

TRANSPORT, INFRASTRUCTURE AND CLIMATE CHANGE COMMITTEE

Tuesday 2 October 2007

Session 3

£5.00

© Parliamentary copyright. Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body 2007.

Applications for reproduction should be made in writing to the Licensing Division,
Her Majesty's Stationery Office, St Clements House, 2-16 Colegate, Norwich NR3 1BQ
Fax 01603 723000, which is administering the copyright on behalf of the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate
Body.

Produced and published in Scotland on behalf of the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body by RR
Donnelley.

CONTENTS

Tuesday 2 October 2007

Col.

FINANCE AND SUSTAINABLE GROWTH	161
ABOLITION OF BRIDGE TOLLS (SCOTLAND) BILL: STAGE 1	179

TRANSPORT, INFRASTRUCTURE AND CLIMATE CHANGE COMMITTEE 6th Meeting 2007, Session 3

CONVENER

*Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Cathy Peattie (Falkirk East) (Lab)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*Rob Gibson (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
*Charlie Gordon (Glasgow Cathcart) (Lab)
*Alex Johnstone (North East Scotland) (Con)
*Alison McInnes (North East Scotland) (LD)
*Shirley-Anne Somerville (Lothians) (SNP)
*David Stewart (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)

COMMITTEE SUBSTITUTES

Alasdair Allan (Western Isles) (SNP)
Gavin Brown (Lothians) (Con)
John Park (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
Tavish Scott (Shetland) (LD)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING GAVE EVIDENCE:

Malcolm Reed (Transport Scotland)
Stewart Stevenson (Minister for Transport, Infrastructure and Climate Change)
John Swinney (Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Sustainable Growth)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Steve Farrell

SENIOR ASSISTANT CLERK

Alastair Macfie

ASSISTANT CLERK

Clare O'Neill

LOCATION

Committee Room 2

Scottish Parliament

Transport, Infrastructure and Climate Change Committee

Tuesday 2 October 2007

[THE CONVENER *opened the meeting at 14:01*]

Finance and Sustainable Growth

The Convener (Patrick Harvie): Good afternoon. I welcome everybody to the sixth meeting in 2007 of the Transport, Infrastructure and Climate Change Committee. I ask everybody present to ensure that mobile phones and any other wireless devices are switched off.

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Sustainable Growth has agreed to answer our questions today. He is joined by Malcolm Reed of Transport Scotland; John Ewing, director of the Scottish Government Transport Directorate; and Philip Wright, a deputy director of the Scottish Government Climate Change and Water Industry Directorate. I welcome all our guests and ask John Swinney whether he would like to make any opening comments.

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Sustainable Growth (John Swinney): Thank you for the invitation and for introducing my team, which reflects the respective areas of the committee's remit.

I have responsibility for transport, infrastructure and climate change because the Government has brought together those areas of responsibility to establish clearly the connection between them. We view it as an opportunity to ensure that we have the most effective cross-working at policy-making and delivery levels in the Scottish Government and externally. I look forward to working with the committee, my officials and Stewart Stevenson, who has significant policy responsibilities in transport, infrastructure and climate change. We discussed at the committee's away day where the Government can address issues of relevance to the committee.

The Government takes the view that climate change crosses political boundaries; it affects every one of us and every political dimension of the debate. Therefore, we are keen to have a dialogue with the committee on a range of issues to support our efforts to tackle climate change. I have made clear to the convener my willingness to discuss with the committee issues in connection with the proposed climate change bill and to ensure that the Government and Parliament make progress in considering the legislation on climate change that is developed during the period ahead.

In my climate change statement to Parliament back in June, I acknowledged the significant work that had been undertaken by the previous Administration in laying the foundations for tackling climate change. I look forward to building on that work through the climate change bill. Among the work that we inherited from the previous Administration was the national transport strategy, which was published last November. Production of that document involved extensive consultation relating to several issues that will be of significance to the committee in addressing a range of priorities in this field. Those issues include reducing emissions; ensuring that we develop a public transport infrastructure that improves quality, accessibility and affordability; and tackling connectivity in Scotland.

As the committee knows, the Government operates on the basis of five strategic objectives, the interlinked themes of which are: wealthier and fairer, safer and stronger, greener, healthier, and smarter. We are determined to bring forward policy measures that fit into those areas to reflect the balance of policy choices that have to be made to support the Government's purpose and work.

