course, more than happy to look at doing that at some point. It is important that the existing work that is being carried out is concluded so that we can look at it on the basis of where we go next and what the next steps would be. However, I have been encouraged by the way in which the work has been taken forward to date, and I am more than happy to discuss that further with colleagues in Parliament, and to discuss how we can make further progress in the matter.

Jenny Gilruth (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP): I have another invitation for the cabinet secretary. I invite him to meet me in Leven so that he can see for himself the benefits of reinstating the rail link to the town.

Michael Matheson: It has been a while since I have been in Leven, so I will have to take up that offer from Jenny Gilruth. I recognise the interest that she, too, has in the matter. I encourage all MSPs who have a collective interest in it to work in a co-operative fashion. I will certainly do what I can to make sure that we continue to make progress with the proposal.

Of course, it is important that the proposal goes through the proper due process for making decisions on such matters. Any decision on investment in reopening a line or on investment in a new line has to be based on evidence that justifies that as the most appropriate way in which

to help to improve transport connectivity in the area. That is the case for railways, roads and other transport investment.

I am more than happy to meet Jenny Gilruth in her constituency and to discuss the matter in more detail with other MSPs at a later date.

Broadband Connectivity (Stirling)

2. Bruce Crawford (Stirling) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what percentage of households in the Stirling constituency have faster broadband connectivity. (S5O-02360)

The Minister for Energy, Connectivity and the Islands (Paul Wheelhouse): Based on figures that have been provided by the independent broadband analysts, thinkbroadband, 95.1 per cent of all premises in the Stirling constituency are now able to access fibre broadband, and 89.1 per cent can access superfast speeds of 30 megabits per second and above.

When deployment through the digital Scotland superfast broadband programme began in January 2014, just 59.8 per cent of premises were able to access fibre, and only 57.7 per cent at speeds of 30Mbps and above. The latest assured figures show that more than 16,200 premises in the Stirling constituency now have access to fibre broadband as a direct result of the programme, with over 14,000 of those at speeds of 24Mbps and above.

Bruce Crawford: Is the minister aware that a significant number of my constituents in the Stirling constituency still do not have access to fast broadband? Although I am delighted that the Scottish Government will soon be letting the contract for the R100 programme to ensure reaching 100 per cent coverage of faster broadband by the end of 2012, I ask the minister whether he is aware that the communities of Crianlarich and Tyndrum were potentially within the scope of the current contract, for which BT is responsible, and whether he can update me on the prospects for those communities to be connected to faster broadband in the near future.

Paul Wheelhouse: As Bruce Crawford is aware, the Scottish Government has responded to the failure of the "United Kingdom market" approach that has been taken by UK ministers, and it has stepped in with the intervention that he mentioned—the R100 programme—and the digital Scotland superfast broadband programme.

We intervened because of concern about the impact on economic development in communities such as Crianlarich, which Mr Crawford mentioned. I understand that officials in the DSSB team recently provided an update to Strathfillan community council on broadband in Crianlarich,

which stated that planners continue to work on finding a solution that will allow Strathfillan to be covered under the DSSB programme. I am, of course, happy to correspond with Mr Crawford with further detail on that.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I remind members to ask crisp supplementaries and the front bench to provide crisp answers in reply.

South Scotland Trunk Road Network

3. Joan McAlpine (South Scotland) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what action it plans to improve the trunk road network in the South Scotland region. (S5O-02361)

The Cabinet Secretary for Transport, Infrastructure and Connectivity (Michael Matheson): The contract for construction of the £30 million Maybole bypass is expected to be awarded by the end of this year. When it is complete, that project will improve road safety and journey-time reliability along the A77, including to the port at Cairnryan.

Looking to the future, Transport Scotland recently published the draft Borders transport corridors study report, which contains a number of recommendations for improvements to the trunk road network in the region.

In the west, Transport Scotland is progressing the south-west Scotland transport study, with the stakeholder engagement phase having been launched earlier today. The emerging outcomes from both studies will provide important inputs to the forthcoming strategic transport projects review.

Joan McAlpine: I welcome that news. Can the Scottish Government say how much those contracts are worth, and how many jobs it expects to support through such contracts? Can the cabinet secretary confirm what benefits will be reaped by local firms?

Michael Matheson: Construction of the 5km Maybole bypass is estimated to be worth in the region of £30 million. That will benefit the local community by providing opportunities for small and medium-sized enterprises to bid for subcontractor roles. There are provisions for at least four vocational and seven professional site-based training opportunities, and it is estimated that the project will at its peak employ up to 165 people. That will no doubt bring benefits to the local economy. I have no doubt that there will be local contractors who will be keen to take up some of the subcontractor roles that come about through the contract.

Oliver Mundell (Dumfriesshire) (Con): I am pleased that the Maybole project is finally moving forward. On two other long-delayed projects that have seen slow progress, can the cabinet

secretary tell me when the A76 will be fully reopened and when the Scottish Government will finally get around to investing in the A75?

Michael Matheson: It is wrong to suggest that the Scottish Government has not invested in the A75. There has been extensive funding over a considerable period to deal with pinch points and other safety issues, along with maintenance. We will continue to make the necessary investments.

As I said, we are undertaking the south-west Scotland transport study, which will look at the wider issues that need to be addressed. That will include the A75, the A77 and other roads in the area, as well as the transport network as a whole, and it will feed into the strategic approach that we take to transport investment. Unlike what happened during the many years of Conservative rule in this country, we are making real investment in Scottish roads, including the A75.

Colin Smyth (South Scotland) (Lab): Given the economic challenges facing the south of Scotland, the national strategic importance of the ferry terminal at Cairnryan and the chronic lack of investment in the A75, A76 and A77, surely the cabinet secretary accepts that the south of Scotland needs a far bigger share of trunk road investment than it has had in the past few years.

Michael Matheson: As Colin Smyth will be aware, a significant amount of investment goes into the A75 and A77 as part of the maintenance contract and, where appropriate, for upgrades to be carried out. Actually, work has been taking place over recent times, with restrictions in place as carriageway replacement work is carried out.

The member will also be aware that we have commissioned the south-west Scotland transport study, the public consultation element of which started today. That is the first phase of public engagement. There will be further phases in which working groups will be established to engage with local stakeholders on the most effective way to improve connectivity and transport links for the south-west of Scotland. The study will allow us to make decisions on the most appropriate actions to meet the connectivity issues in the south-west of Scotland, and on where investment will be required. That will then sit within the strategic transport projects review.

As Colin Smyth will recognise, it is important that we take the approach of having a wider look to ensure that the investments that we make in areas such as the south-west address the issues and are actually adding value and improving connectivity in those areas, alongside our other proposals for transport and connectivity improvements right across the country.

Transport (Scotland) Bill (Socially Desirable Bus Routes)

4. **Bob Doris (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government how proposals in the Transport (Scotland) Bill aim to support the improved planning and delivery of socially desirable bus routes. (S5O-02362)

The Cabinet Secretary for Transport, Infrastructure and Connectivity (Michael Matheson): The Transport (Scotland) Bill provides local authorities with a range of tools to influence and improve bus services in their area, ensuring that there are sustainable bus networks across Scotland. That includes options to pursue partnership working, local franchising or running their own buses in certain circumstances.

Bob Doris: Some students in my constituency have no easy way of commuting to Cleveden secondary school in Kelvindale, an area that is poorly served by bus. Although I hope to secure a solution to that, under the current system, when Strathclyde partnership for transport tenders a socially desirable bus route, the process is costly, of limited value and often restrictive. Does the cabinet secretary agree that a co-production model for such bus routes, subsidised or otherwise, between communities, the council and bus companies, through which a strategic approach can be taken to socially desirable bus routes, would be far preferable? What can the bill do to address that key issue?

Michael Matheson: Partnership is at the centre of what we want to achieve with our proposals to improve bus services in Scotland. Part of the work that we are taking forward is around a new model for local transport authorities to work with bus operators to help to revitalise services. We are also committed to promoting positive changes and partnership working to improve bus services, and the best way for that to happen is by getting the right partners together. Bob Doris's suggestion about taking forward those matters in a way that is based more on co-production, engagement and partnership is essential to ensuring that bus passengers are at the centre of the way in which we design and deliver bus services and that those services reflect the needs of local communities, including communities in his constituency.

Liam McArthur (Orkney Islands) (LD): I raised with the cabinet secretary's predecessor concerns about cuts to bus services from Gills Bay and Wick to Inverness. Will the Transport (Scotland) Bill recognise that some of those socially desirable and important bus routes serve communities beyond the places that they are in and that it is absolutely crucial that, in that instance, Orkney is fully involved in any discussions about how that

vital bus connection to the ferry services is taken forward?

Michael Matheson: As the member will be aware, the Government invests £250 million a year in bus services in Scotland through a variety of channels. Part of that support is to provide local authorities with subsidies for particular routes when necessary in certain circumstances. That will continue to be the case into the future. It is, of course, for local authorities to decide on where they wish to take such action.

The additional benefits that will be provided under the Transport (Scotland) Bill will include additional methods by which local authorities and other partners can consider taking action when they believe it to be socially desirable and necessary for a bus service to be made available when no commercial operator is in place.

Along with the investment that we are making, the provisions in the bill for additional options for local communities and local authorities will provide more opportunities for actions to be taken at the local level as and when they are necessary.

East Kilbride to Glasgow Rail Line

5. Linda Fabiani (East Kilbride) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what discussions it has had with Transport Scotland, Network Rail and ScotRail regarding the East Kilbride to Glasgow rail line. (S5O-02363)

The Cabinet Secretary for Transport, Infrastructure and Connectivity (Michael Matheson): The Scottish Government has prioritised the East Kilbride and Barrhead routes for enhancement as part of the control period 6 project funding. The first part of the improvement is to run longer trains with more seats for passengers along both routes. The work necessary to deliver that is being pursued urgently, and we expect to make a positive announcement soon.

Transport Scotland, Network Rail and ScotRail are working together closely to develop plans that will deliver better resilience, more capacity, reduced emissions and major passenger benefits during the coming years. Detailed work has already commenced to assess the most economic means of delivering those outcomes.

Linda Fabiani: In his meetings with the ScotRail Alliance and Transport Scotland, will the cabinet secretary stress the inadequacy of the single-track line and the importance of upgrading this commuter line to help the Government with its aspirations regarding low emissions and carbon reduction? As a commuter corridor for Glasgow, the East Kilbride line is crucial.

Michael Matheson: I recognise the concerns that the member has raised and note that she has raised them recently on behalf of her constituents.

Part of the purpose for which we are carrying out the work that is being done at the moment is to look at how we can improve resilience and capacity on the existing network, particularly on the East Kilbride and Barrhead lines, with the objective of providing more seats and greater reliability. As part of CP6, we are looking at the infrastructure arrangements that are in place and where strategic investments can be made to support greater use of our railways and greater resilience and reliability within them, and, alongside that, to provide people with a positive alternative to driving into town centres in places such as East Kilbride and Glasgow.

The points that the member has raised are not lost on me and they are being considered as part of the work that is being done at the moment.

Long-term Infrastructure Spend

6. Gordon MacDonald (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what its programme for government means for the long-term level of infrastructure spend in Edinburgh and across Scotland. (S5O-02364)

The Cabinet Secretary for Transport, Infrastructure and Connectivity (Michael Matheson): Our programme for government committed to increasing infrastructure spend by around 1 per cent of gross domestic product. That will mean that annual investment in our hospitals, schools, houses, transport, low-carbon technology and digital connections will be approximately £1.5 billion higher by 2025-26 than it will be in 2019-20.

That national mission will bring a level of investment in our vital economic and social infrastructure that will protect and create jobs in the short term, and support growth and productivity in the long term.

The city of Edinburgh will continue to benefit from investment across a range of its infrastructure, including key projects such as the St James quarter and the Edinburgh and south-east Scotland city region deal.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You must be brief, Mr MacDonald.

Gordon MacDonald: The commitment to infrastructure spend is to be £1.5 billion a year higher by 2025-26, which means support for schools, faster broadband and improved transport in my constituency, which represents practical benefits for my constituents. Does the cabinet secretary agree that, in such times of Tory-induced uncertainty, such ambitious plans help to

ensure investments that will benefit future generations?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Briefly, please, cabinet secretary. We have to move on.

Michael Matheson: I agree with the member's sentiments. The ambitions that we have set out as part of our national infrastructure mission involve ensuring that we continue to deliver the major infrastructure investment that Scotland needs for the future. Increasing our investment in that area puts Scotland much more in line with other developed countries with regard to the level of investment that is necessary to ensure that we have a modern, fit-for-purpose infrastructure, and the programme that we have set out demonstrates the ambition that this Scottish National Party Government has for Scotland in the years ahead.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I apologise to the four members whom I did not manage to reach. That was notwithstanding my mantra that, if we have shorter supplementary questions and shorter answers, everyone will get in. Perhaps, as they say, that can be taken on board.

Justice and the Law Officers

Prison Disorder

1. Alexander Stewart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what its response is to recent figures from the Scottish Prison Service showing record levels of disorder, drug taking and fire raising in prisons. (S5O-02369)

The Cabinet Secretary for Justice (Humza Yousaf): Like all of us, prison officers have the right to work in a workplace that is free from assault. We recognise the importance of providing a safe and secure environment for those in custody and for the men and women who work in our prisons.

Our prisons deal with increasingly complex populations, including an increase in members of serious and organised crime groups and those under the influence of unknown substances, who all present an increased risk of disorder.

A national strategic risk and threat group has been established by the Scottish Prison Service in response to increasing levels of violence against those in its care or prison staff.

I will add some context. Compared with England and Wales, Scotland's response to disorder in our prisons performs favourably. The latest figures from England and Wales show that the rate of assaults on staff is 223 per cent higher than the rate in Scotland, at 84 per 1,000 prisoners compared with 26 per 1,000 in Scotland. Of course, I suspect that I speak for everyone in the

chamber when I say that that is 26 per 1,000 too many.

Alexander Stewart: Official figures show that 37,518 punishments were given to inmates in 2017-18, which represents a rise of more than 9,000 since the Scottish National Party came to power. What measures is the cabinet secretary putting in place to combat the growing disorder in our prisons?

Humza Yousaf: As I said in my previous answer, the SPS has taken immediate action by establishing a national strategic risk and threat group. When I talked to Colin McConnell from the SPS and Phil Fairlie from the Prison Officers Association, both of them spoke about the complex issues that are involved. Of the 448 separate incidents involving violence against staff over the past two years, 40 per cent were perpetrated by individuals who had identified mental health issues. The situation is much more complex than I have time to deal with in this answer.

Alexander Stewart's question gives me the opportunity to mention the report published today by HM chief inspector of prisons, David Strang. It raises some challenges for our present estate but, in general, it spoke in positive terms. Mr Strang said:

"We should never take for granted the good order that is maintained in Scotland's prisons and that they are in general stable and secure environments."

That is in stark contrast to what Peter Clarke, HM chief inspector of prisons for England and Wales, said in relation to his annual report, which was issued in July. He talked about having seen some of

"the most disturbing prison conditions ever seen",

which have

"no place in an advanced nation in the 21st century".

He also said:

"In this, my third annual report as HM Chief Inspector of Prisons for England and Wales, violence, drugs, suicide and self-harm, squalor and poor access to education are again prominent themes."

That contrast is there, but we must never be complacent, and we will not be.

Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab): I associate myself with the remarks about prison officers, who do fantastic work.

New psychoactive substances are a real and growing problem in our prisons. Given that they are hard to detect, what support is the Scottish Government giving the SPS to help it develop new techniques and technologies to detect psychoactive substances coming into our prisons?

Humza Yousaf: I will ask the SPS to give a detailed written answer with regard to the work that it is doing to combat that issue, which is exactly the type of issue that the newly established national strategic risk and threat group will consider.

As I said, the issue of unknown substances was raised in my discussions with the SPS and the POA as one of the factors that were giving them cause for alarm.

Reconviction Rates

2. Gil Paterson (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government how current reconviction rates compare with 2006-07. (S5O-02370)

The Cabinet Secretary for Justice (Humza Yousaf): Reconviction rates in Scotland are now at a 19-year low and they have reduced to 27 per cent, compared with 32 per cent in 2006-07. That means that over the past 10 years there has been a shift from around one in three offenders being reconvicted to around one in four. The average number of reconvictions per offender is also at its lowest level for 19 years, and it is 22 per cent lower than it was in 2006-07. The figures that were published earlier this month show that individuals who are released from a custodial sentence of 12 months or less are reconvicted nearly twice as often as those who receive a community payback order.

We continue to work to create a just, safe and resilient Scotland, and those figures reinforce the value of taking an evidence-led, collaborative approach in order to reduce the use of short-term imprisonment, prevent reoffending and promote rehabilitation.

Gil Paterson: Can the cabinet secretary outline the measures that have been employed that have caused that dramatic and welcome outcome?

Humza Yousaf: There are many. The Government's focus on rehabilitation and its understanding of community payback orders and community justice have paid dividends. We will continue to invest heavily in community justice. For example, we have allocated around £100 million per annum to local authorities to help them deliver community sentences and reduce reoffending.

I say to parties across the chamber that we should never look at victims' rights, which we will continue to strengthen at the heart of our justice system, and the rehabilitation of offenders as two conflicting narratives or measures. They are not; they are very much two sides of the same coin.

I hope that everyone will look at the data to see where we have had success in reducing the rates

of reconviction and reoffending. I hope that we can find a parliamentary consensus on a way forward that includes, for example, a presumption against short-term sentences of 12 months or less.

Liam Kerr (North East Scotland) (Con): Given that the reconviction rate has fallen by less than 5 per cent over 18 years and that it is still a third higher than the rate in Northern Ireland, does the cabinet secretary agree that there is simply no room for complacency?

Humza Yousaf: I agree that there is no room for complacency, and I hope that I am not demonstrating any complacency. I am suggesting that we look at the justice analytics and the empirical evidence that is in front of us. Having spoken to Liam Kerr on a number of occasions about this agenda, I say to him that, whatever we do—whether it is a Government or an Opposition measure—it is very important that we look at the data to see what works. I hope that we can build a parliamentary consensus, because undeniable and irrefutable evidence exists that community payback orders and community sentences help to tackle reoffending much better than short-term prison sentences do. Therefore, I hope that Conservative members will support a presumption against short-term sentences of 12 months or less.

Rape Victims (Support)

3. Gillian Martin (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what action it is taking to ensure that rape victims are given support throughout the investigation process and after the sentencing of their attacker. (S5O-02371)

The Cabinet Secretary for Justice (Humza Yousaf): Rape and sexual assault are serious crimes and anyone who has been affected should feel able to report such crimes to the police and know that they will be supported through the justice process.

From 2015 to 2018, the Scottish Government provided an additional £1.85 million to support the project, and in 2018 we agreed an additional £1.7 million for the next two years to ensure that local rape crisis centres can continue to provide direct support to women who are engaged with the criminal justice system. In the recent programme for government, we confirmed the award of a further £1.5 million over three years to Rape Crisis Scotland through the equalities budget to speed up access to other support, such as counselling. That funding begins in October, so I hope that it will start to make a difference in the not-too-distant future.

In addition, £1.1 million of additional funding has been provided, in the current year, to the Crown Office and Procurator Fiscal Service and the Scottish Courts and Tribunals Service to improve

the handling of sexual offences cases and communication with victims.

Through the work of the chief medical officer's task force, we are improving care pathways for people who require a forensic medical examination. In December 2017, we published national standards, which are underpinned by £2.25 million of Scottish Government funding.

Gillian Martin: Does the cabinet secretary agree that continuity of police personnel is vital in such cases, and that all victims, particularly women who might be over 16 but who are still in school and very young, should be given the option of being accompanied by another adult throughout police interviews? In some cases in my constituency, that has not always been the case.

Humza Yousaf: I would like to talk to Gillian Martin afterwards about the specific details of that individual case. I have spoken to many partners involved in the criminal justice system and have identified where there are potential gaps in the process, from the moment that such a terrible crime happens right through the investigation, trial and sentencing to post trial and the release of the perpetrator.

For the most vulnerable witnesses and victims, we have made significant progress, but where there are gaps, I am keen that we work collaboratively with all the justice partners involved to ensure that we plug those gaps as much as possible. I would be happy to speak to Gillian Martin about the individual case that she raised to get a bit more information to inform my thinking.

Football Policing (Independent Review)

4. James Kelly (Glasgow) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will commit to an independent review of football policing. (S5O-02372)

The Cabinet Secretary for Justice (Humza Yousaf): There are around 5 million supporters at football matches every year in Scotland. The vast majority of football fans in Scotland are a credit to their teams, with only a tiny number of incidents compared with the total number of supporters attending games.

Operational policing is entirely a matter for Police Scotland. Police Scotland keeps the policing of football matches under constant review, and the tactics and deployments that are used will vary depending on the circumstances and the risks that are associated with each match. Public safety is paramount and the Scottish Government supports Police Scotland in taking appropriate and proportionate action in response to any situation where it is considered that any criminality may arise.

There is a general framework for Police Scotland's approach to football policing and Police Scotland works closely with clubs to develop policing plans. Those arrangements are working well and therefore, in my view, there is no need for an independent review.

James Kelly: As a football supporter, the cabinet secretary will be aware that, so far this season, we have had police filming fans at a low-level friendly, serious questions being asked about crowd management at a Celtic v Rangers game, and reports in the *Sunday Herald* of police officers approaching fans asking them to act as paid informants. There is widespread concern among football fans about those incidents. Does the cabinet secretary accept that football supporters have the right to be respected and the right to support their team and that an independent review of football policing would progress that respect among both parties?

Humza Yousaf: I will take each of the points in turn but, before I do that, I will say that I absolutely agree that football fans—any sports fans—going about their business should be allowed to do so and to enjoy that leisure activity. It is my belief that they very much are able to do so without police involvement. The vast majority of football fans who attend a football match on a Saturday or Sunday or indeed a European game through the week will never have an interaction with the police or, if they do, it will be minimal. The vast majority of football fans get to watch their team play without an interaction with the police.

I disagree with James Kelly's premise that there is widespread concern. I do not know the last time that James Kelly went to a football match but, when I last went, nobody approached me to say that they had major concerns relating to football, so I do not think that concern is widespread at all.

James Kelly described the filming of fans at "a low-level friendly". Is it his suggestion that there will not be sectarian chanting just because a game happens to be a low-level friendly? Police Scotland gave evidence to the Justice Committee to say that filming of football fans helped to gather evidence when there was sectarian singing; that is the reason for doing that. Again, that is an operational matter for Police Scotland.

On the issues that arose at the Celtic v Rangers match, I believe that Celtic is planning an independent review and has a consultant on board for that review. Police Scotland has also said that it will review its measures in relation to the incident that took place. I also have concerns about that incident.

On James Kelly's last point about informants and the *Sunday Herald* article that he mentioned, I will just quote one of the fans, who was not going

by his own name. The article states that one of the fans said that the police came to his door—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I am sorry, cabinet secretary; I know how important this is, but I have let you have a long go at it. Forgive me—you can sit down for a minute—I appreciate that many on the front bench are new to their positions, but they are giving very long answers and I am not getting through many questions and supplementaries. Could you be very brief now, please?

Humza Yousaf: I will. That was the third point that was raised—I was asked, in effect, three or four questions, and I am going through each of them.

The quote from the football fan was that the police

“were there wanting to know if there was going to be any organised fights, or if there was going to be groups of people travelling to certain places ... If I knew that information, could I share it?”

That is hardly heavy-handed policing tactics. Using human informants is regulated by the independent Investigatory Powers Commissioner's Office. If James Kelly has any concerns, he can, of course, raise them directly with IPCO.

Antisocial Behaviour

5. Jamie Halcro Johnston (Highlands and Islands) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what action it is taking in response to the reported increase in incidents of antisocial behaviour. (S5O-02373)

The Minister for Community Safety (Ash Denham): The evidence points towards a long-term and sustained reduction in antisocial behaviour. The Scottish crime and justice survey showed that, in 2008-09, 46 per cent of adults felt that people behaved in an antisocial manner in their area, but by 2016-17, that percentage had fallen to 29 per cent. More adults than ever before feel safe to walk alone after dark in their local area, which I am sure Jamie Halcro Johnston will welcome. It is very important that people feel safe in their communities and, for that reason, we are taking a number of actions that have contributed to the downward trend and which will continue it. Those include refreshing our guidance to police and local authorities; supporting the extension of our whole-systems approach to tackling youth offending; and ensuring that initiatives such as cashback are focused on the communities that are hit by crime and antisocial behaviour.

Jamie Halcro Johnston: I welcome it where antisocial behaviour has reduced but, according to Police Scotland management information figures, antisocial behaviour has increased significantly in parts of my region—in Moray, by 25 per cent in a

single year. With pressure on local authority budgets across Scotland, we have seen the number of community wardens cut in many council areas. Will the minister confirm whether she monitors centrally the deployment of community wardens and whether the police are actively responding to the changes in areas where warden numbers have fallen?

Ash Denham: I will ask my officials to look into the issue of community wardens. The 2017-18 report suggests a slight increase overall in antisocial behaviour. However, the report for the first quarter of 2018-19, which was published in August, suggests that reports fell from 95,052 in April to June 2017 to 90,986 in April to June 2018. If we look at the figures overall, they indicate a long-term and sustained reduction in reports.

Women Remand Prisoners

6. Rona Mackay (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what action it is taking to reduce the number of women who are being placed on remand. (S5O-02374)

The Cabinet Secretary for Justice (Humza Yousaf): First, I thank Rona Mackay and all those who contributed to the Justice Committee's inquiry into the use of remand in Scotland; its report was published shortly before summer recess and I responded to it on 23 August. As the committee report acknowledged, issues impacting on the remand population go beyond justice and can result in disruption to individuals and families that is comparable to a short custodial sentence. Decisions in each case are, rightly, a matter for the court to make within the overall legal framework that is provided by the Parliament, and remand is necessary in some cases.

We work very closely with partners and across portfolios to help ensure that the needs of the remand population are recognised and that remand is used only where necessary and appropriate. That includes action that is specific to women on remand, such as providing additional funding of £1.5 million per annum for bail support services specifically for women and support for the shine mentoring service for women on remand. As confirmed in the programme for government, we will issue revised guidance and provide additional funding for supervised and supported bail. The forthcoming debate on the Justice Committee's report will provide an opportunity to debate the issues in more detail.

Rona Mackay: Does the cabinet secretary agree that alternative methods to custody, such as holistic support and community sentences, should be offered to women, given that 75 per cent of women who are remanded do not go on to be sentenced?

Humza Yousaf: Knowing your wish for brevity, Presiding Officer, I say that, yes, I agree with Rona Mackay. The Government has recognised that point for many years. We are taking forward a number of measures as per Elish Angiolini's commission on women offenders. I will give Rona Mackay a fuller response in writing on the measures that we are taking forward in that regard. I absolutely agree with the premise of her question.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: If everyone is going to be brief, I will call Margaret Mitchell to ask question 7.

Scottish Legal Complaints Commission

7. Margaret Mitchell (Central Scotland) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government when it last met the Scottish Legal Complaints Commission. (S5O-02375)

The Minister for Community Safety (Ash Denham): I met Jim Martin, the chair of the Scottish Legal Complaints Commission, on 21 August, as part of a series of introductory meetings with a range of stakeholders. Scottish Government officials have regular engagement with the SLCC to discuss legal services policy.

Margaret Mitchell: Will the minister confirm who scrutinises the work of the SLCC and holds it to account for its performance?

Ash Denham: The SLCC is an independent commission. We are undertaking a review of the regulation of legal services, during which the work of the commission, and complaints handling in particular, will be looked at. We are considering the regulatory framework across the piece. We would like to see how all that will work in respect of promoting competition, innovation and the public consumer interest. We are looking at all that and we expect the chair of the independent review to produce a report in the autumn.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you. That concludes portfolio questions. I apologise to the three members I was unable to call, for reasons that I know they understand.

Primary 1 Tests

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Christine Grahame): The next item of business is a debate on motion S5M-13945, in the name of Liz Smith, on primary 1 tests. I invite members who wish to speak in the debate to press their request-to-speak buttons now.

14:41

Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): The Scottish Conservatives are very pleased to bring this debate to Parliament, because we believe that it is of crucial educational importance. I am sure that that view is shared by every political party in the chamber. Indeed, I believe that we could all be accused of irresponsibility if we did not acknowledge and listen to the arguments that are being put to us by many in the world of education.

I want to be up front about our position on this matter, but before I do so, I welcome the fact that the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills said at the weekend that he wanted a "fact-based debate". I also welcome the comments that the First Minister made at last week's First Minister's question time, when she told Willie Rennie that educational concerns about this issue should take precedence over politics. That is what many teachers are hoping for this afternoon. We intend to examine the educational arguments in detail.

Bruce Crawford (Stirling) (SNP): Is the member aware that currently 29 councils across Scotland carry out P1 assessments? Will she call today for those councils to halt the assessments, or will she stand accused of breathtaking hypocrisy by doing exactly what she just talked about—engaging in cheap political point scoring?

Liz Smith: I am very well aware of exactly what councils are saying just now. In some of those very same councils, teachers are speaking out loud and clear about their concerns.

Let me be crystal clear about our position and restate our commitment to rigorous standardised tests in P4, P7 and secondary 3, as a crucial part of improving educational attainment and measuring progress in our schools.

I know that some parties disagree with standardised assessments generally, but we support the Scottish National Party's arguments about why they are important in terms of education and accountability. In our view, in drawing his conclusions, John Swinney was absolutely right to look at the trends in the recent programme for international student assessment—PISA—results and the comment in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's report from three years ago, both of which were

consistent with the 2014 Scottish survey of literacy and numeracy. There was undoubtedly a very strong argument for delivering better standardised assessment. Mr Swinney is correct to say that it has been too easy for some schools and local authorities to be less than wholly accountable for their educational performance. It was right to introduce standardisation that provides better accountability.

Let me be unequivocal. We said in our manifesto in 2016 that primary 1 testing was part of that and we should not have argued otherwise. However, it is also a matter of public record that, during the intervening two years, we have on several occasions said in Parliament and in the media that we have misgivings about primary 1 tests in a way that we do not have about P4, P7 and S3 tests.

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (John Swinney): Liz Smith said that the Conservative Party was supportive of P1 assessments in 2016. On 28 August 2018, Liz Smith issued these words:

“The Scottish Conservatives have never been in favour of formal standardised national tests in Primary 1”.

Does she recognise why some of us feel that the Conservatives are deceiving us on the issue?

Liz Smith: I recognise that we made a mistake about primary 1. I just say to the SNP that this, coming from a party that in two programmes for government—in 2016 and 2017—hammered home that there would be an education reform bill, is a bit rich.

Let me come to the evidence, because that is important. I particularly want to speak about the kindergarten model, which is used in many European countries, several of which do not have children start formal education until age seven. The model was established by Friedrich Froebel and was used as the foundation of infant teacher training in Scotland for a long time—a time when Scotland was the envy of the world for what it delivered in both primary and secondary education.

Just as important, that philosophy is wholly in line with the principles of the early years of the curriculum for excellence. Just like the curriculum for excellence, the Froebel model takes a holistic view of every child as an individual. Froebel believed that children should be nurtured as part of their family and community and that success in education came about through strong links between home and school. The infant classroom was based around structured play and learning through discovery and gifts, as Froebel described them, such as counting blocks—latterly, Cuisenaire rods—coloured balls, sand or whatever materials children used to discover.

Froebel did not ask infant teachers to make use of standardised tests or assessments. Instead, he asked them to be skilled in their professional judgments and well informed, through daily observation of each child, which would then be discussed with each family. Everything about that observation was done to inform and improve teaching. Froebel believed that testing at such a young age could prove unhelpful and, more important, that quality information about the child's progress could be gained by more meaningful approaches.

Stewart Stevenson (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP): Will the member take an intervention?

Liz Smith: I will not do so at the moment, if the member does not mind.

In my teacher training years, I remember exactly the same debate taking place among primary teachers. Therefore, in refining my thoughts prior to leading this debate, I looked carefully at the primary 1 tests, at the curriculum for excellence in the early years, and at what Scotland has done in the past. I have to say that the curriculum for excellence in the early years is relatively free of the controversy that has bedevilled the later stages, which was laid bare at the Education and Skills Committee this morning.

I spoke to a lot of people who have done the Froebel training, to find out whether there are concerns that the absence of formal testing means that too many children with problems are not identified. Only a few said yes, that was possible; the majority said that their specialist training enabled them to pick up problems more quickly.

A former teacher, who had been head of an infant department, told me that the best way to decide the answer to the whole question of whether to test in P1 is to look at the historical trends in standards in the middle and final primary years, because if the Froebel system had not been delivering, basic standards in literacy and numeracy in P4 and P7 would have suffered. They did not suffer. Indeed, Scotland had a really strong set of results—and that was irrespective of social background.

At this stage in today's debate, it is important to recognise that current concerns about the standardised tests are largely concentrated on the primary 1 age group. Some critics, with whom I profoundly disagree, believe that the other standardised tests are wrong, but it is primary 1 on which the focus has fallen. We should be asking ourselves why that is.

Stewart Stevenson: Is the member aware that on 17 September 2017 Justine Greening announced a mandatory test for pre-school children, and that on 18 April 2018 a contract was

placed with the National Foundation for Educational Research to develop a mandatory test for all four-year-olds?

Liz Smith: Thank you, Mr Stevenson. Yes, I am aware of that. The same debate is happening in England, Wales and many other places—it is not unique to Scotland.

I would like to share a few thoughts from a primary teacher who wrote to me earlier this week. She told me that she was worried about this debate on primary 1 tests, and about the fact that some politicians may be misrepresenting our position. An experienced teacher of primary 1 and primary 2, she asked me to look at the debate from the point of view of the best interests of the child. She said:

“There have been some good questions in the new tests but there are others which have undoubtedly created problems and which, as a result, have been the catalyst for the current complaints. In some of the questions the language used is not making use of the phonetic alphabet with which children are familiar and they are using names which were very hard to read. Some questions are too long, taking up too much time, and there is overemphasis on data handling within each assessment, for which I can't really understand the purpose.”

She went on to say that that had led to much discussion in her staff room, ending up with many teachers feeling that there had been insufficient training about how many teachers would be able to participate in the tests and how to interpret them, and that there was too much pressure to complete the assessments in a hurry, which I do not think was the Scottish Government's intention. All that seemed to be very time consuming and not altogether clear on how teachers will use the tests to inform their teaching, which is very important.

John Swinney: Does Liz Smith not accept that the issues that she recounts from a primary schoolteacher, which are entirely reasonable, should lead us to the conclusion that we should monitor and consider the contents of the assessments, rather than halt them as her motion proposes?

Liz Smith: No. Scottish Conservatives disagree with that. Given the evidence that has been piling up over the past two years, we consider that the time has come to call a halt, reconsider the evidence that is very much before us and evaluate the best way of progressing primary 1 pupils.

Let me come to the concerns from other education professionals. The cabinet secretary knows that, initially, his economic advisers were included in that group. Again, there are some mixed views, and it would be wrong to suggest otherwise. However, there is a common theme coming through what they are saying—whether it be Sue Ellis, Lindsay Paterson or Sue Palmer, all of whom I greatly respect in this debate. They

have differing views, but in each case they make one fundamental point: the issue is not just about their being able to measure outcomes but that any form of assessment or test must be meaningful. The Scottish Government must ensure that all teachers who use the test feel entirely comfortable with what they are being asked to do. On that last point, it is very clear to me that many primary 1 teachers currently do not feel at all comfortable, which is why this debate is so important.

When pressed on some of the concerns about the content of the current P1 tests, John Swinney said, in August this year:

“If we need to look ... again and reflect on the feedback to make sure the guidance is appropriate for the process then we will do that to guarantee young people have the type of educational experience we want them to have.”

I believe that that was a recognition that there were some serious issues to be addressed. The cabinet secretary knows, I think, that that is what many teachers want him to do. He knows, too, that the advice provided about the P1 tests—including what the rights of parents are—has been confused and muddled; that point was made by Lindsay Paterson in his article last week.

The Conservatives have been accused of being interested in nothing other than political opportunism and jumping on a bandwagon. If that were true, it would not be possible to find on the record comment from me and several of my colleagues, on several occasions in the course of the past two years, questioning the educational value of primary 1 testing. As a party, we continue to have such misgivings, and we are listening to what is being said by those who are being asked to deliver the tests. That is why I am proposing this motion, which asks the Scottish Government to stop and think, and to halt the primary 1 tests so that we can reconsider the facts that are before us and the whole approach to evaluating pupil progress in primary 1.

I move,

That the Parliament believes that good-quality pupil assessment is an essential component of the drive to raise educational standards in Scotland's schools, but notes the level of concern that has been raised by teachers and other education professionals regarding the introduction and delivery of new testing arrangements for Primary 1 (P1) pupils; considers that this concern questions whether the new P1 tests are in line with the play-based learning philosophy of early years provision in the curriculum for excellence, and, in light of this concern, calls on the Scottish Government to halt the tests in P1 and to reconsider the evidence and the whole approach to evaluating the progress of P1 pupils.

14:54

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (John Swinney): When we make decisions about the

future of our children's education, it is important that we have available to us dispassionate expert opinion to help us to make the correct choices. I have listened with great care to the words that Liz Smith has shared with us today. I say with the degree of respect that Liz Smith knows I have for her, that I do not consider that we have heard in the debate so far the marshalling of expert opinion that she claims.

In 2015, the Scottish Government invited the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development to review Scottish education. In its report "Improving Schools in Scotland: An OECD Perspective", it said:

"The light sampling of literacy and numeracy at the national level has not provided sufficient evidence for other stakeholders to use in their own evaluative activities or for national agencies to identify with confidence the areas of strength".

The report also states:

"There needs to be a more robust evidence base available right across the system, especially about learning outcomes and progress."

That reference to "progress" is crucial. It is precisely what the national improvement framework and national standardised assessments seek to do.

Oliver Mundell (Dumfriesshire) (Con): I wonder whether the cabinet secretary had time to listen to Professor Jim Scott's comments this morning in the Education and Skills Committee. He said that no evidence has been brought forward to support the assessments, and that we do not know whether they are robust.

John Swinney: I have just set out why we need the assessments: the OECD told us—

Oliver Mundell: Where is the evidence?

John Swinney: I am just marshalling the issue. *[Interruption.]* We sought external independent opinion, which said that we did not have enough information about learning outcomes and progress, so we have put in place the standardised assessments. *[Interruption.]* How we assess their effectiveness is by asking our education advisers in Education Scotland to ensure that each level of the assessments is compatible with each level of curriculum for excellence, and consistent with the benchmarks that have been signed off by chief inspector of education and the chief examiner, in order to make sure that young people are properly equipped, with the ability and the platform to progress in our education system. *[Interruption.]*

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I am sorry, cabinet secretary, but before we carry on, I have a point to make. Mr Mundell—you are annoying me

with your barracking. If you want to say something, you should try to intervene.

John Swinney: The president of the Association of Directors of Education in Scotland made the point, in the letter that she authored with my officials to directors of education, that assessment is an essential part of a good education system and is an integral part of effective teaching and learning. She said:

"A key principle of Scotland's education system is that assessment is for learning. Assessment allows teachers to understand children and young people's progress and to plan the next phase of their learning and teaching. Assessment is, therefore, a key tool to inform teachers' professional judgment of the needs of the children and young people they are teaching. ... The Scottish Government and the Association of Directors of Education, therefore, see the assessments as an integral part of everyday learning for children and young people in P1, P4, P7 and S3, delivered as part of the education authority's duty to provide education."

The "professional judgment" of teachers—Liz Smith made this point—is at the heart of the framework and the standardised assessments that we have put forward, and the assessments provide a consistent tool to inform those judgments.

Teachers have been using assessments for years to confirm their judgment of children's progress. The vast majority—29 out of 32 local authorities—were using some form of standardised assessment before the national scheme was introduced. Crucially, the majority were assessing P1 children not just once, but twice during the year.

Iain Gray (East Lothian) (Lab): When Mr Swinney made a statement a couple of weeks ago, I asked him whether he knew how many of those local authorities had replaced the previously used diagnostic assessments with the new SNSAs.

John Swinney: East Renfrewshire, for example, is a long-established assessment authority. It wants consistency between the SNSA and the historical model that it has been using, in order to ensure that it has consistency in its educational information. I consider that to be a perfectly reasonable transition position for a local authority to take, but not a long-term position.

There is nothing new about assessments for P1 children. Local authorities, led over the years by the Scottish National Party, Labour, the Conservatives and the Liberals, have all taken assessment approaches, and nobody has objected.

There are sound educational reasons for that, the key one being that it is absolutely vital to get as much information as possible on children's

achievement as early as possible. Professor Sue Ellis, who was quoted by Liz Smith, said:

“We know that there is a big difference in children’s attainment when they start school and that difference grows and gets wider as children move through the school system, so we do need some way of tracking that and checking it”.

Liz Smith: When it comes to raising standards across the board, which is what we all want, what evidence does the cabinet secretary have to support his approach? With regard to international measurements, many of the countries that are doing exceptionally well on educational standards do not start measuring until children are seven. Does the fact that they are doing better than Scotland not prove a point?

John Swinney: The key point here goes back to the quotation from the OECD that I read out at the beginning of my speech. Essentially, we do not have enough information about learning outcomes and progress. For progress to be measured, we must understand whether children are acquiring the skills that we expect them to acquire at the early level, because if they are not, they will be at a disadvantage in progressing to the first level. Ultimately, that will be compounded and will fuel the attainment gap, which is what we are trying to erode.

The assessments are essential. For the first time, teachers are able to use assessments that are specifically designed for and aligned to curriculum for excellence. For the past two years, I have picked up from teachers around the country that, under CFE, they are not confident in the levels that they should be achieving for their young people. The process has been strengthened by the benchmarks that I have put in place, and the standardised assessments provide consistency and compatibility between authorities so that we can be assured that, wherever a child walks into a school, the teaching profession is working to the same standard across the country.

Johann Lamont (Glasgow) (Lab): Is the data being collected at national level? We have been advised that it would not be collected at national level, but the cabinet secretary seems to be suggesting that it is necessary for it to be collected at national level, so that standards can be identified at national level.

John Swinney: I am saying nothing of the sort. I am saying that teachers, in working their way through the assessments, will have greater clarity about the performance of individual young people against the standards across the country—the benchmarks for what we expect from curriculum for excellence. I am talking about the levels that are achieved by young people across the country, not the results across the country.

The assessments are high quality and are delivered as part of everyday learning. They provide teachers with a detailed breakdown against core skills, and they highlight not only where a child might need additional support to achieve the relevant standards, but where a child might be excelling and might require additional challenges. That is in keeping with the Government’s twin aims of closing the attainment gap and raising standards.

Crucially—this relates to part of Liz Smith’s motion—the assessments are designed to fit compatibly with the early level of curriculum for excellence, which is a play-based level. It is therefore appropriate that only a small amount of time—less than an hour in one year, on average—is taken to ensure that the play-based learning that is undertaken by children is equipping them with the core skills that we believe they should acquire by the end of P1. Without that assessment, we will run the risk that the needs of children in progressing on to the first level of CFE might not be effectively served by our education system.