Obviously, the committee will take a close interest in the Government's decisions on the comprehensive spending review. I am sure that we will address those issues in due course. The Government is undertaking work on the spending review to ensure that the five strategic objectives are reflected in our spending decisions. That will ensure that our policy initiatives and spending commitments are truly and properly aligned in order to support our purpose and all our work.

The Convener: Thank you.

The committee is still a wee bit concerned about some of the events of last week. I have one or two questions to put to the cabinet secretary and Malcolm Reed, as a wee refresher.

We invited Transport Scotland to give evidence on the Abolition of Bridge Tolls (Scotland) Bill, but that did not happen, for one reason or another. We have received a letter of apology from each of you, with the reason given as either a breakdown of communication or a mistake. The initial explanation that we were given was that it is for Scottish ministers to decide which officials will represent them at committee. I seek clarification on the matter.

My first question is for the cabinet secretary. Was no approach made to Scottish ministers to ask whether you were content for Transport Scotland to appear at committee?

John Swinney: That is correct.

The Convener: My next question is for Malcolm Reed. How did this unfortunate breakdown in communication happen?

Malcolm Reed (Transport Scotland): If I may, convener, I repeat my apology.

My impression was that the matter was still under discussion between our two offices. In fact, in view of the discussion, I had not realised that the invitation still stood for the date in question. It was only very late on Friday that I became aware that I was expected to appear before the committee on the following Tuesday. Frankly, that did not give me an opportunity to discuss it with ministers or to do any necessary preparation.

The Convener: I am sorry, but are you saying that the initial acceptance had been a mistake?

Malcolm Reed: No. I am sorry; I am not saying that. We had received a letter from the committee clerk and the invitation was still being discussed informally between our two offices. My understanding was that we had neither accepted nor declined the invitation. Certainly, at that point, we had not taken it to ministers.

The Convener: In view of the number of issues for discussion today, I do not want to labour the point. However, I seek an assurance that when, in future, the Transport, Infrastructure and Climate Change Committee pulls out a chair for Transport Scotland, Transport Scotland will sit on it.

John Swinney: In my letter to the convener of 27 September—I am sure that it will have been issued to members—I said that I want Transport Scotland to have the fullest involvement in the work of the committee. I also want that from all the officials who are involved in this area of policy activity. I assure the committee that that will be the case, at all times. The type of discussion that has been held to date, such as that which took place between Malcolm Reed and the committee at your away day in the summer recess, is indicative of the Government's determination to ensure that our officials are fully engaged in the committee's work. I give you that assurance.

I understand that another invitation has been extended to officials to give a further briefing on the replacement Forth crossing. I also understand that Transport Scotland either has indicated or will indicate that it is happy to provide further information and briefing to the committee and to discuss any relevant issues. Obviously, some issues will sit pending a ministerial decision. However, in the context of those parameters, I am very happy for officials to be fully involved in the committee's work. I give you that assurance.

The Convener: I am very grateful for the assurance.

One issue on which the committee had indicated a desire to hear an answer from Transport Scotland before our final evidence-taking session on the bill later this afternoon is whether it had

conducted an independent assessment of the impact of removing the tolls, aside from the toll impact study. I put the question to Malcolm Reed.

Malcolm Reed: We have conducted no separate investigation of the impact of removing tolls.

The Convener: So the toll impact study as it stands is the state of knowledge on that question.

Malcolm Reed: Yes.

Cathy Peattie (Falkirk East) (Lab): My questions are for the cabinet secretary. Given the Government's announcements last week and Thursday's vote in Parliament, I am interested in how you plan to consult people about the plans to replace the Edinburgh airport rail link and involve them in taking those plans forward.

John Swinney: The Government has been involved in a wide range of discussions with stakeholders in the preparation of the plans that we announced to Parliament last Thursday. Over the past few years, there has been extensive discussion about the options that existed in respect of the possibility of a rail link to Edinburgh airport, and a number of options have been considered during that period. The proposal that the previous Administration put forward, which was supported by the previous Parliament, was the subject of extensive parliamentary scrutiny. I was pleased that Parliament supported the proposals that we announced on Thursday.