If the assessment is administered correctly, a child will take part in it as part of their normal class work and it will not feel different from any other task that they are asked to do.

I have dealt with the education arguments; I want now to turn to some of the political issues. I acknowledge the long-standing hostility of the Greens and the Liberal Democrats to such testing. They are entitled to their view, but I do not share it. I point out to them that they are hostile to all standardised assessments and that they are being asked to vote for that in the Conservative motion.

I am appalled by the Conservative Party. When the First Minister announced national standardised assessment in September 2015, Ruth Davidson responded in the chamber by saying:

“I am pleased that our repeated and sustained calls for standardised assessments to be introduced in schools have been heeded.”—[*Official Report*, 1 September 2015; c 31.]

The Conservative manifesto in 2016 said that the Scottish Government should

“design the new standardised tests at P1, P4 and P7 to fit into these international methodologies”

and claimed credit for the introduction of national assessment.

This morning, Liz Smith said that the Conservatives had changed their mind on P1 assessment. That was not what she said on 28 August, when she said:

“The Scottish Conservatives have never been in favour of formal standardised national tests in Primary 1”.

That statement is untrue. It demonstrates the deceit that is at the heart of the Conservative motion today.

Last week, the Conservatives were demanding more school data; this week, they want less. In 2016, the Conservatives supported P1 assessment, but today they do not. There is only one conclusion to draw: the Conservatives are playing politics with the education of our children. We will not play along with them.

I move amendment S5M-13945.1, to leave out from “considers” to end and insert:

“recognises that assessments are a key tool to inform teachers; professional judgment of the needs of the children and young people that they are teaching; agrees that the assessments are delivered as part of everyday learning and provide consistent evidence for teachers to identify the next steps in a child's education; further agrees that this is especially valuable in P1 if closing the attainment gap is to continue; recognises that the assessments are not high stakes, there is no pass or fail, and that they should never cause stress to young children, and welcomes the changes and improvements already made following the first year of operation to ensure a better experience for younger pupils and provide extra reassurance to teachers and parents.”

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I am giving speakers a little extra time—Liz Smith could have had that, too—as we have time in hand. There were a lot of interventions. If anybody is wondering about the timings, it has been to take account of interventions.

15:05

Iain Gray (East Lothian) (Lab): I am clear that we on the Labour side of the chamber have no problem with teachers assessing pupils' learning. Teachers assess pupils' learning every day using a variety of techniques and diagnostic methodologies and, above all, they deploy their professional expertise to do so.

We also have no problem with the monitoring of literacy and numeracy standards in our schools. We encourage that, and not just nationally. We would like Scotland to re-enter the trends in international mathematics and science study, or TIMSS, and the progress in international reading literacy study, or PIRLS, international comparisons, which, as we found out last week, were ditched not for a good educational reason but to save money.

However, we have a problem with league tables and high-stakes testing, which is why, in 2003 when we were in Government, we got rid of it and replaced it with the literacy and numeracy survey. It did the job well in a statistically rigorous way that was accepted by teachers, educationalists and parents. The current Scottish Government did not

improve it, as the OECD suggested, but instead abolished it.

Our problem is with the Scottish Government's national standardised tests, which purport to inform individual learning and monitor national standards at the same time with the same test.

John Swinney: Mr Gray said that we use the standardised assessments to judge performance around the country, but that is not the case. We use information from teachers' professional judgment about the achievement of levels by individual pupils—that is what is undertaken. Does Mr Gray accept that the surveys that he cites do not give us an insight into individual weakness in the system, whereas, if we want to improve outcomes for young people, we need to have that data available to us?

Iain Gray: The survey is certainly not a diagnostic learning tool, and it was never claimed to be. It is a summative survey tool. Later on, I will go into a little detail on exactly that point.

James Maxton once said of politics:

“If you can't ride two horses at once, you shouldn't be in the circus.”

Mr Swinney has failed to ride the two horses of individual diagnostics and national standardised testing at once. That has resulted in the current mess and in some farcical moments, such as Mr Swinney's press release that told us that the tests were not tests and that we should stop calling them tests being issued on the same day that his department released an evaluation that called them tests. He also told parents who asked whether the tests were compulsory that they are not compulsory, but that the parents have no right to refuse to allow their child to take them. That is a riddle and not an answer. There was also yesterday's desperate measure of Scottish Government officials putting MSPs and journalists through a literacy and numeracy test for five-year-olds, as if that would prove anything.

Mr Swinney has clearly told the Parliament that the tests are

“diagnostic assessments to support learning and teaching. Data from them will not be published or used for accountability”.—[*Official Report*, 5 September 2018; c 21.]

However, the First Minister has said something different. She said:

“As a result of the introduction of standardised assessment and the new way in which we are monitoring performance, instead of the previous Scottish survey of literacy and numeracy data, we will now have data on every pupil in the country, which will allow us to determine progress in reducing the attainment gap.”—[*Official Report*, 21 June 2018; c 10.]

The First Minister thinks that those are statistically valid results to monitor progress

nationally, whereas the Deputy First Minister swears to us that they are not.

The truth is that the Government has managed to introduce assessments that feel like high-stakes tests to teachers and pupils, but do not produce statistically valid comparative measurements, and diagnostic tests that teachers tell us that they do not trust to diagnose and which have not replaced the assessments that they used previously. The Deputy First Minister says that they are not summative assessments against benchmarks with a pass or fail, but yesterday we were shown the teacher sheet for each pupil, which is a list of curriculum for excellence benchmarks with a tick or a cross against each one according to whether it was passed or failed. The pupil is then placed against a national norm. We were shown results being collated at class, school and local authority levels. That looks like summative norm-referenced testing to me.

To be honest, what I think of the assessments is not important; what matters is what teachers think of them, and their views are very clear, not least from the Educational Institute of Scotland.

John Swinney: I acknowledge that many teachers do not like the standardised assessments. Equally, many other teachers like them. The issue was illustrated to me this morning at the Scottish learning festival, where I was open to questions from a huge audience of teachers. In the first group of questions, one teacher made the case for and one teacher made the case against: there are different opinions. What is important is that we have to be equipped with the diagnostic ability to support young people. That is why we have the assessments.

Iain Gray: No. What is important is that the evidence, consensus and support are built before an educational reform is introduced, and not after.

Only a couple weeks ago, the EIS, which represents teachers, reaffirmed its

“serious concerns over the educational value”

of the national standardised assessments. It wrote to every MSP to do that. One teacher summed things up to me, saying:

“I cannot use the data from these tests to support my teaching in ANY way”.

That teacher’s view was repeated to Mr Swinney at the learning festival this morning.

Those problems and flaws apply to the whole of the Scottish national standardised assessments but, more than anywhere, they apply in P1. There are reasons for that.

First, there are many stories of four and five-year-olds having been upset—even to the point of tears—by questions that they have found

incomprehensible or confusing and which required computer skills that they found daunting.

Secondly, that has meant that teachers have told us that, in primary 1, far from those assessments being an integral part of everyday teaching, they have lost 30, 40 or even 50 hours of valuable teaching time for each of the literacy and numeracy tests.

Thirdly—and above all—there is, as Liz Smith said, growing evidence that, at that early age, play-based learning is the most appropriate and effective approach to education in general and closing the attainment gap in particular.

The Deputy First Minister has protested in the past and said again today that there is a play-based curriculum in P1, but the experts tell us that we cannot have that and his standardised tests. They are not compatible. Even if the Government insists on persisting with the tests further up the school while it tries to sort out what they really are supposed to be, at the very least—the very minimum—surely it must listen to the teachers, whose professional expertise Mr Swinney claims to hold in high regard, and scrap the tests in primary 1.

15:14

Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green): I am glad that we have this opportunity to debate standardised assessments, after weeks of those of us who speak on education debating the issue outside Parliament.

As the Deputy First Minister made clear, the Scottish Greens have long been clear that we oppose the policy. He was not correct to say, however, that in supporting Liz Smith’s motion we support standardised assessments. Members will not find that phrase in the motion. I will read the first part of it. It says:

“That the Parliament believes that good-quality pupil assessment is an essential component of the drive to raise educational standards in Scotland’s schools”.

We agree, but we do not believe that that assessment should take place through the formal standardised assessments. There is no contradiction there, and I will explain why as I go through my speech.

There has been much talk of manifestos. In our 2016 manifesto—a fine read that I would recommend to the Government—we unequivocally opposed the return of standardised assessments, and not just for four and five-year-olds. We welcome the parliamentary majority that has now formed around that position with regard specifically to the P1 assessments.

The Scottish Government has been keen, including in this debate, to say that the policy is

evidence based, but it was international best practice and evidence that led the Greens to oppose standardised testing in the first place. To tick off one particular cliché of education debates, I note that Finland is one of the undisputed success stories of education reform. It turned from being mediocre, at best, in the 1980s to being a model of excellence from the early 2000s onwards. Although a range of factors have contributed to its success—most obviously, lower levels of inequality and poverty have supported its success in education—its approach to standardised tests are part of that success story.

Finnish education was reformed to allow teachers the freedom to assist pupils based on their own best judgment. Standardised testing was dropped and replaced by an emphasis on continuous informal assessment of the individual needs of each pupil. Our Education and Skills Committee visited Finland earlier this year, and during that visit we were all struck by the culture of trust in its system—particularly trust in classroom teachers, with proper resourcing, support and training, to come to their own judgments about their pupils. That is what we need in Scotland, particularly for children with additional support needs, for whom the tests cause even more unnecessary anxiety.

Well-trained teachers and well-staffed schools are what we need in order to ensure that every additional need is identified and supported. That means reversing the cuts that have seen educational psychologists, and the grants associated with studying on that course, disappear.

The reason why Finland took the approach that it did is that, although some standardised assessments may provide some data that can be useful—a criticism that has been levelled against Scotland's assessments is that they do not provide that—the very presence of the tests and the impact that they have on pupil experience and teaching is a net negative. Pupils often react badly to the tests. Some experience anxiety and fear. In others, they elicit boredom. We knew that already. There were warnings from the Scottish Government's international advisers before the policy was introduced.

Professor Andy Hargreaves, who is a member of the Scottish Government's international council of education experts, highlighted the fear and anxiety that standardised tests cause pupils. Other academics, the EIS and the experience of individual teachers and pupils have all confirmed that. We have all heard the reports of young children in some cases being reduced to the point of tears and experiencing huge anxiety over the tests, but teachers are also pressured, whether intentionally or not, to teach to the test. As Iain

Gray explained, the focus becomes hitting some pre-defined metric regardless of its suitability to the pupil that the teacher knows, and knows best. The professional judgment of individual teachers, which is one of the principles that underpins the curriculum of excellence—and one that we all agree on—is undermined by the policy.

The Deputy First Minister can give all the assurances that he likes on how standardised tests will be used, but the very presence of the assessments creates the pressure to teach to them, rather than emphasising the needs of individual pupils.

Teachers are concerned that the results of assessments far beyond the primary 1 level will be used by senior management and others to form judgments on their professional abilities, because the data can be aggregated to a class level. That is what creates the pressure to teach to the test. There are also well-grounded fears that, although there is no intention—for now—to return to league tables, that sets the groundwork for future league tables, and informal tables may begin to emerge. The presence of standardised tests pushes education to become target driven at a level that is abstracted from the needs of individual pupils.

This cuts straight to the heart of what we want Scottish education to be. Do we want a culture of repeated formal assessments and pressure being heaped on pupils throughout their school lives or a culture of tailored support that recognises the capability of individual students and relies on teachers' professional judgment to foster their learning, as the curriculum for excellence intends?

What I find particularly frustrating about the introduction of the standardised tests is that all the issues that I have highlighted were already well known. As I mentioned, members of the Scottish Government's international council of education experts have been at the forefront of some of the criticisms. I appreciate that there are some experts, including on the Government's council, who support approaches of standardised assessments. The Government has drawn attention to a number of them. I respect their views and I do not for a second doubt their expertise in the field. However, the question that must be asked is why the Government is ignoring the other assembled experts. Why is it ignoring the voices of teachers and pupils, and of people in Scottish education who are saying that there is a problem?

Just this morning, the Education and Skills Committee heard from Professor Jim Scott, as Oliver Mundell mentioned. He said that he had not seen sufficient evidence that the assessments are beneficial. We also heard from Dr Alan Britton, who said that he has not seen evidence of consultation and consensus-building on this policy.

That is a polite understatement if I have ever heard one.

Teachers, parents and education charities have all raised concerns and called for the P1 tests to be scrapped. After today's debate, a majority of members of this Parliament could be added to the ever-growing list of those calling for a rethink. While many of us have concerns far beyond P1 assessments, that is what the debate is focused on.

I urge the Deputy First Minister to walk back his previously stated intentions to ignore the will of this Parliament. After the shambles of his proposed education bill, the majority of which he will now attempt to force through without a Parliamentary mandate, Mr Swinney is developing a reputation for casting aside the views of elected members as well as those of experts, teachers, parents and pupils.

That is no way to build a successful system of education, and it is certainly not building a consensus. It will result in the opposite of Finland's culture of trust. Today we will give him an opportunity to take a different tack. For the sake of teachers and pupils currently experiencing this failed policy, I hope that he will listen.

15:21

Tavish Scott (Shetland Islands) (LD): I thank Liz Smith for bringing this debate to the chamber today. If the Scottish Government had been sure of its ground, it could have introduced the debate at any point in the past weeks and then Mr Swinney would not have had to miss the learning festival this afternoon. Ministers may want to reflect on the benefits of leading a debate if they are so confident of their arguments.

A retired Edinburgh teacher whom I know provides support to local schools here in the capital, paid for through the Government's attainment fund. In the past year, she has spent more time helping five-year-old girls and boys to sit their primary 1 test than on the job that she was employed to do by the city council.

On Monday, I sat down with P1 teachers in Shetland who showed me the reality of the tests for five-year-olds. I completely concur with Iain Gray's assessment of the data that is produced: the children's names, the numbering, and the questions and the ticks or crosses that can be produced from them. The simple message from those teachers was that they learn nothing about pupils that they did not already know.

As others have already said, two eminent educational researchers told Parliament's Education and Skills Committee today that they did not recognise evidence, consultation or

consensus-building in relation to primary 1 testing. They also pointed out that the Government had not followed a reasonable principle and piloted the initiative to judge its effectiveness.

The principle that I share with most teachers and parents is that four and five-year-old girls and boys should encounter a play-based approach to the start of school. The curriculum for excellence early level for three to six-year-olds stresses exploration and play, yet teachers explain that P1 tests skew learning away from play. Therefore, I do not recognise or agree with the Deputy First Minister's interpretation of that in his remarks.

There is a wider debate, too, about why Scotland persists with the age of five for the formal start to education. Many countries around the world—88 per cent of them, indeed—structure a play-based nursery or pre-school curriculum through to six years old, and some countries start formal education at seven.

John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP):

Given that we are emphasising play, is it Tavish Scott's argument that play should not be assessed?

Tavish Scott: Mr Mason would do well to read the curriculum for excellence guidelines for the three to six-year-old programme and he would understand the answer to that question without needing to ask it. Nursery teachers assess all the time—that is the point, and, frankly, I do not understand why members on the Government benches do not get it.

What is the reality of testing? Rather than go to a civil service tutorial yesterday, I have listened—not just in this past week, but for weeks and weeks over months—to primary 1 teachers and school management teams talking about the reality of testing, and I am sure that I am not the only Opposition member to have done so.

There is a balance to the argument. The former standardised assessment was for some teachers a genuine diagnosis, but teachers have graphically explained that what went before was quite different from the new national standardised tests now in classrooms. To suggest otherwise is simply misleading.

The parents group Upstart also contends that local authority baseline testing is partly responsible for the lack of play-based teaching in many schools.

The structure of the tests assumes that five-year-old boys and girls can read and use a mouse, that they have an attention span that will last the length of the test and that they will not simply guess the answer. That is wrong on all counts, as many teachers observe.

The Scottish Government has repeatedly claimed—the Deputy First Minister did so again today—that the test takes less than an hour per pupil. Indeed, I think that he said that it was an average of 20 minutes. I can find no teacher who confirms that. I understand that, in a class of 21 primary 1 pupils of varying abilities, the average time is an hour per pupil, and not 30 minutes. It is not under an hour—it is an hour.

John Swinney: Mr Scott is right to press on the evidence. The Government either has answered or is about to answer freedom of information requests on that, and those answers demonstrate that the available data shows that the average time for a P1 assessment in numeracy is 22 minutes, and in literacy it is 27 minutes. That information, which is across more than 100,000 individual assessments, is in the public domain.

Tavish Scott: We will see—we will all cast a close eye on that. I think that the word used was “average”, but we will be happy to look at the evidence on that. All that I am saying is that plenty of teachers, not just from Shetland but from all over the country, have told me time and again that it takes more than an hour per pupil.

The point is not just about the time that it takes the pupil; it is about the time that the teacher takes out of the classroom when he or she could be teaching all the pupils in the class. The Deputy First Minister gave no recognition to that important point in his remarks. The teacher could be spending that time with the 21 pupils as opposed to taking individual pupils bit by bit through the test. Whether it takes 22 minutes, 27 minutes or an hour, that is time not spent in the classroom.

It is therefore wrong to underestimate and disparage the evidence of class teachers everywhere that the time taken on primary 1 tests is time lost to teaching and therefore to the educational advancement of five-year-olds. Testing five-year-olds is particularly demanding on teachers in composite classes, of which there are many in parts of Scotland, but the Government has simply not recognised that as yet.

There are sensible educational arguments why the P1 testing regime is not appropriate and should be stopped. The principle of the argument does not support testing five-year-olds, and the practical case against it is overwhelming. I am at a loss to understand why the Government is deaf to the practical observations of teachers and parents.

Ministers have used extraordinarily aggressive language in talking about anyone who even considers that P1 testing is wrong. Many teachers have asked me why that is the case. There are sensible educational alternatives that help primary 1 teachers in their constant evaluation of their class. For example, why do not ministers listen

carefully to teachers who use the northern alliance literacy programme, which is constructive and helps teachers with their pupils? As one teacher put it to me the other day, why does not the Government embrace and support the things that work and help teachers, rather than impose tests that do not tell them anything about their classes that they did not already know?

What is the Government's case for testing five-year-old girls and boys? Is it about the data that the Government wants? One of Mr Swinney's officials helpfully explained today how school league tables can be calculated using the data from the P1 tests. Mr Swinney made much of that today. It looks to me like the remorseless direction of travel. Tests are not appropriate for primary 1 girls and boys. The Government should accept that and it should accept the will of the Parliament.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Linda Fabiani): We move to the open debate, with speeches of six minutes. Time is quite tight.

15:28

Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I am grateful for the opportunity to contribute to this debate on primary 1 testing. I do so from the perspective of someone who has two children in primary school and who is also married to a primary school teacher, so what happens in our primary schools is of keen personal interest to me as well as being of wider political importance.

The starting point for the debate is to make it clear that, as Liz Smith set out, we in the Conservatives support standardised assessments as a matter of principle. I know that other parties take a different view—we have already heard from them—but our position is that there is great value in standardised assessments further up the school. Those assessments can be of value to individual teachers, they can help parents in understanding what stage children are at and, equally important, they can give an overall picture of performance across the country.

We have heard the cabinet secretary set out why he believes that standardised assessment is important, and I have sympathy for his argument and agree with a lot of the points that he made. However, it flies in the face of decisions that were taken by him and his predecessors in office to reduce the amount of information that is available. The Scottish survey of literacy and numeracy was scrapped. Mr Swinney's predecessor removed Scotland from the international trends in international mathematics and science study, or TIMSS, and the progress in international reading literacy study, or PIRLS, which provided important comparisons with other countries.

If the Government is going to make the argument today about the value of assessment, it needs to be consistent in its approach, yet it is being completely contradictory to what it has done in the past.

Today's debate is not about standardised assessments in themselves. It is focused entirely on one question: are standardised assessments appropriate at P1 level? Here is where we depart from the cabinet secretary. The evidence we have heard from those involved in education, and particularly from teachers on the front line, is that there are real issues with the standardised assessments for P1 as they exist. We know that the EIS opposes the tests. We have heard quoted in the debate today evidence about the views of various teachers and headteachers who have expressed concern about the impact of the assessments. We have also heard the views of many parents, who are deeply concerned about the tests to the extent that many are actively looking to remove their children from the system rather than have them face testing. Liz Smith has already set out in some detail her concerns with the inappropriateness of this form of testing at P1.

I cannot see why such testing is necessary. Any primary 1 teacher who is worth their salt will, within a few weeks—if not days—of new pupils starting at school, have a strong grasp of their individual abilities. It is precisely because we have well-trained and committed P1 teachers that we should have confidence that they can pick up on those children who are doing well, those who are struggling and those who will need additional support. It is therefore difficult to see what improvements a standardised test, as proposed, will bring to the information available to a good primary 1 teacher, given that they should have that information already.

The reality is that if the tests are already proving to be controversial and unpopular with parents, as is the case, large numbers of parents will effectively boycott the tests by removing their children from the system, as they are entitled to do. The value of the tests disappears altogether if a large majority of parents and pupils do not participate. The policy objective is defeated because parents vote with their feet.

In approaching the issue, the Scottish Conservatives believe that we should listen to the evidence. As Liz Smith said earlier, we said in 2016 that we would support P1 testing, but we now accept that that was wrong. We have listened to the evidence and we have changed our minds. We realise that we got that wrong.

In the same way, we heard from the cabinet secretary for more than a year how vital his new education bill was going to be. The First Minister even told Parliament last year that

“A new education bill will deliver the biggest and most radical change to how our schools are run that we have seen in the lifetime of devolution.”—[*Official Report*, 5 September 2017; c 13.]

One year later, it was announced that the bill was to be abandoned. The cabinet secretary seems to be telling us that it is all right for him to change his mind about the way forward, but other parties are not permitted to change their minds. That is an extraordinary set of double standards, even for this Government.

The cabinet secretary has gone further. He has used extraordinary language this afternoon. He accused the Conservatives of deceit because we changed our mind. He should apologise for that remark.

John Swinney: I did not accuse the Conservatives of deceit for changing their mind. I accused the Conservatives of deceit because Liz Smith said, on 28 August:

“The Scottish Conservatives have never been in favour of formal standardised national tests”,

yet in his hysterical speech, Murdo Fraser has just confirmed the point.

Members: Oh!

Murdo Fraser: We know when Mr Swinney is in trouble because he resorts to the language that we have heard this afternoon. [*Interruption.*] He is allowed to change his mind, but when other people change their minds, they are accused of playing politics. SNP members know that they are on the run—[*Interruption.*]

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Can we please settle down? That was getting ridiculous, and it came from both sides of the chamber.

Mr Fraser, can you close fairly quickly?

Murdo Fraser: I will, Presiding Officer.

There is much in the SNP's approach to education that we support. Many of its ideas about improving school autonomy, empowering headteachers and putting a renewed focus on literacy and numeracy are ideas that we have championed for years. Therefore, in our approach to education, we can hardly be accused of putting politics before the interests of young people, because our track record speaks for itself.

The vote today is not a vote about party politics, as the cabinet secretary would claim; it is a vote about what is best for our schools and our pupils and what is in the interests of parents. The vote must be not to have standardised tests in primary 1, because the evidence tells us that they are not in the best interests of our children. For that reason, I support the motion in the name of Liz Smith.

15:35

Clare Adamson (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): I have listened with interest to speeches from across the chamber this afternoon, hoping to get some enlightenment about the positions of the parties on national testing. However, I am afraid that I remain as confused as I was before I came to the chamber.

I will offer some reflections on my experience. My son went through the five-to-14 curriculum. I received report cards for him every year saying that he was working towards a particular level in that curriculum. That was the case even at primary school, when he was working towards level B. Those report cards told me that he was working at the appropriate level and that he had been assessed by the teacher formally as part of that process. That happened from primary 1 onwards.

I then discovered that other tests were being done on my son and the other pupils in North Lanarkshire—the cognitive ability tests, which I had never heard of before. Murdo Fraser talked about parents voting with their feet. I wish that I had had that option but, actually, I knew nothing about those tests. The process was hidden from parents. We were not given any information about when the tests were happening or what the results were. It was a black box in education. After having conducted research into the tests and having listened to the arguments for the assessments, I realised that they were probably to my son's benefit, and I made the appropriate decision. However, that evidence is not available to most parents.

What we have now is a system in which parents know exactly what is happening in our schools and they can get the results and see an assessment of how their child is doing. That is much more transparent than what was happening before.

Iain Gray: Will the member take an intervention?

Clare Adamson: I am sorry, Mr Gray; I do not have time.

The other thing that concerned me as a parent was the cost of the tests. It has been mentioned today that, somehow, uniquely, the tests that are being brought forward by this Government cause extreme stress and require the use of extra time and resources in the classrooms. However, there has been no assessment of what happened in relation to the other testing that was going on before, so I am in the dark about that.

Oliver Mundell: Will the member take an intervention?

Clare Adamson: I will not be taking interventions.

When looking into this issue, I remembered that some work had been done on the costs of national testing. In June 2005, *TESS*—the *Times Educational Supplement Scotland*—published details of a survey that it done of 32 local authorities. The survey showed that standardised testing was costing councils over £1 million a year, and the true cost to the Scottish purse was likely to be higher, because Dundee City Council, Dumfries and Galloway Council, Clackmannanshire Council and Stirling Council had not responded to the FOI requests. Further, local authorities such as Glasgow City Council and Perth and Kinross Council did not disclose their costs because testing in their areas was carried out on a school-by-school basis. Did the cost of that testing come out of the school's budgets or from the education budget of the local authority? I am none the wiser.

The *TESS* report also showed that the assessments were on the increase. North Ayrshire Council had been looking for an authority-wide approach in order to inform its assessment of what was happening with learning and teaching in its area. It proposed to carry out assessments in P1, P3, P5, P7 and S2. That was a Labour-controlled council, but the Labour Party comes to the chamber today to say that it does not agree with primary 1 testing.

The report also showed that the City of Edinburgh Council was the biggest spender on standardised testing, paying out £136,000 a year on literacy and numeracy tests. It used GL Assessment tests and its own P1 baseline assessment to examine literacy. Again, that was a Labour council—in coalition—using P1 tests.

At that time, Lindsay Paterson said that the survey showed that testing was

“not alien to the culture of Scottish teaching or Scottish teacher professionalism”.

Instead of buying in from the likes of Durham University and external organisations, without benchmarking across local authorities or across Scotland, we now have a standardised test that can be used by everyone across Scotland.

I will point to some of the councils that were doing such testing. As I said, Labour in coalition in the City of Edinburgh Council was doing primary 1 testing. West Lothian Council, a Labour-led council, spent £100,000 a year on primary 1 testing; Aberdeenshire Council, a Conservative and Liberal Democrat coalition, spent £98,000; and Aberdeen City Council, a Labour and Conservative coalition, spent £95,000 on tests.

However, the Conservatives say that they do not believe in primary 1 testing. Either Opposition parties are completely unaware of what their

administrations and local authorities are doing in the classrooms, or they have come here—

Oliver Mundell: Will the member take an intervention?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Ms Adamson is closing.

Clare Adamson: —with what the First Minister described as political opportunism. I do not find either of those positions particularly edifying. Having this debate in that context does not serve Scotland's young people.

Testing has been a standard practice. If there are improvements to be made, let us make them. However, it is wrong to have a fundamental position against primary 1 testing when it has been going on in our schools. We should be looking at improvements and the benefits of such testing for our young people, instead of taking a political stand against the Government. That does not do Scotland's young people or the Parliament any good.

15:41

Jenny Gilruth (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP): It is just like being back in the classroom this afternoon.

Today's motion states:

"good-quality pupil assessment is an essential component of the drive to raise educational standards in Scotland's schools".

I begin with a note of consensus, because the exhausting stalemate of political debate that surrounds Scottish education needs it. Teachers deserve it, and it is imperative for our pupils that every political party focuses on the practicalities of closing the poverty-related attainment gap.

Perhaps Professor Lindsay Paterson put it best last week, when he said:

"The simple fact—unpalatable for many politicians and teaching unions—is that education can't do without tests ... Only reliable data from scientifically standardised tests can enable us to learn from both the failures and the successes."

Assessments—call it what you will—are not new. In the senior phase of our curriculum, we expect pupils to be ready to sit final examinations at national 5, higher and advanced higher levels.

Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab): Will the member take an intervention?

Jenny Gilruth: I would like to make some progress.

Assessment is a golden thread that runs through our education system. As a child progresses, their teacher assesses their progress. Our teachers have always been entrusted to do

that. In Fife, it has been completed in our primary schools historically through the assessment for excellence model, which was developed by Durham University. As my colleague Bruce Crawford alluded to, 29 out of 32 local authorities use some form of assessment to benchmark pupil progress. We know that it is not new.

However, assessment under curriculum for excellence changed in its very nature. What might have been an end of unit test in S4 became an outcome and assessment standard, which pupils had to overcome in order to gain unit passes and, therefore, to be presented for the final examination. If a pupil did not pass those units—and an added value unit at national 4, or an assignment at national 5—they could not gain a full course award and, in some circumstances, they would not be permitted to sit the final examination.

The education secretary was therefore right to remove that unnecessary administrative burden, which had meant that faculty heads such as me with responsibility for a number of different subject areas would sit in schools until late into the evening simply inputting data for the Scottish Qualifications Authority's benefit.

That is the issue with today's debate. It has taken primary 1 assessment as a narrow indicator and as something that can be detached from a child's wider educational journey. I therefore ask that the Government gives consideration to how standardised assessment data correlates and communicates with the managing information system—or SEEMiS, as it is known—which is used by most secondary schools to track pupil progress.

I doubt that there is a single member of the Scottish Parliament who has not sat a test in their lives. Tests are integral features of a modern education system. Indeed, on the Education and Skills Committee, I am glad to be in the company of two former teachers and, across the chamber, I count at least five others in total. However, I think that I am correct in asserting that I am the only former teacher with experience of delivering curriculum for excellence and of the many challenges and opportunities that that system can present.

What existed prior to standardised assessments was, of course, the much-lauded-by-the-Opposition Scottish survey of literacy and numeracy. When I was a faculty head, that data was never shared with me. As a classroom teacher, I had random groups of pupils removed from my classes and then returned during the course of a lesson. However, as a secondee at Education Scotland, I learned the most about what the SSLN meant—administration, running about and providing data to the Government of the day.

This has to be the key difference with standardised assessments. At yesterday's briefing with Scottish Government officials, it was explained to all members who attended that data generated by these assessments is then provided to the teacher to track pupil progress accordingly. This data will mean something to teachers.

Iain Gray: Will the member give way?

Jenny Gilruth: I would like to make progress.

Notwithstanding, I think that legitimate concerns have been raised regarding how standardised assessments will be administered. I have consistently raised poor information and communication technology provision in our schools as an issue from my own experience. A primary teacher I know told me of having to sit one to one with her pupils to administer these assessments because there was no wi-fi connectivity.

Yesterday, my Surface decided to give up the ghost while I was preparing my speech for today. Within minutes, a member of the Parliament's information technology team was in my office and, within the hour, I had a new one. That does not happen in our schools. Wi-fi provision is disparate and technology provision is patchy. We must, therefore, support our teachers in making these assessments work and that means that local authorities need to ensure that they resource our schools on an equal basis.

Last Thursday, I watched a class of schoolchildren look on as the leader of the Opposition party berated the educational system in which they are currently learning. I watched her pivot a question on standardised assessments to the role of parents in directing school education. I watched her hype up a narrative, which has been perpetuated again today, suggesting that Scottish education is failing.

Today's motion appears to be much of a confused muchness when it comes to the Tories and education. We know that they backed standardised assessments in 2016, but the motion pivots towards play-based learning. I have to wonder whether any of them have actually been in a primary school recently.

Oliver Mundell rose—

Jenny Gilruth: Are they seriously suggesting that we allow pupils to play in sandpits and paint pictures with their hands until the end of S3? I hope that every member will reflect on the purpose of assessment. We all sat some form of assessment to get here and, if we are to have an education system that provides an equal chance for every pupil to succeed, we must empower our teachers to make the necessary interventions that will do just that.

15:47

Johann Lamont (Glasgow) (Lab): I welcome the opportunity to participate in this debate, although it does not particularly feel as though it is a debate at this stage; I hope that, at a later stage, people will be willing to take interventions.

I wish to express my concern at the way in which those defending the Scottish Government position have dismissed the issue by suggesting that it has been all got up by those who are motivated by their opposition to the SNP. They ought not to judge others by their own standards. It is a well-known tactic to impugn the motives of those raising concerns so that the concerns themselves do not need to be addressed. In doing that, members have shown great disrespect for those parents, teachers, educationalists, childcare workers and others who have had the temerity to suggest that the Scottish Government approach is seriously flawed. I suspect that many of those people, including primary school teachers, have been in a primary school in the past week or so.

I say to John Swinney that his criticism of the Tories—that they are simply not being Tory enough—is the oddest of attacks that I have heard him make. I also wish to express concern at the attempts to characterise the debate as being between those who care and want to bring rigour through standardised testing, and a teaching profession that does not care and simply resists change, whatever that change may be.

All through my teaching career, I was driven by a passion and desire to see rigour in the system—a rigour that ensured that children, wherever they were born and whatever their circumstances, could achieve their potential. I have always believed that the education system should raise ambition and expectation, not shrug away a child's life chances on the basis of where they were born. That is the test that I apply to this policy—will it improve those chances? I do not believe that it will. I say to the cabinet secretary: teachers who oppose this testing do so not because they do not care, but precisely because they do care. Teachers want real change in the lives of young people, not something that creates a busyness in the system but has no evident benefit.

I move on to the tests themselves. Yesterday, I attended the demonstration—I use that word loosely—which raised a whole series of questions for me. The assessment can be taken at any time during primary 1, so children could do the test at any age between four and a half and six. There was no clarity on the level of support that a child could get to complete the assessment: a teacher might help them; an additional support teacher might help them; indeed, a buddy from primary 7 might help them—no consistency was suggested in that regard. Pupils were to get loads of practice

ahead of the assessment, so that they understood what the questions might involve. It was clear, despite claims to the contrary, that the assessment is not consistent, cannot be used as a survey of national trends in literacy and numeracy and is not just part of the normal learning experience. In truth, it disrupts that experience.

As Iain Gray said, our short experience of a rather shambolic lunchtime presentation is not what is relevant. What do teachers and families tell us? Teachers say that tests take up teacher time and take time away from learning. They take classroom support away from individual pupils who need it to manage the class while the tests are being run. The information that the test provides is less useful to them than the assessments that they make themselves. There is huge effort, but to little or no purpose. It is no wonder that those who are in the front line of supporting our young people are so frustrated at the approach of the Scottish Government.

It is hard to assess the opportunity costs of this focus. Not only does it not support learning; it compounds the pressure already on teachers and support staff. Even if the assessment produces a diagnosis—one that most teachers will already have been able to make for themselves—it will not bring with it the help that the diagnosis identifies is needed. The Government funds a test, but it will not provide extra learning support to help a child catch up; it will not bring in the educational psychologist to assist with more complex needs; it will not bring in a home links teacher for the wee soul whose family circumstances are denying the child peace to learn; it will not provide additional support for those with additional support needs who need help to sustain a full day or full week in school and who are currently on part-time timetables. It will not reduce workload—it will disrupt it further. Although Mr Swinney wants to do more testing, he is reducing the support that staff and teachers have in the classroom every day.

This is the nub of it: standardised assessment is not a policy that has been developed over time and consensus has not been built around its worth. It started as a line to take when the Government was under pressure on its record on education. The problem for the cabinet secretary is that, in seeking to answer the question on how to improve Scottish education, he has not followed the basic good practice that is so revered in the education system: look at the question, study the evidence, draw conclusions and outline action. Do not start at the conclusion and then work a way back to find a way to justify it—that is poor practice in education and it is even poorer practice when its consequences are so significant for the education of our children. It is time for the cabinet secretary to stop the defence that he has deployed so far: that he is the only one who cares. It is time for him

to step back, not dig in; to listen, build consensus, change his approach and ensure that our young people are at the centre of this process and that none of them are denied the opportunity to have a proper education.

15:53

James Dornan (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP): If we want to get it right for every child, we must ensure that we catch each individual at least by the time that they reach their first moments of education. As a constituency MSP, I deal with many inquiries about education provision and outcomes. Often parents tell me stories about their children's abilities and trials. When they have identified a difficulty with a child's ability to learn, they frequently tell me that they wish that it had been picked up earlier in order for that child to have received the support necessary to enable them to reach their unique potential.

I have never met a parent who has complained about early intervention with regard to supporting a child's educational needs. Parents recognise that the earlier a problem, or indeed a talent, is identified, the more support and educational nurturing that young person can receive. Education does not just start in primary 7 or national 5 level or even when young people sit higher; a good education starts with a firm foundation from the day that our children pass through a school door—if not before.

The standardised testing does not provide a mark that determines the educational destination that a child will arrive at in the future; it is merely a process in which education providers can gather the appropriate information and data to ensure that no child is missed out or left behind. Teachers need a benchmark to gauge the abilities and attributes that each child has and those that they need in order to succeed. It is really important to acknowledge that these assessments form only part of the picture when it comes to a child's progress and development.

Oliver Mundell: Does the member think that these tests actually show what he says they show? Many teachers feel that they provide a benchmark that they could otherwise judge for themselves, and that they do not tell them anything about the individual's potential.

James Dornan: I sat the test today—and I am proud to say that I passed first time.

Members: Wahey!

James Dornan: Thank you.

So, I have seen the test. We have a four-year-old in our house regularly—in fact, he is not yet four but will be very soon. There were lots of

questions that I think that he would have been able to answer. The test is adaptive.

Oliver Mundell: Will the member give way?

James Dornan: Hold on. Let me finish answering your question.

If answering those questions was the limit of what that child could have achieved, that would show where they are—that is what the child would know. However, if the child was doing well, the questions would get harder and harder until they found the level that the child was at.

It is in no way a pressured test. I hear about children crying when they are doing the tests. Children have always cried at school.

Daniel Johnson: That is not a good argument.

James Dornan: Hold on a second. I remember the day that I started primary school: one girl started crying in the corridor and the next thing we knew there was a corridor full of greetin weans. When they are young, anything can set them off. Please do not mix the two together and say that the tears of a child are about the test.

Johann Lamont: Will the member give way?

James Dornan: No.

It really is important to acknowledge that the assessments form only part of the picture. The assessments have no results and are used alongside many other teaching tools to provide a more accurate and complete picture of developmental progress. The Government has always made it very clear that the assessments are a guide to creating a tailored and specific education for each and every child and they are in no way, shape or form a negative tool. As I said earlier, the tests should be used to identify any early intervention that is necessary.

I read a brilliant article in *The Herald* that argued that we should take the politics out of this debate. It highlighted why it is so important that we look at this issue rationally and not engage in the scaremongering that can be so damaging when parents already face so many difficult choices in raising children.

The discussion about what is best for our children should fundamentally have their best interests at heart. It should not be used as some sort of political football. To be quite honest, this seems like just another Tory and Labour stunt. The Conservative Party is known for many things—not many of them positive—but at this moment in time the party mantra seems to be U-turn above all else. We have all witnessed Ruth Davidson's spectacular 180 when it comes to Brexit, but this current change in her party policy is quite something to behold. Not only does it appear that the Tories agreed with the standardised

testing policy; they were once publicly supportive of this Government's commitment to it. Liz Smith herself released statements to the press criticising previous structures of testing and encouraging the Scottish Government to improve the very assessments that the motion criticises. That smacks of opportunism and blatant hypocrisy. We have all witnessed the Tory Party's ability to use pretty much anything to attack the SNP. However, I am shocked at its willingness to take something as important as a child's education and use it to serve its own agenda.

When I was convener of the Education and Skills Committee, I worked well with Liz Smith and I have the highest regard for her. I know that she has a genuine interest in the future of all our children and young people. For that reason, I am incredibly surprised that she has put her name to the motion. I strongly urge her to reconsider her position on this.

We should be using this platform in the chamber to draw together to close the attainment gap. It has angered me that we are using this valuable time to discuss something that has been supported by parties across the chamber. I am sure that Labour and the Lib Dems will be asking, "Where?" Just before I came into the chamber, I was on the television with a Conservative and a Lib Dem. They both said that these tests were the worst thing in the world and that they would be the ruination of every child. However, four councils have Lib Dem and Conservative coalitions and they are all using standardised testing. Four of them were using it beforehand and four of them are using it now.

The Labour Party uses standardised testing everywhere that it is in power. It is not the assessments that you do not like; it is not even the standardisation of the testing—it is the SNP bit at the end of it that you do not like. That is the terrible thing about this debate today. It is not about children's education or the assessments; it is about trying to get one over. It is about people smelling blood and thinking that they can get a victory.

Johann Lamont: Will the member give way?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Mr Dornan is closing.

James Dornan: This debate is about people smelling blood and thinking that they can get a victory, when they should be making sure that every child gets the education and the start that they deserve, right from primary 1. I support the Government amendment.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I remind members again that they should always speak through the chair.

16:00

Alison Harris (Central Scotland) (Con): I am delighted to speak in this afternoon's debate in support of my party's motion on this important subject.

Assessments can play a clear role in the drive to raise educational standards, but the speeches that I have heard so far from my colleagues have made clear why we must support the motion that calls for a halt to P1 testing. My colleagues highlighted the significant educational evidence that underpins the need to halt assessments at P1 level. What has been introduced for primary 1 children sits uneasily with the play-based philosophy of early years provision that is set out in the curriculum for excellence.

My colleagues demonstrated that the debate is important, not for political reasons, as has been suggested more than once, but because it will impact on the lives of four-year-old and five-year-old children—the youngest and potentially most vulnerable children in our education system. Moreover, the botched implementation of standardised assessment in primary 1 has affected not just those young people but their parents. I will focus on parents in my speech.

Parents should not have to fight for accurate and transparent information about their children. When they request information from the Scottish Government about the assessments that their children are undertaking, the response should be clear and correct, at the very least. However, when we consider the timeline of Scottish Government interventions in the prolonged conversation on primary 1 testing, it is obvious that that has not been the case.

First, Scottish Government documents did not make clear whether parents could withdraw children from the assessments. Then, emails released under freedom of information legislation revealed that a Scottish Government civil servant had said "children can be withdrawn". Weeks later, a Scottish Government spokesperson said:

"there is no statutory right for parents to withdraw their child from any aspect of schooling other than some parts of religious education."

Finally, a civil servant misquoted advice from the Society of Local Authority Lawyers and Administrators in Scotland—SOLAR. The organisation publicly refuted the Government's statement.

When we consider that series of messages, who can blame parents for being confused? This SNP Government contradicts itself on a weekly basis.

Dr Alasdair Allan (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): The member quite rightly said that parents deserve information. How does she square the

need to give parents information about how their children are doing with her preferred option of stopping assessments that have been in place for years?

Alison Harris: We have very professional teachers, who are more than capable of assessing children and giving parents the information that they require, on a daily basis.

The cabinet secretary's apology to the Parliament for the error to which I referred was welcome, but it does not change the fact that such a level of confusion is unacceptable. Hard-working parents do not have time to decipher muddled messages from the Scottish Government, and on a topic of such paramount importance as their children's education, they simply should not have to do that. Parents should not encounter political spin when they ask about their children.