We intend to take a prompt approach to the implementation of the proposals. We will have to acquire certain consents to take them forward. Some of those consents will relate to the location of the Gogar station and others will relate to the establishment of the Dalmeny chord, which will form a link between the Fife line and the Glasgow line at the Winchburgh site. In addition, there will be discussions with stakeholders and communities about how we ensure that the transport connections that we put together—a formidable number of enhancements to transport connections will arise from the Government's proposals—can be taken forward to best suit the needs and aspirations of other communities. I am thinking in particular about communities in which we can expand the connections to destinations in and around the area that the network will serve.

Cathy Peattie: Will there be a full consultation prior to moving forward? You spoke about trying to move fairly quickly. Can you indicate a timescale?

John Swinney: As I told Parliament, I want the Gogar station to be operational at the same time as the trams become operational, to provide a link to Edinburgh airport. I want to take steps to ensure that that element of the programme takes its course as early as possible to ensure that we have

that connection up and running at as convenient a date as we possibly can, and certainly on the same timescale as the trams.

On the wider issues, we will have specific discussions with surrounding communities. Our objective is to complete the discussions as quickly as possible.

Cathy Peattie: I have a question about concessionary bus travel. As you are aware, people aged 60 and over and disabled people can have a pass that gives them free bus transport throughout Scotland. A lobby in favour of community transport feels that people who have a disability, or older people who are frail and less able to go to bus stops, are discriminated against. Will you consider including community transport projects in the free transport model?

John Swinney: I recognise the problem that you highlight and acknowledge that it affects people in our society. I am prepared to consider whether such provision can conveniently be added to the concessionary travel scheme. I am happy to examine the issue with Stewart Stevenson and will respond to the committee accordingly. We must be mindful of many logistical issues related to the concessionary bus scheme, but we can certainly give an undertaking to consider that point.

Cathy Peattie: Thank you. I welcome that.

14:15

Alison McInnes (North East Scotland) (LD): Cabinet secretary, you said that you had had extensive discussions with a wide range of stakeholders about your new proposals for EARL. Did you discuss the matter with the City of Edinburgh Council?

John Swinney: To my knowledge, the discussions that we had did not include the City of Edinburgh Council. However, they included Network Rail, BAA and TIE, which, with the development of trams in Edinburgh, is obviously significantly involved in transport issues.

Alison McInnes: I would have thought it unlikely that you would have been able to carry out any appraisal of your new proposals under the Scottish transport appraisal guidance process. Will you advise me in that respect?

John Swinney: A STAG appraisal was undertaken on our proposals.

Alison McInnes: What stage did it reach?

John Swinney: Stage 1.

Alison McInnes: That is a fairly light appraisal.

John Swinney: Nonetheless, it is a STAG appraisal.

Alison McInnes: And you will progress the appraisal through its further stages.

John Swinney: Of course.

Alison McInnes: What will you do if, as the project is developed, it becomes clear that its benefits are not as good as those of the existing project?

John Swinney: The Government has decided to change direction on its project, and now—if I can use this pun—we have to decide on our direction of travel in that respect. Parliament has consented to our decisions and I assure the committee that we will take forward our consideration of the new proposals for the Edinburgh airport rail link in a way that is consistent with the STAG appraisal regime. Indeed, one of the key points of our proposals is that we will seek to ensure that we leverage out as many benefits as possible into other connections. Thursday's statement outlined a range of very positive measures with the possibility of enhancing connections from the north, the east, the west and the south of Scotland, and we will take forward our proposals in that context to ensure that they deliver a strong group of connections.

David Stewart (Highlands and Islands) (Lab): I have a couple of questions about the new Forth crossing. First, on the timescale for decision making in ministerial statements, I presume that when you make a statement on the matter you will confirm that you will go ahead with an environmental assessment on the new crossing under the Environmental Assessment (Scotland) Act 2005.

Perhaps I should just throw my other questions at you. What are your current estimates of the cost of a new Forth crossing? Some of our witnesses have put the figure as high as £2.3 billion at 2006 prices, which is clearly a very large sum. Are you confident in your Government's ability to manage such a huge project on cost and on time? After all, there have been hiccups with other projects, including, as Alison McInnes pointed out, the EARL project.

One major question, of course, is how you will fund the crossing. Have you ruled out all private sector involvement in the new bridge? Are you considering bond funding, which I believe will require permissions from Westminster? Will you look at shadow tolling or direct grants? Have you explored whether any European funding such as European regional development funding or trans-European network system funding is available? My understanding is that ERDF, in particular, is fairly tight for such projects.

Finally—I apologise for asking so many questions—I assume from previous comments that you are not looking to introduce tolls on the

new bridge; after all, that would not be consistent with your current approach. Can you confirm that assumption?

Finally, will you use your current power to vary tax rates by up to 3p, which, of course, you can do without reference to Westminster and without needing any further funds?

The Convener: The member asked a number of questions, many of which were prefaced with the word “finally”.

John Swinney: There certainly were a number of questions to respond to.

Over the summer, we considered further the options for the Forth replacement crossing. In that respect, I was delighted that the public very much supported and engaged with the exhibition on the various proposals, which was held in a number of venues in the affected areas. Two options—a replacement bridge or a tunnel—have been discussed, and you are absolutely right to suggest that we will undertake a strategic environmental assessment under the terms of the 2005 act.

The cost could be of the order of £3 billion. However, the Government has yet to decide on the type of crossing that will be built and the method of financing. Those decisions will be made during the autumn so that we can make early progress on the replacement crossing and avoid having a question mark over the existence of a Forth crossing in the future. Obviously, the crossing is a major artery that connects different parts of Scotland.

A number of Mr Stewart's questions relate to the method of financing. I am simply not in a position to give definitive answers on that. Information will be reported to the Parliament in a statement in due course, and I will be delighted to come back to the committee after that statement to answer any further questions that you have.

David Stewart: I understand that you cannot give us chapter and verse on every aspect of the funding, but £3 billion is more than I thought the cost would be. Obviously, it is a tremendous sum.

I have two further questions. First, given your policy on the Forth and Tay road bridges, I presume that you will not toll the new crossing if it is a bridge. Secondly, have you ruled out any private sector funding in the financial package for the new crossing?

John Swinney: I return to what I said in my earlier answer. It would be premature for me to comment on the funding mechanisms. I will be happy to come back to the committee to explain further when we have reached our conclusions and made a statement to the Parliament.

I apologise for not answering your question about whether we expect to bring in the project on

budget and on time. Of course the Government expects to do exactly that.

David Stewart: Can I quote you on that?

John Swinney: You most certainly can.

Alison McInnes: What responsibilities will be delegated to Transport Scotland in relation to this major project? Will you provide the committee with some details of the multimodal element of the new crossing?

John Swinney: Your first question raises an important issue that I touched on in my speech in the debate in Parliament last Thursday. With such major projects, we have to ensure that the governance arrangements are crystal clear at all stages. That was the most significant point in the Auditor General for Scotland's report on the EARL project. As I said on Thursday, I reflect that the lack of clarity in the governance of the Stirling-Alloa-Kincardine development was a major contributor to the cost and programme problems in that project.

Transport Scotland's role in the replacement Forth crossing will be as the client. It will act on the Government's behalf to procure the crossing. In that sense, it will be responsible for protecting the public's interest, notwithstanding ministers' responsibility for Transport Scotland. In designing the project, we will look to ensure that we make the governance arrangements crystal clear at the outset. Again, I will be happy to examine the governance arrangements with the committee so that it has confidence in them. If we get the governance correct at the outset of a project, the uncertainties that exist later will be dealt with much more easily.

Whether the development is a bridge or a tunnel, it will have to have a multimodal element within it. We are still considering the format of the multimodal arrangement, which will be a material consideration in the Government's decision, and we will report to the Parliament in due course.

The Convener: I have a question on the plans for the existing crossing. Where is the knowledge at in relation to the costs and feasibility of replacing the cables and safeguarding the future of the existing bridge?

John Swinney: An exercise is on-going to assess the condition of the cables and the remedial action that can be taken to protect them. It will be some time before there is clarity on the impact and effectiveness of that work. We will pay careful attention to the outcome of that investigative work.

It is rather early to give a definitive position on the renewal or replacement of the cables, because we do not have a full assessment of the nature of the problem. There is a question about the long-

term reliability of the bridge in the years to come, and we need to take action to ensure that there is a crossing at that stage that will guarantee that connection as an important journey point in Scotland.

Malcolm Reed: The Forth Estuary Transport Authority is in the lead on this work, but it is keeping us informed. The cabinet secretary is right—FETA put in place a system of monitoring, and only over a period of months and years will that monitoring reveal how effective the dehumidification of the cables is.