It is little wonder that people's opinion of local schools was at a record low in the Scottish Government publication, "Scotland's People Annual Report: Results from the 2017 Scottish Household Survey", which was released two weeks ago. In 2011, 85 per cent of people were very or fairly satisfied with the quality of local schools, but the rate had dropped to just 70 per cent in 2017. Under the SNP, parents' confidence in schools is plummeting.

Yet only this week, the cabinet secretary appeared on "Sunday Politics" to say that he might not respect the view of the Parliament on today's Scottish Conservative motion. I sincerely hope that that will not be the case, and I shall remain hopeful until things are proved otherwise.

Parents, teachers and organisations from Upstart to the Scottish Childminding Association to the EIS are giving the cabinet secretary a clear message: it should be play-based learning, and not tests, for primary 1 children. Scottish children should not be doing tests at an early age when, in many European countries, they would be up to two years from starting their formal education. While five-year-olds in Frankfurt and Florence are happily enjoying the play-based learning of kindergarten, five-year-olds in Falkirk are having to face the pressure, stress and anxiety of standardised testing.

The clear message that parents and education professionals are sending the Government is shared by those on this side of the chamber. It is also shared in the principles of the Scottish Government's curriculum for excellence. By continuing with the assessments, the SNP will be disregarding the guidelines within its own documents. That can only add to the confusion for parents and teachers, who are already struggling to cope with the excessive bureaucracy and workload that have been foisted on them by the

SNP's handling of the implementation of the curriculum for excellence.

It is time that the cabinet secretary listened. He is aware that we in the Conservative Party are behind him on the principle of standardised assessment in general. However, as we move forward, two things have become clear.

James Dornan rose—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Ms Harris is just closing.

Alison Harris: First, the assessments cannot continue for children as young as four. Secondly, and quite simply, parents must be treated better.

In conclusion, I would like to quote the words of the executive director of Connect, Eileen Prior, who said:

"Whether they are called national tests or national assessments, whether the Scottish Government says they are tests or they aren't, it's time to scrap them for Primary 1 children."

16:06

Maureen Watt (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP): Presiding Officer, thank you for affording me the opportunity to speak in this debate, in which, as Clare Adamson said, some contributions have contained more heat than light.

It is a fact that nearly everybody feels qualified to speak on education, because they have been through the education system themselves or may have children, or even grandchildren, who have been there more recently. My interest in education stems from my mother having taught primary 1 or the reception class for many years, from having worked in the sector myself at both secondary and college levels and from having chaired my children's primary school parent council, but—most important and relevant—from having driven forward the implementation of the curriculum for excellence as Minister for Schools and Skills from 2007 to 2009. We should not forget that Scotland has an education system that is world leading and that many educationists across the world watch with interest and envy and adopt elsewhere.

Oliver Mundell: Will the member take an intervention?

Maureen Watt: Not at the moment.

As we have heard, primary 1 testing is not new. Of the 32 local authorities, 29 carried out such testing prior to the introduction of national assessment. As Lindsay Paterson, professor of educational policy at the University of Edinburgh, and a not infrequent critic of Government policy, said:

"The simple fact—unpalatable for many politicians and teaching unions—is that education can't do without tests ...

Only reliable data from scientifically standardised tests can enable us to learn from both the failures and the successes."

Those are Professor Paterson's words, not mine.

Johann Lamont: Is not the real issue about the 29 local authorities that do testing? I have been involved in such tests, and they bear no comparison to what is being described now. Would it not be an option for there to be discussion, through Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Education, with the three authorities that do not have such assessments, so that they could decide what kind of test it would be and whether the way in which it was done was appropriate?

Maureen Watt: I was just going to say that if we did not have national standardised testing it would be left to local authorities to do their own, and then the Opposition parties would be complaining about a lack of consistency and standardisation and a postcode lottery. Those parties are keen to find evidence on early years testing, but the truth is that there is not much of that out there.

I found one research paper relating to kindergartens in the United States. It says:

"there is a long history of screening children in kindergarten for sensory, language, and cognitive abilities in order to refer children with disabilities for early treatment".

Daniel Johnson: Will the member give way?

Maureen Watt: It continues:

"Students who do not perform as expected on the assessments can be classified as at-risk ... teachers can alter their instruction"—

Daniel Johnson: Will the member give way?

Maureen Watt: It might be good if the member just listened to a paper on the issue:

"Students who do not perform as expected on the assessments can be classified as at-risk"—

Daniel Johnson: Will the member give way?

Oliver Mundell: Will the member give way?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I am sorry, Ms Watt, but could you halt for a moment? It is quite clear that Ms Watt is not giving way, Mr Mundell and Mr Johnson.

Maureen Watt: Presiding Officer,

"teachers can alter their instruction to help ensure that students are learning to read and not falling through the cracks ... early detection helps deter later reading problems ... with intensive intervention, students ages 8 to 10 could increase their accuracy in reading but could not catch up in their fluency rates."

In the US, kindergartens are encouraged

"to use assessment to inform instruction with the end goal of increasing student achievement."

Not a single constituent has contacted me about P1 testing, but what on earth do I say to my constituents if they tell me that their child's possible autism, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, hearing difficulty, sight difficulty, dyslexia or any other conditions has not been picked up and addressed because the opportunity to identify those through P1 tests has been scrapped because of the Opposition parties' blatant politicking? Their position has nothing to do with our children and their future, getting it right for every child, having individualised learning plans, raising attainment and giving every child an equal start in life, but everything to do with the negative—even destructive—opposition of the Conservatives in this Parliament.

Today, the Conservatives have been called out as not only being uninterested in the wellbeing and the education of our children and interested only in those who are growing up in loving, nurturing surroundings and who are fit, healthy and thriving; they have been called out as being not at all interested in identifying those children who are struggling because they have not had that nurturing environment, who are hungry because of the Tories' disgraceful welfare policies, or who have experienced too many adverse childhood events in their lives, which inhibits their concentration and ability to learn.

Today, we see the Conservatives all over the place as their hypocrisy is called out. Previously, they were all in favour of tests. Last week, they were calling on us to scrap the tests. This week, they are calling on us to suspend them, or they are saying that the tests are too difficult or that they are not telling us enough. Which is it? Only five or six members took the time to find out about the tests for themselves.

Cabinet secretary, the tests have not even been running for a year. Of course they should be reviewed, and refined if necessary, but do not kowtow to these disgraceful chancers that surround us in this chamber.

16:13

Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab):

I will take a deep breath, because this is not how I was planning to start my speech, but there must be correction of some of the statements that we have heard.

It is simply a mistake to confuse assessments for neurodevelopmental disorders with testing: they are completely and utterly different things. We need to build understanding of neurodevelopmental disorders, and we must not blur the boundaries between the different categories, because that will not help the arguments or debates, and it will not help in

understanding the needs of people with dyslexia, autism spectrum disorder and ADHD so that they can get the help that they require. The tests are a barrier to those things; they do not help them.

I will highlight a single question from the tests. It has a picture of a feather and asks what word sounds like the picture. A child with autism spectrum disorder or dyslexia—and, perhaps, a child with ADHD—would find that question in particular to be hugely stressful and difficult to answer. They would be left confounded and confused about what they were required to answer. No one can tell me that it is all right because it is a multiple-choice question. We are talking about five-year-olds who have never had to answer multiple-choice questions. Let us not confuse diagnostic tests with academic tests for literacy and numeracy.

I turn now to what I had intended to say. It is important that we look at the merits of the tests, what they aim to do and how they do it in the context of the education system that we all want. That is not a party-political question; it should involve a dispassionate and objective debate about what role the tests have in general and, more important, what role they can play for five-year-olds in P1. There has been too much blurring of the general and the particular. There is the argument on the generalities of testing, which is that we must ensure that children get used to testing, and then there is the argument on the specifics of P1 testing. I argue that they are two very different arguments.

I speak in the debate not from the perspective of a politician, but as a parent. I had to learn a lesson of my own the other day. It was a proud moment when my daughter, who is six and has just gone into P2—she sat the test last year, but we did not find out about it in advance—read her own bedtime story for the first time. I did not read the story to her; she read it to me, and she did it with passion and with joy. She read the words, not all of which were straightforward. The story—it was “Cinderella”—included words like “enchanted”. She read it with intonation and pleasure that enabled me to see that her education is working. I did not need a test to tell me that.

A mere matter of weeks earlier, I had been worried about whether her reading was up to scratch and whether we ought to spend more time with her at home trying to get her up to speed. That would have been wrong, because the value of her education at this point is not to do with the precision with which she reads; it is to do with the passion with which she reads, the enjoyment that she gets from reading and the fact that she finds it useful for her own life. That is what a five-year-old should be reaching in primary 1—not arbitrary

academic standards, which are for much further down the line in children's academic careers.

It strikes me that testing at that point is counterproductive in far more fundamental ways. The philosophy that curriculum for excellence was meant to enshrine is about trusting teachers and allowing them to design the curriculum that is relevant to their communities and their children. The P1 testing does not do that. We are talking about arbitrary centralised tests which, ultimately, teachers will always teach to. We do not want teaching to the test, especially in the early years, when we ought to be encouraging learning through play. I fail to see how testing for literacy and numeracy using multiple-choice tests is in any way compatible with learning through play.

What is more, I think that such testing stifles innovation. I know that the Deputy First Minister is passionate about ensuring that we engender a culture of innovation in our education system, and I agree with him on that. A lesson that I have learned has come from seeing the value of innovation in my daughter's school, where the nursery and primary 1 have been combined. The children do not have fixed classrooms or fixed teachers through the day. The school has embraced learning through play by combining the nursery and primary 1. I fear that by imposing tests such as the P1 tests we will make teachers fearful of innovating in that way, because they will know about the tests and might think that such innovations are simply not worth the risk.

We need to learn the lessons from elsewhere in the world; Ross Greer set out very well the lessons that are to be learned from Finland. It is clear that high-performing education systems trust their teachers and pursue a less centralised and less prescriptive method. In assessing children, they trust teachers' professional judgment rather than tests.

James Dornan: Will the member give way?

Daniel Johnson: I will give way briefly; I am right at the end of my speech.

The Presiding Officer (Ken Macintosh): I am sorry—Mr Johnson does not have time. He must wind up in the next 30 seconds.

Daniel Johnson: I have outlined the direction that the debate should have taken. It should not have been about which party said what and when, or whether a particular press release or speech could be found in which a party said one thing or another. The debate should be about whether tests are helpful for our five-year-old children. That is the substance of the matter. That is what is at stake, and that is what we should be discussing. Let us ignore the rest of the political flimflam and nonsense that we have heard. It is clear that, if we are serious about the education of our five-year-

olds, testing them should play no part in their school experience.

16:19

Stewart Stevenson (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP): I am afraid that, of all the speakers so far, I probably bring to the debate the least amount of relevant life experience. Three years of lecturing postgraduate students does not qualify me as a teacher—that is for sure—and I am not a dad, so I have nothing to offer in those respects. On the other hand, I have nine great-nieces and great-nephews, a goddaughter and seven nephews and nieces, so I have had some exposure to the issue.

I will pick up on what Daniel Johnson said about multiple-choice tests being stressful. I found it quite stressful to stand beside my goddaughter with a Portsoy Ice Cream gift voucher in her hand—she was not yet three years old—as we experienced the multiple choice of 32 flavours of ice cream. That illustrates the general point that developing skills starts early. I think that by the time they get to five, every child has gone through many multiple-choice examinations; it is just that none of them has been in the academic sector. There is nothing unfamiliar to them in being presented with choices. That is an illustration of how we might all be guilty of overplaying some of the issues.

In the early stages of the debate—this was remedied later, in particular by Alison Harris—members made comparatively little mention of children, but we should put children, rather than teachers, at the centre of the debate. However, teachers are clearly not unimportant and neither are parents. That is for sure.

The real thing in the debate is that the Conservatives have changed their minds: they are entitled so to do. I have occasionally changed my mind, and my political colleagues have occasionally changed theirs. There is nothing wrong with that. If new information comes along, new conclusions can, reasonably, be reached.

However, the question is on what the overall Tory position is on testing, which takes me back to my intervention on Liz Smith, during the first speech in the debate. South of the border, the Tories are moving in a very different direction. From September 2020, the new reception baseline assessment will be statutory for all pupils in England. That is for the reception class or, in other words, kindergarten—before pupils get to primary school. That will be coupled with testing in the first and second years of primary school.

The National Foundation for Educational Research said:

“Our experience in producing a reception baseline assessment in 2015 demonstrated that it is possible to undertake a robust assessment of children’s language, literacy and numeracy skills at this age.”

In other words, at age four, five or six. We should hold on to that expert advice. It is vitally important to lasting and significant change that parents and teachers be provided with transparent and consistent information. That is what the Tories are introducing in England. They have bluntly tried to disconnect the Tories in Scotland from that and take a different position, but there is one Tory party, so I am not at all clear on what basis we should properly look—

Liz Smith: I have to say that there is a lot of opposition and concern about what is happening south of border for exactly the same reasons as there are concerns up here.

Stewart Stevenson: I think that we had a confession there that the Tories are getting it wrong, which is quite interesting. If they are getting it wrong in England, it is perfectly possible for us to consider that they might be getting it wrong in Scotland. *[Applause.]*

Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con): It is interesting that we would take a different position from the one that has been taken down south. Will Mr Stevenson concede that the SNP might be getting it wrong up here?

Stewart Stevenson: I am rarely accused of getting it wrong and I never admit to it. That is not true.

I always look at evidence, but the evidence in this case is that, as has been the case for Maureen Watt, not one constituent has contacted me on the subject. It is simply not the talk of the steamie among those for whom it matters—the pupils and the parents. That is the kind of evidence that is driving me.

It has been said that children at age four, five or six should not be exposed to computers. I spent 30 years working in computers, but I find that most six-year-olds are more adept at working a tablet than I am. Therefore, that is not a particularly credible argument.

Even in Denmark, local government wants to introduce statutory testing for three-year-olds in kindergarten. There are many different ways of looking at the problem. I am very happy to support the Scottish Government’s approach.

Finally, testing is important. Would we let a driver on the road without their having passed the driving test?

16:25

Michelle Ballantyne (South Scotland) (Con): The debate gets more interesting as it goes on.

Like Liz Smith and my other colleagues, I believe that assessment is a key part of learning and education, not least so that we can ensure progress and understand where a child has got to, but also to ensure that we have some degree of accountability in our education system as a whole. However, the debate is not about that. It is not about whether we should formally assess our children during their education; it is about the value and appropriateness of doing so in P1.

The early years of education are about building the foundations of literacy and numeracy. Children need to develop their confidence in using language. Although I am not always a cheerleader for curriculum for excellence, its early years positioning is about the holistic development of the child, based on structured play. That enables the individual child to broaden their vocabulary, develop more complex sentence structures, recognise patterns and ensure that, no matter what their starting point is, they will be equipped to cope with the rigours of formal learning and assessment as they go through the system.

We know that all children do not develop their readiness for formal learning at the same age and that structured play has a huge role in contributing to that readiness and to the way in which an individual child will engage in literacy and numeracy later on. Daniel Johnson referred to those things. The ability to access and understand information effectively is critical to our children’s life chances and wellbeing.

Most members are not experts on education, so it is incumbent on us to pay heed to both educationists and teachers. I acknowledge that differences of opinion exist, but there is increasing evidence and clarity from all sides that formal standardised tests in P1 cut across the principles of a play-based curriculum.

I was one of the people who took the time yesterday to attend the event that the cabinet secretary arranged to try out the P1 assessment and discuss with the project team the intentions behind it. I thank Mr Swinney for that opportunity. I might have seen the assessment in schools, but it was really good to talk to the team that is developing it. However—there is a big however—Mr Swinney may be a bit disappointed to hear that that only served to confirm my view that the administration of the assessments in P1 has little or no real value.

I found the use of the word “standardised” quite confusing by the end of the meeting, as each child may be given the assessment in a different way. They could be given it alone, in a group, with a P7

buddy or with a teacher. It could be at the beginning or the end of P1 or in the middle of it—and, of course, there is already potentially an age difference of a year in children in P1. The assessment could be done by reading what is on a screen, or children could listen by pressing a button. The person with them could read out the assessment. Not every child would complete the whole assessment, depending on how difficult they found it.

I can accept the argument that the assessments should not cause children undue stress if they are administered appropriately, but it is clear that there have been and are considerable resource challenges in respect of the time that it takes to set them up and administer them and to wind up afterwards, and in respect of the facilities that are needed. Many teachers have told me that they do not have computers in their classrooms, so the children have to leave the classroom to undertake the assessment. There is a pressure if all of that cannot be done in a very supportive way, and there is a pressure on the child when they do an assessment for the first time.

Unlike in the design of most learning and development tools for that age group, no positive feedback or encouragement was built into the process.

There was confusion about exactly how the results will be used. We asked the question, and initially we were told that they were just for the teacher and maybe the headteacher, but later in the discussion we were told that performance tables could be created. We heard about that earlier in this afternoon's debate. We were told that the assessments enable the child's progress to be tracked, yet it was made clear that the test can be delivered only once and that the system blocks the child out after that. It cannot be re-administered, so there is no way of seeing whether the child has improved. However, when I asked whether the assessment provides a baseline for the child's ability, I was told that it was not that, either.

We were told that the assessment would allow the teacher and headteacher to understand where the child is in comparison with others and to identify their strengths and weaknesses in their knowledge and understanding. When the question was asked whether a competent teacher could do that without the standardised test in P1, we were told that the answer was yes, but that they might not have had the time to get to know the child in that level of detail and the test would speed things up. I cannot say that I found that terribly edifying. I would hope that my primary 1 teacher would know my child—or, hopefully, my grandchildren, in times to come.

I do not doubt the cabinet secretary's sincerity when he said:

"We need to keep this in some sense of perspective. Because what I do not want to happen is that young people come through our education system, have an issue which is not identified early enough, and all the international evidence tells us that if you don't identify an issue in an individual at the earliest possible opportunity it'll just get worse and worse."

However, I have to ask him whether he believes that the tests identify barriers to learning such as dyslexia, dyspraxia and visual or auditory limitations. Those are the things that need to be identified early, at P1. If we can identify and address those, we will be making real progress, but I do not believe that they are captured by the assessments. I would welcome comment from the cabinet secretary on improving early access to assessment and support for those very real barriers.

The Presiding Officer: Ms Ballantyne, will you wind up, please?

Michelle Ballantyne: Okay.

In a recent BBC interview, the cabinet secretary said that he remains open to ways in which he can reduce the workload for teachers. He said:

"My door is very much open on this question to ... reduce the amount of bureaucratic burden that teachers feel they are facing."

I put it to him that today is an opportunity to do just that by supporting the motion.

The Presiding Officer: Gordon MacDonald will be the last speaker in the open debate.

16:32

Gordon MacDonald (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP): This debate should have been about making sure that teachers have access to good-quality information to help to inform their judgment about pupil performance. It should have been about making sure that parents have access to information about the performance of their children and the schools that they learn in. It should have been about making sure that the right people have access to the right information about our young people in order to ensure that progress can be made to raise attainment.

Instead, what I have witnessed is political parties wilfully rewriting history—a history in which the Labour, Liberal Democrat and Conservative parties have supported assessments in primary 1. It is blatant political opportunism, and that they are prepared to do this at the expense of kids' education is an utter disgrace.

Ignoring the political point scoring that has been going on, I want to move on and talk about what is actually going on in our schools just now.

Neil Findlay (Lothian) (Lab): Will the member take an intervention?

Gordon MacDonald: No, thank you.

Attending the information event yesterday, I and a number of SNP colleagues heard that the assessments are taken by children only once during the school year and that there is no set timetable. The assessments do not have to take place at a set time of year but can take place when teachers and schools decide that the pupils are ready. The assessments consist of about 30 questions, and on average they take 27 minutes, but there is no time limit. The questions are multiple choice and they get progressively harder or easier depending on each individual pupil's ability.

The assessments are completed online and are marked automatically, saving the teacher time and allowing them to focus on teaching. Teachers get instant feedback from the assessments so that they can provide the support that is needed for each child's numeracy and literacy development.

Of course, no new system of assessment will be perfect. That is why the Scottish Government published on 28 August the user review report on the first year of the assessments and why it has already made changes.

I spoke to a local teacher who highlighted that their school has a computer suite, which has meant that the pupils have to go to a separate and unfamiliar room for the assessment; that should be addressed. Ideally, children should be able to take the assessment in a familiar environment, but to call for a ban on standardised national assessments is not the answer; it is just short-sighted political opportunism.

In carrying out research for this debate, I came across an education department report that stated:

"In primary schools, standardised assessment, using local authority tests at the beginning and end of P1 in literacy and numeracy, has been established for the last ten years."

Michelle Ballantyne: Will the member take an intervention?

Gordon MacDonald: No, thank you.

The report continues by highlighting that the results of the assessments are used in many ways by schools and it lists eight benefits, including contributing to the identification of pupils who may require additional support and supporting the process of monitoring pupils' progress.

I forgot to mention that the extract was from the attainment report for the education, children and families committee of Edinburgh City Council, published in March 2009 and covering the 2008 academic year. The report highlights that

standardised assessments have been used in Edinburgh schools since June 1998, and they continue to the present day.

Political parties in Edinburgh were so opposed to those standardised assessments that during the eight years when Labour controlled the council it made no attempt to reverse the policy. The Liberal Democrat coalition of 2007 to 2012 also made no attempt to reverse the policy, and neither did the Labour coalition from 2012 to 2017. It was policy that Labour itself had introduced, back in 1998.