This is a new branch of engineering. There is worldwide recognition that the condition of suspension bridge cables is a problem, so there is a concerted effort throughout the world—in America, Japan and elsewhere—to come up with new technologies. I would be very surprised if solutions do not become available in the next 10 or 15 years that are not available at the moment. It is a very exact science. There are probably grounds for being a little more optimistic than we were 18 months ago, but beyond that I do not think that we can be more definite.

The Convener: We will leave that there as we are becoming pushed for time and members have questions on other transport projects.

You will be aware that there was a members' business debate in the chamber recently on the Aberdeen western peripheral route. Various campaigners on the issue had been raising questions about the cost, and about the public local inquiry process that may be ahead. First, on cost, what is your expectation of the budget for the AWPR, based on United Kingdom figures for the average price of building a mile of road and what we know about the existing commitments within the budget? Are the campaigners right that the figure is likely to rise to more than the ball park of £600 million, or is the current cost estimate reliable?

John Swinney: We currently estimate the project outturn cost to be in the order of £295 million to £395 million. Those are the costs that we have reported to Parliament.

The Convener: Are you confident that they will not rise?

John Swinney: I would be confident that those costs would not rise.

The Convener: I want to raise another complaint, I suppose, that has been made about the process. The environmental statement has had to be republished, and although the £500 that people have to spend on it might be trivial in terms of the Scottish Executive's transport budget, it is a significant cost for an unfunded community group to have to meet for a second time. Can the

Government do anything to ensure that people have access to such information without having to spend additional money?

John Swinney: I will look into that point, see whether we can make access more convenient, and report back to the committee.

14:30

Cathy Peattie: In the previous session, I sat on the Airdrie-Bathgate Railway and Linked Improvements Bill Committee, which was very interesting. There was a strong lobby for additional stations at Plains and Caldercruix, and a strong recommendation from the committee that the Parliament agreed with. Can you update us on where we are with that?

John Swinney: Feasibility studies have been completed on stations at Plains and Blackridge. An updated report on Plains is imminent, and the Blackridge station point is being continued.

Charlie Gordon (Glasgow Cathcart) (Lab): In last week's ministerial statement on rail links to Edinburgh airport, reference was made to various improvements to rail connections between Glasgow and Edinburgh. In that context, can you comment on the possibilities for speeding up rail journeys from south-west Scotland—for example, from Stranraer, Ayr or Prestwick airport—not just to Glasgow but to Edinburgh and beyond? As I understand the aftermath of last week's debate, there will be improvements to the number and size of trains from Glasgow Central station to Edinburgh, which could go via Shotts and/or Carstairs. Is that the best that people in south-west Scotland can hope for in rail connections to Edinburgh?

John Swinney: Last week, the Government set out a number of measures that will improve the journey between Edinburgh and Glasgow. Those measures will include, first, an increase in the number of connections that it is possible to secure from different locations, whether that means starting from Glasgow Central or Glasgow Queen Street.

Secondly, there will be a number of measures to improve the connectivity of some of those journeys so that it will be possible for people to get on a train in Glasgow and get off at Edinburgh Park or the new Gogar station to get connections to Edinburgh airport, which I suspect will be welcomed by many. Thirdly, there will be a series of different measures with the objective of reducing journey times between Edinburgh and Glasgow to as low as 35 minutes. We are bringing forward a number of material improvements on different routes to try to improve connectivity.

There are clearly other issues in relation to connections from Ayrshire and the south-west to

and beyond Glasgow Central. If I was a betting man, I would suspect that that takes us into the sphere of Glasgow crossrail.

Charlie Gordon: That would be relevant if we were discussing a direct service, but at the moment, we are still talking about changing at Glasgow Central.

John Swinney: The improvements that we are putting in place to the connections from Glasgow Central to Edinburgh will be a welcome boost for people who are trying to get from the south-west to the east of Scotland. The Government will take forward those initiatives to try to improve the connectivity to suit the best interests of people in those areas.