That hypocrisy of those political parties that are now opposed to P1 testing did not happen only in our capital city. Out of 32 local authorities, 29 councils were already carrying out annual P1 assessments—councils in which Labour, Liberal Democrat and Conservative parties were in administration. Not only did those councils already carry out P1 assessments, but many of them had two P1 assessments—one at the start and one at the end of P1.

Why was there no issue when councils run by their parties were carrying out P1 assessments, but there is now? The only difference that I can see is that an SNP Scottish Government is administering them—and it saves councils £9 million a year. Suddenly to claim that there is an issue with P1 assessments when an SNP Government adopts the policy nationally is insincere and those parties should be ashamed of themselves. They saw a chance to attack the SNP and have had no problem in doing a 180-degree turn on their own manifesto promises and the policies that their own councils have implemented. It is disgraceful.

Johann Lamont: Will the member take an intervention?

Gordon MacDonald: I am in my last minute.

The fact is that, when it comes to educating our young people, no party should be exploiting the issues for political gain. Nobody should stand in the way of driving up standards in our schools just for the sake of some headline-grabbing, political kick-about. Unfortunately, that is all that we have seen from Labour, the Liberal Democrats and the Conservatives today.

The Presiding Officer: We move now to the closing speeches.

16:39

Mary Fee (West Scotland) (Lab): In closing for Scottish Labour, I thank the Conservatives for bringing the debate to the chamber today. I will be voting in favour of the motion to stop testing primary 1 children in our schools. I do so at the behest of parents and teachers from across West

Scotland who have contacted me in the past week and the past few months.

I repeat what Iain Gray said in opening the debate for Labour: we on this side of the chamber have no problem with teachers assessing pupils. Teachers assess pupils' learning every day, using a variety of techniques and diagnostic methodologies, and they deploy their professional expertise to do so. Nor do we have a problem with the testing of literacy and numeracy. However, the idea that children as young as four and a half years old are being assessed in our schools is, frankly, absurd. It is nonsense for the Scottish Government to pretend that it is about assessing and tackling attainment, and the range of evidence and opinion on the issue shows how out of touch the SNP is with teachers and parents.

A child who was born in late February 2014 would sit the same test as a child born in April 2013. The age gap is nothing new in our education system, but the development of four and five-year-olds can be staggeringly different, and more so than at any other age of primary or secondary school. Children in primary 1 should learn in a stress-free and welcoming environment, with constant support from teachers and support workers. Every hour that the teacher spends on carrying out the tests is an hour that could have been better spent developing and supporting our children's basic educational and emotional skills.

I stated at the outset that teachers and parents from West Scotland have been in touch with me over this flawed policy.

James Dornan: Will the member take an intervention?

Mary Fee: No—not at the moment. I would like to make a bit of progress.

I will read out just a few of the comments that I have received. One teacher in Renfrewshire writes:

"The best data on pupils is gathered by teachers while teaching, through the formative assessment that takes place every day in classrooms. I believe that the Scottish Government have chosen not to listen to teachers and even their own expert advisers."

Those are the sincere beliefs and experiences of a teacher who deals with young children every single day. At the heart of the debate lies a serious question: why does the cabinet secretary think that he knows better than teachers with decades of experience or parents, who know best about the wellbeing of their children? It is the cabinet secretary's blinkered view that is causing this unnecessary damage in our schools.

Instead of teachers teaching, we waste already stretched resources in carrying out useless tests

of four and five-year-olds. Another teacher, this time from Inverclyde, contacted me to say:

"4 and 5 year olds are expected to sit at a computer for up to, and in many cases, more than an hour, for each of three assessments.

They are using equipment with which they may be unfamiliar, on a Wi-Fi or hardwired connection that is not fit for purpose, to engage in repetitive activities.

This needs adult supervision often taking classroom assistants, nurture teachers, learning support teachers and in many cases management teams away from their 'normal' duties—this then impacts on the rest of the school and on the workload of that staff.

And for what? For a bureaucratic nightmare."

Another teacher from Renfrewshire writes:

"As a teacher and EIS member, I am contacting you to ask you to back scrapping these tests. In my own school, they have caused stress and upset both to children and staff.

Testing young children is not necessary, the data gathered is not useful and these tests set children up for a lifetime of hating tests.

If Scottish teachers are truly going to 'Get It Right for Every Child' then scrapping these tests goes some way to doing that."

Those comments are from staff who are on the front line of teaching, not from people sitting in a central Government office. They know better than any member of the Cabinet, and I ask the Scottish Government to listen to those voices.

Presiding Officer, have I got six minutes or seven?

The Presiding Officer: Six.

Mary Fee: I apologise to Mr Dornan in that case, because I will not be able to take his intervention. I wanted to make some progress with some of the comments that I wanted to make. In the few seconds that I have left, I want to pick up on a comment that Mr Dornan made in his contribution when he said that children cry all the time and it has got nothing to do with the tests.

James Dornan: That is a complete misrepresentation.

The Presiding Officer: Speak through the chair, please.

Mary Fee: When a parent says that the tests made their child feel sick and cry and that their child was crying because they were made to go on a computer and they could not use it to do the test, that is not the supportive and nurturing environment that I want our children to be in. If the Parliament votes today to halt the assessments for P1 children, that is what the Scottish Government must do. The cabinet secretary must listen to the voice of Parliament.

The Presiding Officer: Conclude, please, Ms Fee.

Mary Fee: If he does not, it will tell teachers and parents that the cabinet secretary's arrogance knows no bounds and that the Scottish Government knows better than they do. He should do what is right for four and five-year-olds and end this vanity project.

16:46

John Swinney: I begin by thanking Michelle Ballantyne for her kind comments about my officials who put on the demonstration yesterday. I asked them to do that because I felt that it would help to inform the debate and give members the opportunity to interact with questions. I appreciate her kindness in her comments about the way in which my officials interacted on that matter.

One of the points that Johann Lamont raised was that the Government had not followed the evidence and had not attempted to build consensus in this debate. The evidence that the Government followed was the evidence that we commissioned from the OECD when, in response to the fall in standards that was identified by the Scottish survey of literacy and numeracy, we invited the OECD to review Scottish education. As I said earlier, the OECD said:

"There needs to be a more robust evidence base available right across the system, especially about learning outcomes and progress."

It is on the basis of that evidence and advice that we acted to address the issues.

Why was standardised assessment our response? It was because 29 out of the 32 local authorities were already undertaking some form of standardised assessment, albeit of different characters around the country. A 30th local authority, South Lanarkshire Council, was considering embarking on a form of standardised assessment but, when it heard that the Government was preparing to address the issue, it held back until the Government put its approach in place.

Mary Fee has just raised the concern of a teacher in Inverclyde about the application of the computer-based Scottish national standardised assessment. In Inverclyde, the local authority has been using an on-screen, computer-based, non-adaptive standardised assessment for many years. The difference between it and what I have put in place is that Inverclyde Council has been applying that twice during P1. The idea that the Scottish national standardised assessments have somehow been applied in a way that has fundamentally changed the way in which young people are assessed at the local level is therefore erroneous.

Johann Lamont: I go back to the point that I made earlier about impugning the motives of people who raise concerns. Do you have any idea why schoolteachers, parents and carers are expressing concern? If this is something that has been happening routinely all along, why are schoolteachers highlighting their concerns about the proposals?

The Presiding Officer: Will all colleagues please address their comments to the cabinet secretary through the chair?

John Swinney: I am not impugning anyone. It is not my—*[Interruption.]* I am grateful to Mr Scott for his enthusiastic support for that remark. I do not impugn people's motives. I am facing a challenge here. Parliament is holding us to account about the need to improve standards in our schools. When the Scottish survey of literacy and numeracy came out in 2015, we were not able to identify where the weaknesses in performance were around the country, because there was not consistent data, which is exactly what the OECD highlighted. That is why we pulled together the 29 out of 32 local authorities that were undertaking different forms of assessment and set up a standardised assessment right across the country. That was a pretty logical move.

Johann Lamont asked about teachers, and lots of teachers have been quoted. I will quote a teacher from the EIS survey:

"Data is incredibly detailed and personalised. Feedback will be very useful in looking for next steps. Some of our data showed areas of weakness we hadn't expected and some showed strengths, especially in P1, that we hadn't expected."

We can all point to feedback from teachers, but, of course, what people will say varies around the country.

I hear people talking about my arrogance in this debate. I have adapted and changed these assessments. I have not said that everything is perfect. Last year, I commissioned a user survey and I commissioned feedback from practitioners. That led to significant changes in the assessments with regard to the replenishment of questions, the improvement of question design, the updating of practice assessment and the provision of advice and exemplification with regard to classroom management, and also in relation to the establishment of a P1 practitioner forum to hear more feedback from the teaching profession as we work through the assessments year by year.

Of course, the reason why we need to do that is to address the comments that were made the other day by the president of ADES, who said:

"We suffer too much in education from decisions being made too quickly—my ask is for politicians to pause and allow us the time to evaluate"

the effectiveness of the assessments.

Daniel Johnson: On the point about the tests being amended, I have real concerns about the compatibility of these tests with neurodevelopmental disorders. Will the cabinet secretary undertake to have the tests assessed for their compatibility with dyslexia, autism spectrum disorder and other neurodevelopmental disorders?

John Swinney: Fundamentally, the teacher's judgment comes into play here. It was not 100 percent of young people who took part in the assessment; it was 94 percent. That is evidence of people in the teaching profession exercising the type of professional judgment that I would ask them to when they think that it is not appropriate for a particular child to do the test.

Earlier, Mr Johnson raised the issue of the connection to and the compatibility with play. I understand the model of education that he talked about being used in his child's school in Edinburgh—I am very familiar with it. That is what the curriculum for excellence is designed to do. However, I remind Mr Johnson that we are talking about play for learning and, at some point, we have to assess the learning that young people are undertaking in order to satisfy ourselves that they have reached the early level that will then give us the foundation and the platform for them to move on to first level.

The last comment that I will make relates to some of what has been said about the international advice and evidence. Pasi Sahlberg, an eminent global educationist who originates from Finland, is a man for whom I have huge respect and whose writings I follow assiduously. This morning, he said:

"P1 assessment in Scotland is not a standardised test. It is a diagnostic tool to support teachers' professional decisions and judgement. We are critical"

of

"high-stakes standardised testing, not this one."

Iain Gray: Will the member take an intervention?

John Swinney: I am afraid that I cannot. Mr Gray knows that I am generous in my interventions, but I have reached the maximum time that I can speak for.

That is information from eminent educationists that demonstrates that the Scottish Government has taken the considered steps to support professional judgment, and I ask Parliament to support those measures today.

16:53

Oliver Mundell (Dumfriesshire) (Con): After this morning's meeting of the Education and Skills

Committee, I did not think that I could be any more depressed about this Government's attitude to education, but I have felt depressed throughout this afternoon. It is pretty disingenuous of the cabinet secretary to get up at the 11th hour and give a very gentle and measured talk-through of some of the points in the debate, given that he has spent the past week trying to shout down opposition, an approach that has been adopted by every one of his back benchers, who refused to take interventions on specific points.

James Dornan: Does the member remember me taking an intervention from him? Is he just going to make things up as he goes along?

Oliver Mundell: I remember the member taking the first intervention, not answering the specific point that I raised and refusing to continue the debate and address some of the further issues that have emerged around these tests.

It is very disappointing that, having been promised a facts-based debate, we have instead spent most of the time politicking as usual. I am proud to say that the Conservatives are willing to listen, evaluate the evidence and change our minds. We are not embarrassed to listen to the evidence and the many voices in Scottish education and take a measured and appropriate view. We are not saying that all standardised assessments should be scrapped; we are saying that primary 1 is not the appropriate point at which to start such assessment. The cabinet secretary would do well to listen to that point.

We have offered our support on reforming education not because it represents some political move or calculated agenda but because we think that educational reform is important. We have been arguing for it for years.

John Swinney: Does Mr Mundell understand the degree of doubt that we have in our minds about his commitment to educational reform? Last week, his leader asked for more information about schools and, today, the Conservatives are advancing the argument for less information about schools. Does he not see the natural inconsistency in the arguments that the Conservative Party has deployed and understand why SNP members believe that the Conservatives are using the debate as a political hit on the Government?

Oliver Mundell: Does that point not say it all?

John Swinney: Yes.

Oliver Mundell: I will let the cabinet secretary finish shouting. That point says it all. On the most important issue and top priority for our country, the SNP and the Government start from the point of view of thinking that everything is about political

positioning and gestures, instead of looking at the evidence.

On the substance of the cabinet secretary's point, there is a considerable difference between asking for useful information that has an evidence base behind it, and pursuing—hell bent and at all costs—a set of assessments that has no rigorous evidence behind them.

We heard questions this morning. I know that Michelle Ballantyne was impressed to see the assessments, but I would have been much more impressed if the cabinet secretary had made available before the debate the robust evidence that exists in order to prove that the assessments work and tell us something useful.

I hear from teachers that there is a number of fundamental flaws in the system that is being introduced. Smart children are clicking on random options in order to speed up the process of getting through the test. People like myself who suffer from dyspraxia and dyslexia find that the tests do not work for them—they do not assess their potential or their capacity. Some of Maureen Watt's comments were quite offensive and disingenuous to parents, and they were not based on evidence. As far as I am aware, the study to which she referred is not about the type of tests that are being used in classrooms in Scotland.

If we want to talk about politics, negativity and unpleasantness, we should note that, throughout the debate, Maree Todd has been shouting at me across the chamber about Westminster and what is happening in England and Wales. If we are having a facts-based debate, I afford her this opportunity, if she wants to take it, to explain to the chamber the different choices on the founding principles and the curriculum that have been taken in England and Wales from those that have been taken in Scotland.

The Minister for Children and Young People (Maree Todd): Forgive me for being sceptical when the Conservatives come to the chamber and paint themselves as the champions for Scotland's children and the champions for upholding the will of this Parliament. Parliament made it very clear that universal credit—[*Interruption.*]

The Presiding Officer: Order, please. Let us hear the question.

Maree Todd: —is harming the children in this country, and that the two-child cap and welfare reform are sending our children to school hungry. What are the UK Government policies on welfare reform doing to improve attainment in our schools—the poverty-related attainment gap, to give it its full title? [*Interruption.*]

The Presiding Officer: Through the chair, please. [*Interruption.*] Order, please.

Oliver Mundell: There we go, ladies and gentlemen. That is how we build consensus around education and have a facts-based debate. [*Interruption.*] If we are going to have a facts-based debate, I will explain to Maree Todd that in England and Wales, they have gone for a much more formal early-years process based on knowledge. Tests are therefore assessing the start of that formal education process. That has been decided on in England and Wales—rightly or wrongly. I remind the Scottish Government that education is devolved and has been separate here in Scotland since before devolution. We managed perfectly well under previous systems without these assessments and attainment in many areas was far better. [*Interruption.*]

Rather than digging in deeper and trying to tell us that the evidence is on its side, it is time for the Scottish Government to start listening, slow down a little bit, and assess whether its own assessments are working.

Business Motions

17:01

The Presiding Officer (Ken Macintosh): Our next item of business is consideration of business motion S5M-13975, in the name of Graeme Dey, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, setting out a business programme.

I remind members that under the new procedure, any member can comment on these business motions. If members wish to do so, it would be best to notify the chair by 3 o'clock that day.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees—

(a) the following programme of business—

Tuesday 25 September 2018

2.00 pm Time for Reflection

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

followed by Topical Questions (if selected)

followed by Ministerial Statement: Mental Health Strategy - 2018 Annual Report

followed by Scottish Government Debate: Scotland's Role in the Development of Future UK Trade Arrangements

followed by Business Motions

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5.00 pm Decision Time

followed by Members' Business

Wednesday 26 September 2018

2.00 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions

2.00 pm Portfolio Questions: Government Business and Constitutional Relations; Culture, Tourism and External Affairs

followed by Ministerial Statement: Common Agricultural Policy

followed by Ministerial Statement: Dignity and Respect in Scotland's Security System

followed by Scottish Government Debate: Supporting and Protecting Human Rights Defenders

followed by Business Motions

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5.00 pm Decision Time

followed by Members' Business

Thursday 27 September 2018

11.40 am Parliamentary Bureau Motions

11.40 am General Questions

12.00 pm First Minister's Questions

followed by

Members' Business

2.30 pm

Parliamentary Bureau Motions

2.30 pm

Scottish Government Debate: Scottish Government Support for Veterans and the Armed Forces Community in Scotland

followed by

Business Motions

followed by

Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5.00 pm

Decision Time

Tuesday 2 October 2018

2.00 pm

Time for Reflection

followed by

Motion of Condolence: Sir Alex Ferguson

followed by

Parliamentary Bureau Motions

followed by

Topical Questions (if selected)

followed by

Scottish Government Business

followed by

Business Motions

followed by

Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5.00 pm

Decision Time

followed by

Members' Business

Wednesday 3 October 2018

2.00 pm

Parliamentary Bureau Motions

2.00 pm

Portfolio Questions: Education and Skills

followed by

Justice Committee Debate: Remand

followed by

Business Motions

followed by

Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5.00 pm

Decision Time

followed by

Members' Business

Thursday 4 October 2018

11.40 am

Parliamentary Bureau Motions

11.40 am

General Questions

12.00 pm

First Minister's Questions

followed by

Members' Business

2.30 pm

Parliamentary Bureau Motions

2.30 pm

Scottish Government Business

followed by

Business Motions

followed by

Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5.00 pm

Decision Time

(b) that, in relation to any debate on a business motion setting out a business programme taken on Wednesday 26 September, the second sentence of rule 8.11.3 is suspended and replaced with "Any Member may speak on the motion at the discretion of the Presiding Officer",

and (c) that, in relation to First Minister's Questions on 27 September 2018, in rule 13.6.2, insert at end "and may provide an opportunity for Party Leaders or their representatives to question the First Minister".—[*Graeme Dey*]

Motion agreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next item of business is consideration of business motions S5M-13977, on a stage 1 timetable, and S5M-13978, on a stage 2 timetable.

Motions moved,

That the Parliament agrees that consideration of the Vulnerable Witnesses (Criminal Evidence) (Scotland) Bill at stage 1 be completed by 8 February 2019.

That the Parliament agrees that consideration of the Scottish Crown Estate Bill at stage 2 be completed by 28 September 2018.—[*Graeme Dey*]

Motions agreed to.

Parliamentary Bureau Motion

17:02

The Presiding Officer (Ken Macintosh): The next item of business is consideration of Parliamentary Bureau motion S5M-13976, in the name of Graeme Dey, on designation of a lead committee.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees that the Equalities and Human Rights Committee be designated as the lead committee in consideration of the Children (Equal Protection from Assault) (Scotland) Bill at stage 1.—[*Graeme Dey*]

Decision Time

17:02

The Presiding Officer (Ken Macintosh): There are three questions to put at decision time. The first question is, that amendment S5M-13945.1, in the name of John Swinney, which seeks to amend motion S5M-13945, in the name of Liz Smith, on primary 1 tests, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

For

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
 Adamson, Clare (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)
 Allan, Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
 Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire South) (SNP)
 Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
 Campbell, Aileen (Clydesdale) (SNP)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
 Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
 Crawford, Bruce (Stirling) (SNP)
 Cunningham, Roseanna (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)
 Denham, Ash (Edinburgh Eastern) (SNP)
 Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)
 Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)
 Ewing, Annabelle (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP)
 Fabiani, Linda (East Kilbride) (SNP)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee City West) (SNP)
 Forbes, Kate (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP)
 Freeman, Jeane (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)
 Gougeon, Mairi (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
 Grahame, Christine (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)
 Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)
 Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen) (SNP)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 Lyle, Richard (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)
 MacDonald, Angus (Falkirk East) (SNP)
 MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
 MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
 Mackay, Derek (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP)
 Mackay, Rona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)
 Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP)
 Maguire, Ruth (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
 Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 McAlpine, Joan (South Scotland) (SNP)
 McKelvie, Christina (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP)
 McMillan, Stuart (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP)
 Neil, Alex (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
 Paterson, Gil (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
 Ross, Gail (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
 Russell, Michael (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)

Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
 Stevenson, Stewart (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Southside) (SNP)
 Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)
 Todd, Maree (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
 Watt, Maureen (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)
 Wheelhouse, Paul (South Scotland) (SNP)
 White, Sandra (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)
 Yousaf, Humza (Glasgow Pollok) (SNP)

Against

Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Con)
 Ballantyne, Michelle (South Scotland) (Con)
 Beamish, Claudia (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Bowman, Bill (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)
 Burnett, Alexander (Aberdeenshire West) (Con)
 Cameron, Donald (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Carlaw, Jackson (Eastwood) (Con)
 Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
 Chapman, Peter (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh Western) (LD)
 Corry, Maurice (West Scotland) (Con)
 Davidson, Ruth (Edinburgh Central) (Con)
 Fee, Mary (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Findlay, Neil (Lothian) (Lab)
 Finnie, John (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Gray, Iain (East Lothian) (Lab)
 Greene, Jamie (West Scotland) (Con)
 Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
 Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Halcro Johnston, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 Harris, Alison (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
 Johnstone, Alison (Lothian) (Green)
 Kelly, James (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Lamont, Johann (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Lennon, Monica (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Lindhurst, Gordon (Lothian) (Con)
 Lockhart, Dean (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Macdonald, Lewis (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Marra, Jenny (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Mason, Tom (North East Scotland) (Con)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Mitchell, Margaret (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Mountain, Edward (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Mundell, Oliver (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
 Rennie, Willie (North East Fife) (LD)
 Rowley, Alex (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Rumbles, Mike (North East Scotland) (LD)
 Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
 Sarwar, Anas (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Scott, John (Ayr) (Con)
 Scott, Tavish (Shetland Islands) (LD)
 Simpson, Graham (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Smith, Elaine (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Smyth, Colin (South Scotland) (Lab)

Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Stewart, David (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Tomkins, Adam (Glasgow) (Con)
 Wells, Annie (Glasgow) (Con)
 Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)
 Wightman, Andy (Lothian) (Green)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 61, Against 63, Abstentions 0.