Charlie Gordon: You mentioned crossrail before I did, cabinet secretary. You may also have mentioned a concept known as the Caledonian express, which involves the re-laying, resignalling and electrification of the line from Glasgow Central to Edinburgh via Shotts. In that scenario, the journey time via Shotts could be brought down to one hour. I presume that your thinking is that that would only match the journey time from Glasgow to Edinburgh via Carstairs and that the Government's position is that people who want to get to Edinburgh from south-west Scotland will have to change at Glasgow Central rather than go over to Glasgow Queen Street.

John Swinney: If we consider the differences in train journey times from south-west Scotland to Edinburgh via Glasgow Central station or via Glasgow Queen Street station, we can see that there is not an awful lot in it, given the transfer time in Glasgow—we are talking about journey times of the same order. Of course, we want to improve journey times on all connections, and some journey times will reduce significantly on the Queen Street to Edinburgh Waverley station connection. We are trying to produce a range of options, so that members of the public can choose how they travel through central Scotland.

Charlie Gordon: Are you ruling out at this stage direct links from south-west Scotland to Edinburgh?

John Swinney: We have put forward a range of measures that will significantly enhance connectivity between Edinburgh and Glasgow. There is much to be positive about in that regard, and I am sure that the connections will be welcomed by people in south-west Scotland.

Alex Johnstone (North East Scotland) (Con): Will the cabinet secretary update us on the Scottish Government's approach to the spending review and the preparation of the Scottish budget on transport, infrastructure and climate change? What budget priorities are emerging?

John Swinney: A number of budget priorities are emerging—

Alex Johnstone: They cannot all be priorities.

John Swinney: As you know from the statement that I made in the Parliament in June, we expect to receive the output of the comprehensive spending review—the document that we must await before we can determine our spending priorities—in the week beginning 15 October, although we might receive the information earlier than we predict. When the information is to hand, the Government will undertake an exercise to take final decisions on the shape of our priorities before laying our budget before the Parliament—ideally within about a month of the comprehensive spending review becoming clear. The timetable that I agreed with the Finance Committee for the consideration of the budget will allow committees of the Parliament the customary two months to consider relevant portfolios' spend.

On the Government's priorities, members are familiar with the Government's five strategic objectives, which I set out in my opening remarks. The objectives structure how we make decisions on policy and budget priorities and will be very much to the fore in our consideration of our priorities on transport projects, infrastructure and climate change, which are relevant to the committee.

Alex Johnstone: David Stewart mentioned funding methods. Can you say what proportion of transport projects you expect to fund from the Scottish futures trust? Will public-private partnerships or other funding methods be involved?

John Swinney: A growing proportion of projects will be funded through the Scottish futures trust mechanism, which we envisage as an efficient and affordable method of funding some of our capital projects. The approach does not apply just to transport projects; it stretches right across the Government and applies to our work on schools, hospitals, waste management, water infrastructure and prison infrastructure.

There will be certain projects that started as PPP projects, which, if they are at an advanced stage, could be affected by the redirection of their structure. We have taken pragmatic decisions on a couple of projects and I am sure that we will continue to be pragmatic. However, our expectation is that the Scottish futures trust will be a competitive mechanism in the marketplace and as a consequence will attract the lion's share of investment.

Alex Johnstone: I am fully aware of the criticisms that you and others have made of PPPs, but you must concede that the PPP model—or its

predecessor, the private finance initiative—has been extremely good at ensuring that projects are completed on time and on budget. How will your proposed alternative work in the marketplace in that respect? Could introducing novel funding arrangements for major funding commitments such as the new Forth crossing or the Aberdeen western peripheral route put those projects at risk or call into question the ability to complete them on time and on budget in the way that PPPs managed to be completed?

John Swinney: A number of commendable projects that were achieved under conventional borrowing mechanisms have been completed on time and on budget. The idea that conventional schemes all come in over budget and that PPP schemes come in on budget is a myth.

One lesson that has emerged from our experience of capital investment over the years is that project management and governance can have as much to do with how a project performs as does a project's method of financing. That relates to my answer to Alison McInnes earlier. I am absolutely adamant that we will get the project governance structures and controls correct, so that we can deliver projects on time and on budget. The critical element is that we have arrangements in place to have reliable control over projects and budgets and to ensure that projects are delivered on time and on budget.

Shirley-Anne Somerville (Lothians) (SNP): In your opening statement, you referred to the acknowledged link between climate change and transport. Environmental groups have expressed concerns about the decision to abolish tolls and about the replacement Forth crossing. Given that, will you assure us about where climate change fits with Government decision making in general and, in particular, in relation to larger-scale transport projects?