Amendment disagreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that motion S5M-13945, in the name of Liz Smith, on primary 1 tests, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

For

Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Con)
 Ballantyne, Michelle (South Scotland) (Con)
 Beamish, Claudia (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Bowman, Bill (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)
 Burnett, Alexander (Aberdeenshire West) (Con)
 Cameron, Donald (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Carlaw, Jackson (Eastwood) (Con)
 Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
 Chapman, Peter (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh Western) (LD)
 Corry, Maurice (West Scotland) (Con)
 Davidson, Ruth (Edinburgh Central) (Con)
 Fee, Mary (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Findlay, Neil (Lothian) (Lab)
 Finnie, John (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Gray, Iain (East Lothian) (Lab)
 Greene, Jamie (West Scotland) (Con)
 Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
 Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Halcro Johnston, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 Harris, Alison (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
 Johnstone, Alison (Lothian) (Green)
 Kelly, James (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Lamont, Johann (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Lennon, Monica (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Lindhurst, Gordon (Lothian) (Con)
 Lockhart, Dean (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Macdonald, Lewis (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Marra, Jenny (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Mason, Tom (North East Scotland) (Con)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Mitchell, Margaret (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Mountain, Edward (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Mundell, Oliver (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
 Rennie, Willie (North East Fife) (LD)
 Rowley, Alex (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Rumbles, Mike (North East Scotland) (LD)
 Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
 Sarwar, Anas (Glasgow) (Lab)

Scott, John (Ayr) (Con)
 Scott, Tavish (Shetland Islands) (LD)
 Simpson, Graham (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Smith, Elaine (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Smyth, Colin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Stewart, David (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Tomkins, Adam (Glasgow) (Con)
 Wells, Annie (Glasgow) (Con)
 Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)
 Wightman, Andy (Lothian) (Green)

Against

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
 Adamson, Clare (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)
 Allan, Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
 Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire South) (SNP)
 Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
 Campbell, Aileen (Clydesdale) (SNP)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
 Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
 Crawford, Bruce (Stirling) (SNP)
 Cunningham, Roseanna (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)
 Denham, Ash (Edinburgh Eastern) (SNP)
 Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)
 Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)
 Ewing, Annabelle (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP)
 Fabiani, Linda (East Kilbride) (SNP)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee City West) (SNP)
 Forbes, Kate (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP)
 Freeman, Jeane (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)
 Gougeon, Mairi (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
 Grahame, Christine (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)
 Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)
 Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen) (SNP)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 Lyle, Richard (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)
 MacDonald, Angus (Falkirk East) (SNP)
 MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
 MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
 Mackay, Derek (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP)
 Mackay, Rona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)
 Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP)
 Maguire, Ruth (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
 Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 McAlpine, Joan (South Scotland) (SNP)
 McKelvie, Christina (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP)
 McMillan, Stuart (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP)
 Neil, Alex (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
 Paterson, Gil (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
 Ross, Gail (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
 Russell, Michael (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
 Stevenson, Stewart (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Southside) (SNP)

Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)
 Todd, Maree (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
 Watt, Maureen (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)
 Wheelhouse, Paul (South Scotland) (SNP)
 White, Sandra (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)
 Yousaf, Humza (Glasgow Pollok) (SNP)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 63, Against 61, Abstentions 0.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament believes that good-quality pupil assessment is an essential component of the drive to raise educational standards in Scotland's schools, but notes the level of concern that has been raised by teachers and other education professionals regarding the introduction and delivery of new testing arrangements for Primary 1 (P1) pupils; considers that this concern questions whether the new P1 tests are in line with the play-based learning philosophy of early years provision in the curriculum for excellence, and, in light of this concern, calls on the Scottish Government to halt the tests in P1 and to reconsider the evidence and the whole approach to evaluating the progress of P1 pupils.

The Presiding Officer: The final question is, that motion S5M-13976, in the name of Graeme Dey, on designation of a lead committee, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament agrees that the Equalities and Human Rights Committee be designated as the lead committee in consideration of the Children (Equal Protection from Assault) (Scotland) Bill at stage 1.

Richard Leonard (Central Scotland) (Lab): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I rise to make a point of order under rule 8.17 of standing orders. Teachers told this Government that those tests were useless and ministers ignored them. Parents told this Government that they did not trust those tests and ministers ignored them. The Scottish Parliament has now voted to scrap those tests. *[Interruption.]*

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

Richard Leonard: Ministers must not now ignore the will of Parliament. *[Interruption.]* The Government must, therefore, bring forward immediate plans for its response to today's vote. Presiding Officer, how will you authorise that within the rules of this Parliament?

The Presiding Officer: Thank you very much, Mr Leonard. The Parliament has passed the motion and the resolution is, therefore, the will of Parliament. There is an expectation that the Government will respond seriously to that resolution and will respond appropriately in due course.

Johann Lamont (Glasgow) (Lab): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. In discussions with the

Government, Presiding Officer, will you reflect on the commission on parliamentary reform's explicit recommendation that when the Government lost a vote, it should take the matter seriously and say when it will come back to Parliament to say how it will respond to the decision. As Maree Todd said earlier, it is important that we uphold the will of the Parliament.

The Presiding Officer: I thank Ms Lamont for her point of order. That particular recommendation of the commission on parliamentary reform is under active consideration by the Parliamentary Bureau. The bureau is the parliamentary body through which Parliament as a whole decides when issues should be brought before the Parliament—it decides parliamentary business. It will be for the Parliamentary Bureau to decide when this issue should be brought back.

As there are no other points of order, that concludes decision time.

BBC Alba

17:09

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Linda Fabiani): The final item of business is a members' business debate on motion S5M-13742, in the name of Donald Cameron, on celebrating 10 years of BBC Alba. The debate will be concluded without any question being put. Some members have indicated that they will make their contributions in Gaelic. Interpretation facilities are available, and any member can listen by plugging their headphones into the socket on the console.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament welcomes the tenth anniversary of the launch of BBC ALBA, which is jointly operated by MG ALBA and the BBC; acknowledges that, since its launch, over £160 million has been invested in producing its Gaelic language content; believes that the station accounts for around 50% of independently-produced hours for audiences in Scotland; commends MG ALBA on working with other Gaelic organisations, including Bòrd na Gàidhlig, to understand the changing trends in Gaelic culture and to implement these in their content; welcomes the news that the channel is investing more in its digital content to reach younger audiences; further welcomes its recent partnership agreement with S4C of Wales, Northern Ireland Screen's Irish Language Broadcast Fund and TG4 of the Republic of Ireland to invest more in Celtic language output, and recognises what it sees as the ongoing contribution that BBC ALBA makes in promoting Gaelic language and culture to a wider audience in the Highlands and Islands and across Scotland.

17:10

Donald Cameron (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I thank MG Alba and, in particular, its chief executive, Donald Campbell, who encouraged me to celebrate this fantastic achievement in Parliament. The debate is being streamed online by BBC Alba.

It is particularly special that we are celebrating today, because it is 10 years to the very day that BBC Alba was formed as a channel. It was launched with a live ceilidh from Sabhal Mòr Ostaig on Skye and a drama about Elvis. Looking around the chamber at all the musical and dramatical talent present, I wonder whether we could match that tonight.

A lot of work went in at that point to achieve the goal of a publicly funded Gaelic broadcaster, and an immense amount of work has gone on since then to take BBC Alba from strength to strength. Given that I am not fluent in Gaelic, I will not inflict what little I have on the chamber, but I am sure that others will not be so hesitant, and I look forward to hearing everyone's contributions.

In BBC Alba, we have a broadcaster that has commissioned or created some £160 million-worth

of Gaelic television content and which accounts for around half the independently produced hours for audiences in Scotland. One of its parent companies, MG Alba, which I have mentioned, is responsible for 114 jobs in the Highlands and Islands, providing vital skilled employment in the Western Isles, Skye, Inverness and places further afield. In addition, there are multiyear contracts with eight independent production companies that produce in a variety of genres, including the hugely successful "Bannan", which is produced by Young Films on Skye.

That is a remarkable achievement, considering that it has all been done on an annual budget that is modest compared with what other Celtic networks around the United Kingdom receive. BBC Alba has done a lot with a little. I will return briefly to the question of funding later.

The Minister for Public Finance and Digital Economy (Kate Forbes): Does the member agree that although debates in English-language BBC have raged for years about a Scottish six, the Gaelic eight, which is the news programme on BBC Alba, has been reporting regional, national and international news from the very heart of Gaeldom for years to an incredibly high standard, and on a fraction of the budget?

Donald Cameron: I thank the member for that intervention—I whole-heartedly agree. Having appeared on "An Là" only on Monday night, I know that it is a fantastic programme.

BBC Alba's overall output, especially its news output, is tremendous. By coincidence, I was lucky enough to spend Monday afternoon visiting BBC Alba's offices in Stornoway, where I spoke to a number of staff members. They said several things that struck me, which I will share with the chamber. The first, which was obvious, was that so many staff had been involved from the very start and were still there. There appears to be an incredible loyalty to the channel from its employees, which, in my view, is undoubtedly a good sign. The second was the fact that BBC Alba is not one single homogenous organisation but a patchwork collection of producers, editors and presenters, some of whom act as independent freelancers. The third was that the channel has been able to bring to the fore important local issues that simply do not receive enough national coverage. For example, we watched the production of a programme about the geese crisis affecting crofters on the Uists.

It is clear that although Gaelic is a central part of what BBC Alba does, the channel promotes not just the language but the wider community and culture. It has obvious connections with the Gaelic-speaking world in the Highlands and Islands, but it is known to reach many more people beyond the Gàidhealtachd. Indeed, many

who watch BBC Alba have no connection to Gaelic whatever.

I will give some examples. I have non-Gaelic-speaking friends who have told me that the only way that they can watch their local shinty team is on BBC Alba. On the very day that Scotland qualified for the women's world cup next year, BBC Alba announced a three-year deal, making it the home of Scottish women's football. A member of the Scottish Conservative media team, who, it has to be said, is not known for his love of Gaelic, admitted to me that the only way that he was able to watch his underperforming football team was on BBC Alba, due to the channel's excellent coverage of the very lowest reaches of the Scottish Professional Football League.

David Stewart (Highlands and Islands) (Lab): Is the member suggesting that the football team is rubbish in two languages?

Donald Cameron: I think that I will leave that hanging.

According to BBC Alba, 10 per cent of viewers over 16 in Scotland watch the channel each week. That means that many people who do not speak Gaelic access the channel's content. Whether people are watching sport, which I mentioned, watching subtitled programmes or simply checking out the original content, the channel is, ultimately, a door to Gaelic for a wider audience. The recent agreement that secured the right to broadcast content from CBBC and CBeebies enhances the channel's offering to a younger audience.

Although there are a lot of good things to shout about, it goes without saying that there are also challenges to overcome. There is wide acceptance that the number of people watching linear TV is declining generally, and that that is particularly the case for younger viewers, who, more often than not, use social media or catch-up services to view content. We all know about the competition that comes from major platforms such as Netflix and Amazon Prime, and we know that people use social media platforms and make greater use of popular websites and apps, such as YouTube and Instagram. That presents obstacles to all linear TV, and especially to channels such as BBC Alba.

Another significant challenge is funding. When I spoke to staff in Stornoway on Monday, they told me that when new funding for content becomes available hundreds of different ideas are put forward, many of which are very good. However, often only a small handful of ideas can be realised. At present, the BBC provides the channel with funding. It provides additional net programme funding of £1.2 million per year. That replaces funding that the channel previously received from MG Alba, which has freed MG Alba to make extra

investment in the independent sector. There is also the overall BBC contribution of £10.7 million.

When we compare those figures with the £74.5 million that the BBC affords to Welsh-language broadcaster S4C or the €37.5 million that the Irish Government provides to its Irish-language broadcaster, we can see a stark contrast. Although the BBC contributes a significant amount, and it is important to acknowledge that support, in my view it could do more to invest in and support BBC Alba.

Although BBC Alba is a 21st century creation that works at the cutting edge of digital media, using the latest technology, it is worth thinking about the historical context. BBC Alba fits squarely into a much more ancient Gaelic tradition, because, in many ways, the channel is the modern equivalent of the sennachie. The sennachie is the storyteller of old, who would entertain with history, song and verse, touching the local and the wider world and shifting between fact and fiction, and drama and real life, just as now, BBC Alba passes on the stories, legends, songs and customs that are rooted in the people and the land in which they live and work.

The people who are listeners and viewers of BBC Alba drive much of the channel's content, rather than content being imposed from above. BBC Alba is a service for the whole of Scotland and a standard-bearer for a language and culture that mean so much to so many people, not just here in Scotland but across the world. Therefore, I finish by saying to BBC Alba, "Tapadh leat!"

17:18

Ruth Maguire (Cunninghame South) (SNP): Mo thaing dha Dòmhnall Camshron airson an deasbad seo a steidheachadh.

A rèir urras a' BhBC, 's e dleastanas BBC Alba measgachadh de phrògraman a thabhann, a' toirt a-steach naidheachdan telebhisein agus an t-side. Bu chòir an sianal a bhith a' frithealadh luchd-labhairt agus luchd-ionnsachaidh na Gàidhlig, agus daoine a dh'fhaodadh a bhith airson Gàidhlig ionnsachadh. Bu chòir an sianal cuideachd a bhith na sgàthan agus na thaic dha cultar, fein-aithne agus dualchas na Gàidhlig.

Bho thòisich BBC Alba a' craoladh air 19 Sultain 2008, tha an sianal air fàs gu mòr gus na h-amasan sin a choileanadh. An-diugh, tha e a' tabhann seachd uairean de phrògraman gach latha, agus tha an t-uabhas dhaoine ga choimhead, le ruigse fada nas fharsainge na a' choimhearsnachd Ghàidhlig. Mar eisimpleir, bidh mòran dhaoine gun Ghàidhlig a' coimhead gu cunbhalach air prògraman leithid nan naidheachdan laitheil, an t-sreath "Eòrpa", dràma agus chuirmean-ciùil bho air feadh an t-saoghail.

Agus gu dearbha, tha spòrs air a bhith na phàirt chudromach den t-sianal. Mar neach-leantainn ball-coise mi fhìn, bha mi air leth toilichte na bu thràithe sa mhìos seo cluinntinn gum bi BBC Alba na dachaigh airson ball-coise nam ban Albannach, a' toirt àrdachadh mòr dha ìomhaigh an spòrsa ann an Alba.

Tha e na urram dhomh Gàidhlig a bhruidhinn sa Phàrlamaid nàiseanta againn, ach tha e na bhriseadh dùil gu bheil cuid de na buill Pàrlamaid againn fhathast a' cur an aghaidh na Gàidhlig. Is e seo an t-adhbhar a tha mi a' feuchainn ri beagan a bhruidhinn san deasbad seo. Tha e cudromach gu bheil a h-uile duine a tha taiceil dhan chànan agus dhan chultar againn a' dìon na Gàidhlig nuair tha daoine a' toirt slaic oirre nach eil cothromach neo reusanta. Chan urrainn dhuinn a bhith balbh

Following is the simultaneous interpretation:

I thank Donald Cameron for securing the debate.

According to the BBC Trust, BBC Alba's remit is to provide a mix of programmes including television news and weather. The channel ought to make provision for speakers and learners of Gaelic, as well as for people who might want to learn Gaelic, and it ought to be a mirror and a support for culture, identity and Gaelic heritage.

Since BBC Alba started broadcasting on 19 September 2008, the channel has grown, and it has addressed and met all those aims and objectives. Now it offers six hours of programmes every day, and an awful lot of people watch it. The channel's reach goes much wider than the Gaelic community: for example, many people who do not speak Gaelic regularly watch programmes such as the daily news and "Eòrpa", drama programmes, concerts from around the world and sport, which is a very important part of the channel's output. I am a football fan, so earlier this month I was happy to hear that BBC Alba will be home to the women's world cup, which will greatly raise the image of Scottish women's football in Scotland.

It is a privilege for me to speak Gaelic in our national Parliament, but it is also a disappointment that some members are against it, which is the reason for my speaking Gaelic in today's debate. It is important that everyone who is supportive of the language and our culture defends Gaelic when people demean it unfairly and unreasonably. We must not remain silent.

Jamie Greene (West Scotland) (Con): Will the member take an intervention?

Ruth Maguire: Ma tha thu a' dol a bhruidhinn Gàidhlig.

Following is the simultaneous interpretation.

If you are going to speak Gaelic.

Jamie Greene: I can only apologise that my intervention is in English because of the—

Ruth Maguire: I said that I would take an intervention only if it was in Gaelic, but I will let Mr Greene in.

Jamie Greene: I had already taken off my headphones.

I want to pick up on a very important point, which is people's perception of the language. Perhaps the politics of recent times has muddled those waters. What does Ruth Maguire think could be done to improve take-up of Gaelic further among young people and adults outside the areas in which it has traditionally been spoken, including the central belt?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I apologise, Ms Maguire. I did not hear that. You may answer in Gaelic if you wish.

Ruth Maguire: It would probably be helpful if I answer Mr Greene in English.

There is a lot that everyone can do. There is clear cross-party support for Gaelic, and it is not owned by one political party or one bit of Scotland. We need to take that out of the debate and take the opportunity to speak a little bit whenever we can, even if we are nervous about it.

In Jamie Greene's region, West Scotland, a mountain of Gaelic activity is going on. On North Ayrshire Council's website he will see that there are Gaelic singing classes, adult Gaelic speaking classes and conversational Gaelic groups. Mr Greene should get involved and lead by example.

The member continued in Gaelic.

Bu mhath leam meal-a-naidheachd a chur air a h-uile duine aig BBC Alba a rinn strì agus a bhios a' strì fhathast gus an sianal Gàidhlig, agus an cànan fhein, a neartachadh. Is mi a tha a' coimhead air adhart ris an ath dheich bliadhna.

Following is the simultaneous interpretation.

I offer my congratulations to everyone at BBC Alba on the effort that they have made—and are still making—to strengthen Gaelic. I look forward to the next 10 years.

17:22

Edward Mountain (Highlands and Islands) (Con): First, I thank my colleague Donald Cameron for lodging the motion, which celebrates the 10th anniversary of BBC Alba.

If my school teachers were here today, they probably would not stop laughing at my attempts to extol the value of languages in our society, especially as my school reports repeatedly stated that I should concentrate on English rather than

trying to master other languages that were clearly beyond me. Looking back, I can admit that I could single-handedly massacre the French language at school. When I served in the Army I made a pretty good job of massacring Swahili and making it unintelligible. That is quite an achievement of sorts, given that, although Swahili has verbs, it has no tenses.

Therefore, if I happen to make a mispronunciation today I will not mind taking an intervention—in any language, as long as someone can explain to me what I am supposed to be answering. I would love to take interventions from members who are far more eloquent in Gaelic than I am.

As we celebrate the 10th anniversary of BBC Alba, it is worth noting that 50 per cent of Gaelic speakers live in the Highlands, and that BBC Alba forms a big part of their daily lives. I am proud of the enduring contribution that my party has made to Gaelic culture through introducing, with the Broadcasting Act 1990, the Gaelic television fund, and through the Broadcasting Act 1996, which further improved funding for Gaelic television. Those two acts laid the groundwork for BBC Alba, which was launched in 2008. The channel now has a viewership in excess of the 60,000 speakers of Gaelic, which is testament to the wide appeal of the language and the programming, and of the growing interest in Gaelic culture.

Gaelic production forms a sizeable part of Scotland's growing television and film industry which, as we know, has generated nearly £100 million in the past year. Production companies, such as the Stornoway-based Mac TV Ltd, are important local employers, which highlights how vital BBC Alba is to the islands' economy as a whole.

BBC Alba's sports coverage has come in for some criticism from people who want the channel to focus more on arts and culture, but I do not see why Gaelic audiences should not get live sports in their own language. Football, shinty and rugby draw new audiences to the channel and should act as a gateway to the Gaelic language.

Let us not forget that BBC Alba exists to support the learning of Gaelic and, alongside Gaelic education in our primary and secondary schools, acts as an engine of growth for the language.

BBC Alba is a big success story for the Gaelic language, so I am delighted to mark the channel's 10th anniversary today.

Today's debate is a reminder of the importance of the Scottish Government's target, which was set more than ten years ago, to ensure

"that by the 2021 census, the proportion of Gaelic speakers is back up to 2001 levels at the very least."

I support the Government in that goal. BBC Alba will be central to achieving the target, so I urge the Scottish Government—and people across Scotland—to continue to support the channel.

17:25

Dr Alasdair Allan (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): Taing mhòr gu Maighstear Camshron airson an deasbad seo a stèidheachadh agus cothrom a thoirt seachad dhan Phàrlamaid 10 bhliadhna de BhBC Alba a chomharrachadh.

Tha cuimhne agamsa air nuair a dh'fhosgail BBC Alba. Bha mise aig a' chèilidh, agus chunnaic mi am prògram mu Elvis cuideachd. Bhon là sin, tha BBC Alba air fàs agus air dol seachad air iomadach clach-mhìle—nuair a thòisich e air Freeview, mar eisimpleir. Mar a thuirt Mgr Camshron, an-diugh tha an iPlayer cho cudromach. Tha an linn òg seo a' fàs suas gun sgaradh sam bith nan inntinn eadar an t-eadar-lìn agus an telebhisean, agus tha BBC Alba ag aithneachadh seo.

Tha e doirbh a chreidsinn nach robh BBC Alba ann 10 bliadhna air ais. An-diugh, tha e a' dèanamh a h-uile seòrsa prògram mu eachdraidh is cultar na h-Alba agus an t-saoghail air fad: prògraman cloinne, prògraman spòrs, naidheachdan agus a-nis dràma. Tha prògraman mar "Eòrpa" a' dèiligeadh le ceistean eadar-nàiseanta ann an dòigh nach eil prògraman sam bith eile ann an Alba no ann an cànan sam bith. Agus aig an aon àm, tha BBC Alba a' dèiligeadh fhathast le cuspairean beagan nas aotroime. Tha cuimhne agam air aon phrògram a bha a' rannsachadh claon-bhreith an aghaidh daoine le falt ruadh. Bha mise a' gabhail pàirt anns a' phrògram sin.

Tha buaidh mhòr eaconomaigeach aig BBC Alba, chan ann dìreach air a' Ghaidhealtachd agus sna h-Eileanan. Tha Riaghaltas na h-Alba a' cur faisg air £12 millean not a-steach air an t-sianal sa bhliadhna, ach tha an t-àm ann a-nis airson ceann-oifis a' BhBC fhèin a bhith a' pàigheadh nas motha, a' dèanamh cinnteach gun gabh 10 uairean de phrògraman a dhèanamh sa chànan gach seachdain, mar a tha a' tachairt leis a' Chuimris.

Taing do BhBC Alba, tha fhios a-nis aig muinntir na h-Alba gu bheil a' Ghàidhlig ann, agus chan eil mi cinnteach gum biodh sin dìreach cho fìor a ràdh anns na làithean ro BhBC Alba.

Aon rud a tha misneachail mu BhBC Alba, 's e sin an taic air a shon thairis air na pàrtaidhean politigeach. Feumaidh mi ràdh, ge-tà, gur e briseadh dùil a th' ann nuair a bhios neach no dhà ann am poilitigs no anns na meadhanan a' dol an aghaidh an aonta seo bho àm gu àm. Mar a thuirt Ruth NicUidhir, cluinnidh tu fhathast cuideigin a'

gearan uaireannan mun dòigh sa chunnaic e no a chuala e facal no dhà de Ghàidhlig aon turas na bheatha, agus mar a bha sin ga chur droil.

Chluich telebhisean pàirt mhòr ann an crìonadh na Gàidhlig. Tha mi an dòchas a-nis gu bheil telebhisean a' cluich pàirt ann an dùsgadh a' chàin. Direach mar a tha cuilean son na beatha agus chan ann dìreach son na Nollaig, chan eil a' Ghàidhlig ann dìreach son a bhith a' bruidhinn mu dheidhinn na Gàidhlig. Tha BBC Alba a' tuigsinn sin.

Anns an spioraid sin, tha mi cinnteach gum bi mi fhèin a' cleachdadh na Gàidhlig anns a' Phàrlamaid, chan ann dìreach airson a bhith a' bruidhinn mun Ghàidhlig mar a tha mi an-dràsta, ach bidh sibh gam chluinntinn bho àm gu àm a' faighneachd cèist mu sheirbhisean slàinte no mu Bhrexit anns a' Ghàidhlig cuideachd.

Following is the simultaneous interpretation:

I, too, thank Mr Cameron for securing the debate and giving Parliament the opportunity to mark 10 years of BBC Alba. I remember when the channel was launched, 10 years ago: I was at the official ceilidh. I also saw the channel's first programme, which was about Elvis. Since that day, BBC Alba has grown and surpassed many milestones.

The channel started on Freeview but, as Mr Cameron said, the iPlayer is more important nowadays. The younger generation has grown up without differentiating between the internet and television, which BBC Alba recognises.

In a way, it is difficult to imagine that BBC Alba did not exist 10 years ago; nowadays, it broadcasts all sorts of programmes, from those on history, Scottish culture, world culture, sports, news and drama to those for children. Programmes such as "Eòrpa" deal with international questions in a way that no other programme in Scotland does—in any language. BBC Alba also deals with lighter topics, however: I remember taking part in a programme that was researching prejudice against people with red hair.

BBC Alba has a huge economic impact, not just in the Highlands and Islands but throughout Scotland. The Scottish Government puts in £12 million-worth of funding a year, and it is time that the BBC contributed more to make sure that there are 10 hours of programmes a day, as happens on S4C in Wales.

It is thanks to BBC Alba that the people of Scotland know that Gaelic is there; that probably would not be true of the days before BBC Alba. The cross-party political support for BBC Alba is encouraging, but it is disappointing when one or two people in politics or the media go against it from time to time. We still hear people complaining

about when they saw or heard a word or two of Gaelic and how that upset them.

Television has played a huge part in the decline of Gaelic; I hope that it will now play a huge part in reawakening the language.

Language, like a puppy, is for life and not just for Christmas. Gaelic is not just there to be talked about in Gaelic—BBC Alba understands that. In that vein, I will certainly be using Gaelic from time to time in Parliament and not just in order to talk about Gaelic as I am doing now. Members will hear me asking questions, perhaps about health services or Brexit, in Gaelic.

Kate Forbes: No is dòcha ceistean mu mhaoineachadh nuair a tha mi fhìn a' freagairt nan ceist?

Following is the simultaneous interpretation:

Will you be asking questions about funding?

Dr Allan: Tha mi cinnteach gum bi mi a' togail cheistean mu mhaoineachadh BBC Alba no mu mhaoineachadh sheirbheisean eile ann an Alba air fad. Tha e cudromach gu bheil sinn a' cleachdadh na Gàidhlig chan ann dìreach airson bruidhinn air a' Ghàidhlig, mar a thuirt mi, ach airson a h-uile seòrsa rud.

Following is the simultaneous interpretation:

I am sure that I will raise questions about funding for BBC Alba and for other services in Scotland. It is important that, as I have said, we use Gaelic not just when we are talking about it but for everything.

The member continued in Gaelic:

Co-dhiù, leis a h-uile duine eile, guidhidh mi meal-a-naidheachd do BhBC Alba agus a h-uile deagh dhùrachd son an àm ri teachd.

Following is the simultaneous interpretation:

Once again, and along with everyone else, I congratulate BBC Alba and offer the channel every good wish for the future.

17:29

Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab): Tapadh leibh, Oifigear-riaghlaidh. Tha mi glè thoilichte gun tug Dòmhnall Camshron an deasbad seo air adhart.

Thank you, Presiding Officer. I am very pleased that Donald Cameron brought forward this debate.

It gives me great pleasure to wish BBC Alba happy birthday. It feels as though BBC Alba has been around for ever, but 10 years is a relatively short space of time for it to have had the impact that it has had. It has been at the forefront of promoting the Gaelic language. Its carrying of

sport—not just shinty, but football and rugby—has promoted the channel to a much wider audience than the one that it might originally have been set up to serve, but that encourages others to listen to and gain an interest in our language.

It could be argued that the coverage of shinty has promoted the game and led to more young people becoming interested in playing it. The more people who watch BBC Alba, the more who will be interested in learning our language and keeping it alive.

BBC Alba has a broad range of programmes for young viewers, including “Padraig Post”, through which it works in tandem with Gaelic-medium education to help young people to learn. As we have heard, its news and current affairs programmes are excellent, too. Historically, “Eòrpa” was recognised for its journalist content even before BBC Alba started broadcasting. For learners like me, “Speaking Our Language” never goes out of date. Sadly, Rhoda MacDonald does not seem to have aged at all, albeit that her hairstyle has changed a number of times over the series.

As well as serving our Gaelic speakers, the channel helps learners and promotes interest in Gaelic. As someone whose first language was Gaelic and who has now returned to it as a learner, BBC Alba offers me an extra connection to the language and a way of keeping up my practice between classes through a wide range of programmes. It enables learners young and old to have Gaelic embedded in more aspects of their lives, instead of it being confined to the classroom. I have often heard people say that they know that we are keeping the language alive when it becomes the language of the playground rather than the language of the classroom.

Although keeping Gaelic alive must be the main aim, the channel has other, unforeseen benefits. It has created jobs in the media, not just for Gaelic-speaking presenters but for people with all the other skills that are required in sound, film and production. It means that young people from the Gaidhealtachd now have a range of careers to choose from and the ability to stay at home to pursue them. One of the big problems in my region is depopulation, which happens for economic reasons. People leave because there are few jobs and even fewer careers. BBC Alba provides young people with a career to pursue that keeps them in our communities and gives them choices.

Our language is also important in keeping our history and culture alive. The history and culture of communities in the Highlands and Islands is handed down through poetry, song and storytelling. If we lose the language, we will lose that aspect of our heritage. BBC Alba also

promotes those traditional arts, as well as contemporary arts. What is sad is that Gaelic was much more widely spoken in the past across much of Scotland and in parts of northern England. It has been lost from those areas and, with it, their culture and heritage has been lost.

BBC Alba's programming is of a really high standard, and it holds its own against English-speaking channels and provides excellent value for money. However, with more investment, BBC Alba could do so much more, and I urge the BBC to have a balance in funding to make sure that it gets a fair share of the cake. As Donald Cameron said, when money is available, the bids to produce new and innovative programming far exceed the cash that is available to pay for it. We must urge the BBC to make sure that BBC Alba gets a fair share.

Last new year, my husband had the flu, so I was at home in front of the TV, taking in the new year on my own. I tried a number of channels before settling down to a wonderful concert on BBC Alba, which was very like a traditional ceilidh, rather than the forced kitsch that can sometimes be found on other channels.

As well as recognising the channel's worth, we need to make sure that we support it. Recently, Duncan Ferguson wrote that BBC Alba had done more to promote and protect Gaelic than the Gaelic Language (Scotland) Act 2005, and he might be right. However, having a Gaelic language act might help us to protect and promote BBC Alba, because if we take it for granted, we do so at our peril.

I am delighted to support the motion, and I hope that I will be wishing BBC Alba many happy returns for many years to come.

Co-là breith math! Happy birthday!

17:35

Angus MacDonald (Falkirk East) (SNP): A chionn gu bheil taic làidir agam airson na Gàidhlig, b' fheàrr leam a bhith a' toirt seachad na h-òraid agam sa Ghàidhlig am feasgar seo, ach a dh'aindeoin tighinn à Steòrnabhagh chan eil Gàidhlig gu leòr agam. Mar sin, le duilichinn, feumaidh mi tionndadh air ais dhan Bheurla.

Following is the simultaneous interpretation:

Given my strong support for Gaelic, I would dearly love to make my speech in Gaelic this evening. However, despite coming from Stornoway, I do not have enough Gaelic to do that, so I will continue in English.

Angus MacDonald continued in English.

I thank Donald Cameron for lodging his motion for debate today. I was pleased to sign it to ensure

that there was cross-party support to allow the debate to take place, as the more Gaelic-related debates we have in Scotland's Parliament, the better.

I am glad that I was at the official launch of BBC Alba here in Edinburgh 10 years ago, which was attended by the great and the good of the Gaelic world and the BBC, and by others. It was a double celebration for me because of my role as the convener of the organising committee of the Royal National Mod, which was being held in Falkirk that year, which meant that the Falkirk Mod was the first to enjoy wall-to-wall coverage of the competitions and concerts through BBC Alba.

As well as providing excellent coverage of the Mod over the past decade, MG Alba is an incredibly important piece in our diverse cultural jigsaw through its partnership with the BBC. Tasked with ensuring that Gaelic is accessible in our day-to-day lives with its creative content, factual documentaries and drama series that are available through broadcasts and online platforms, BBC Alba is vital to the promotion, preservation and normalisation of the culture that is the Gaelic language and lifestyle and all that comes with that. It gives me great pleasure to celebrate the 10th anniversary of BBC Alba here this evening.

BBC Alba was first launched 10 years ago tonight at 9 pm with "Òran Alba", which is a special version of the song "Alba". We have watched the channel grow, expand and diversify. It has changed with the times and made use of emerging platforms for content to be shared far and wide.

At the time of the channel launch, MG Alba's commissioning strategy consisted of long-term volume deal commissions that brought the channel low-cost, high-volume original hourage and allowed the independent sector to enjoy the security of guaranteed funding over a number of years, which allowed for investment and long-term planning, gained favourable deals with suppliers and provided employee security. The strategy also consisted of seasonal commissioning rounds that brought higher-production-value bespoke programming to the channel. There were three tendering rounds each year at the time of the launch of the channel.

Ten years on, MG Alba still has the volume deals, which provide 89 per cent of the channel's original funded hourage for 75 per cent of the programme budget. Sadly, MG Alba cannot now accommodate three commissioning rounds per year due to financial constraints. It currently has two seasonal commissioning rounds at a lower level of individual funding than the original three. Worryingly, those two rounds are in jeopardy due to the lack of assurance that MG Alba has regarding its annual core funding. The commissioning rounds are heavily dependent on

the £1 million pressure funding that has been received over the past three years. Worryingly, again, that sum is not guaranteed, which causes uncertainty and insecurity in the independent sector and for the supply of programming.

As a result, a channel with a 74 per cent repeat level is in danger of losing not only its core audience but the wider Scottish audience without a supply of high-quality originations.

Another issue of concern is the plan to launch a new Scottish channel, which we all welcome. The head of BBC Scotland intimated that BBC Alba would get the benefit of up to 100 hours of new programming as a direct result of the new channel.

I am not sure how far down that road BBC Scotland is, but one thing is for sure: we need to safeguard the current appreciation for and consumption of BBC Alba by the wider Scottish audience, and ensure that the two channels work in partnership with each other and not in competition. I genuinely hope that the arrival of the new channel is not to the detriment of BBC Alba, and that we can get an assurance about that from the BBC.

As always, time prevents me from raising other salient points. Suffice to say, let us celebrate all that MG Alba and BBC Alba have done for Gaelic and sport in Scotland over the past 10 years, and let us all ensure that we protect it for the next 10 years and beyond.

17:40

John Finnie (Highlands and Islands) (Green): Gabhaibh mo leisgeul. Chan eil ach beagan Gàidhlig agam. Mar as àbhaist, feumaidh mi Beurla a bhruidhinn.

John Finnie continued in English.

I am sorry, but that is my usual opening. I have only a little Gaelic, so I will have to speak in English.

I congratulate my colleague Donald Cameron, who talked about BBC Alba going from strength to strength. That is evident from the contributions that we have heard. There is tangible evidence of that with a new television gallery in Inverness. Donald Cameron also talked about "An Là". The fact that that entire production could take place from there is a sign of the progress that has been made.

News is very important, of course, so I also welcome the weekend bulletins on Radio nan Gàidheal. Like others, I very much welcome the new jobs, particularly the six new journalism jobs in Inverness.

As has been said, BBC Alba operates throughout the Gàidhealtachd. Its jobs and its

spread are welcome, and it has always been very outward looking—as, I hope, the Highlands is always seen to be.

There are many things to be positive about, such as the revamp of the children's output and particularly the utilisation of the CBBC and CBeebies brands. That is about the normalising of the use of the language in connection with everything that goes on.

Job creation is, of course, not just about creative jobs. Other members have alluded to that. There are positive contributions from technicians and other supports. That is part of the wider progress that has been made and the result of the role that BBC Alba has played in moving things forward.

The motion mentions joint working. With resources always being finite, collaboration is very important.

I do not wish to appear to be negative, but it is important to talk about the BBC charter review and the significant support for Gaelic that was indicated during the public consultation. Others have touched on that. Donald Cameron talked about the “modest” budget. Others would say that there was an inequitable outcome from the charter review. S4C is guaranteed £74.5 million per annum until 2022.

An email that I received from a constituent this afternoon says:

“Expecting BBC ALBA to survive, never mind thrive, on something like £8.2m (from the BBC) while it has become clear the new BBC Scotland is to have four times that budget, to broadcast for fewer hours, has highlighted further the inequity of the situation.”

I am sure that I was not the only recipient of that email. It calls on supporters of BBC Alba to renew the call for the BBC and politicians to commit to a minimum of 10 hours of new programming per week and to providing the resources that are required to enable BBC Alba to fulfil its role of offering a diverse range of high-quality programmes in Gaelic.

On a positive note, people have talked about the dynamic nature of the media industry and about not making exclusively cultural programmes. Who knows? “Eòrpa” is often cited as an excellent example of a programme that contains very strong investigative journalism not just in Scotland; it takes a broad outlook. Maybe in years to come, people will view “DIY le Donnie” as pivotal. For those who—like me—do not do DIY, it is nonetheless entertaining to watch and I commend it to members. I also commend the sports coverage.

It is very important that we do not politicise the language. Language has a powerful role to play—we know that with our sisters and brothers in

Wales, Catalonia and the Basque Country. The motion mentions Celtic language output and the recent partnership agreement. That could contribute to positive progress and respect for the Irish language in the north of Ireland, for instance.

There are many positive things to say about BBC Alba, and I am sure that the next decade will be the same.

Mòran taing.

17:44

The Minister for Europe, Migration and International Development (Ben Macpherson): I thank all the speakers for what has been an excellent debate, and I thank Donald Cameron for lodging the motion.

It is a pleasure to have this opportunity to express the Scottish Government's gratitude to all who are involved in BBC Alba, on its 10th birthday. First, I thank BBC Alba producers, presenters and commissioners and, of course, the BBC and the Gaelic Media Service, MG Alba, which between them run the channel, for the creative work that they have produced over the past decade, which has made the channel such a resounding success, as others have emphasised. Là breith sona dhut—happy birthday.

BBC Alba has consistently been inventive, and it continues to be so with its exciting autumn schedule and new developments in comedy and international productions.

The Scottish Government is a strong supporter of Scotland's indigenous languages. We recognise their cultural, economic and social value and we want the relevant bodies to work together as closely as possible to support and promote their use.

Although there is still work to do to reverse the decline in the overall numbers of Gaelic speakers, it is encouraging that the rate of decline nationally seems to be slowing down. A point was made earlier about growth in urban areas. I think of bun-sgoil Taobh na Pàirce, the primary school in my constituency, whose roll and numbers are going from strength to strength. The Government's Gaelic education strategy is helping to promote uptake at school age.

Growth and the slowing down of decline suggest that our targeted investment as a Government is paying off and that the strategy of introducing children to the language as early as possible in order to make it an integral part of their lives, their schooling and the way they communicate is working. BBC Alba is an important part of that process in children's programming, in its digital content and in providing a common frame of

reference for the Gaelic community in its widest sense.

In 10 short years, BBC Alba has become an accepted part of the Scottish broadcasting landscape, and a celebrated part, with strong audience approval ratings and audience reach of more than 10 per cent nationally and more than 65 per cent among users of Gaelic. As others have said, that is good for the economy as well. The commissioning of programmes in 2016-17 from 20 different production companies illustrates that. BBC Alba is especially important in economically fragile areas. Indeed, of the 280 full-time equivalent jobs that MG Alba has been estimated to have generated across Scotland in 2016-17, more than 100 were in island communities.

The channel has also demonstrated that its innovative partnership model with MG Alba and the BBC can work successfully. In that regard, I believe that the channel is showing the way to other broadcasters, which are now realising the mutual benefits of partnership models. As our new dedicated screen agency, Screen Scotland, gets up and running, one of its priorities is to promote a more co-ordinated approach to resources and more co-operation between broadcasters in the interests of audiences.

The Scottish Government will continue to support BBC Alba, although broadcasting is reserved, so that the channel is able to meet the challenges of competition and funding in the years ahead, because competition will be stronger than ever. All broadcasters face a challenge from new media giants such as Netflix, as the BBC director-general Lord Hall reminded us earlier this week, when he said that British TV, including the BBC, needs a more level playing field in order to be able to compete against global broadcasters.

Closer to home, as others have mentioned, there is a newly invigorated STV, and from next February there will be a new BBC Scotland channel. We will urge the BBC to stand by the promise that was held out in its proposal for the new channel to co-commission 100 hours of programming with BBC Alba.

As others have mentioned, funding is another key issue. We in the Scottish Government remain committed to funding MG Alba. With £12.8 million from the devolved settlement, £8 million from the BBC and a further £1.2 million that was announced earlier this year, replacing the £1 million that was withdrawn by the United Kingdom Government, MG Alba funding now totals approximately £22 million.

The Scottish Government was delighted to announce in February a £500,000 grant to develop the studio facilities at Seaforth Road in Stornoway, to improve facilities for programme making and

offer training opportunities for young people interested in the media.

However, public funding of the Welsh channel S4C is approximately £120 million and, following a recent UK Government review of S4C, from 2022 that is almost all expected to come through the licence-fee settlement. The role of the BBC is therefore critical. We have argued that the disparity in funding between Welsh and Gaelic TV is disproportionate, and we urge the UK Government and the BBC to take action to ensure that Gaelic TV audiences get a fair deal.

Gaelic is one of the UK's indigenous languages—not just one of Scotland's—and as such it is reasonable to expect support from the UK Government. We believe that there is scope for the BBC to spend more on Gaelic on the ground of equity. Even allowing for its recent enhanced commitments, the BBC still spends considerably less in Scotland than it raises through the licence fee. We urge all to get involved—the UK Government, the BBC and the communications regulator, Ofcom—and to work together to ensure that BBC Alba gets a fair share of the licence fee.

We are also asking for BBC Alba to be regulated through a service licence of its own, as we have argued that the BBC in Scotland should be in general, so that the specific needs of audiences and the sector here can be identified and considered. The needs and circumstances of audiences in the various UK nations differ and they should be addressed individually. Overall, we will continue to do what we can to stimulate the TV sector in Scotland and argue for a fairer deal from the UK.

We are grateful to MG Alba and the BBC for the unique and highly valuable contribution that is made to the Scottish media and to Gaelic and Scottish culture through BBC Alba. We will continue to support it in years to come and look forward to working with those partners to make the next 10 years as successful as the last, so that in 10 years' time we can have another debate such as this evening's, with even more strength to BBC Alba.

Meeting closed at 17:52.

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

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