John Swinney: The First Minister took a set of decisions that resulted in drawing together transport and climate change in one ministerial portfolio—the overall economic portfolio. That shows the significance that we attach to ensuring that the challenge of securing an appropriate relationship between transport priorities and climate change necessities lies at the heart of how we take our decisions. That framework provides a strong system within which to take decisions about such matters.

The Government has announced several activities in relation to climate change. We have signalled our intention to introduce a climate change bill, which will include annual targets for emissions reductions that are binding on the Government. That will be a formidable factor in the Government's policy making. I put on record our determination not to wait until that bill is enacted

before we take steps in that direction. We will start to take steps immediately to tackle carbon reductions.

The Government made an announcement last week on transport projects. We will make a formidable investment in rail projects and rail developments that I think will be warmly welcomed as a commitment to improving the opportunities for individuals to access the public transport network properly and in an environmentally sustainable fashion. That is just one illustration of how the Government intends to develop its priorities.

14:45

Shirley-Anne Somerville: People are still concerned about the forecasted traffic growth. We welcome the commitment that you have given today, but can you give us more details on how the Government will deal with the forecasted traffic growth and on its commitment to public transport in general?

John Swinney: Significant investments in public transport infrastructure are identified in some of the measures that we announced through the statement that Stewart Stevenson made to Parliament on 27 June and the statement that was made last week on transport projects. We can also take forward some smaller projects that will assist the increase in modal shift from car use to public transport use. Such projects include the provision of park-and-ride facilities—which are enormously popular—around some of our cities and larger communities, and the steps that we can take to improve the attractiveness of public transport journeys and the integration of those journeys.

Last week, I was slightly criticised for the fact that the Government was relying on the tram network to provide a connection to Edinburgh airport. I thought that that was a tad unreasonable. There was I, a sinner who had repented, incorporating the tramlines into our wider public transport infrastructure, which I thought was a welcome step.

Other initiatives that we would like to press ahead with, about which I had discussions only yesterday, are to do with encouraging flexible working. By adopting flexible working approaches, we can reduce the journeys that public sector employees have to make to their places of employment. I was shown some attractive examples from the private sector of where encouraging flexible and home working had successfully reduced organisations' carbon footprints. As we set out in our manifesto, we intend to explore such issues as an integral part of our approach.

Shirley-Anne Somerville: Cycling and walking are often forgotten about in these discussions. As

well as improving public transport, is the Government committed to improving the cycle network and encouraging cycling for shorter journeys?

John Swinney: One of the consequences of my ministerial office is the fact that I have been on my bike fewer times in the past few months than I would have liked. I think that there is an enormous opportunity to assist the development of the cycling infrastructure, and that will feature in our plans.

The Convener: I must ask you to keep your answers brief from now on, cabinet secretary.

Rob Gibson (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): I want to ask about the Scottish Government's tier 3 rail projects. What work is the Scottish Government doing on the proposed upgrade of the Perth to Inverness rail line?

John Swinney: Enhancements to deliver an hourly, faster service between Edinburgh, Glasgow and Inverness through Perth are incorporated into the rail utilisation strategy that the Government has published. We are considering specific proposals to remove certain obstacles to achieving enhanced journey times, which we will take forward as part of the programme of activities that we have set out in the list of tier 3 projects.

Rob Gibson: Is the signalling system on the railway part of that work?

John Swinney: Yes.

Rob Gibson: How will the uncosted tier 3 projects be taken forward? Will they be included in the current strategic transport projects review?

John Swinney: When we published our high-level output specification document in the summer, the Government was commended in *The Herald*—of all places—which said:

"the blueprint addresses the needs of areas such as the Highlands and the Borders as well as the central belt, and this is a cause for optimism."

That was a heartening reaction to our proposals.

We have submitted the HLOS document to Network Rail, which is formalising its response as part of its strategic business plan. That will be considered by the Office of Rail Regulation and, as a consequence, the investment period, which commences in 2009, will be able to take its course.

Rob Gibson: I am sure that we will have more time to speak about those projects in due course.

Turning to the islands and the Caledonian MacBrayne contract that was agreed, does the cabinet secretary have any plans to review the procedure that was followed in that exercise and

to consider whether a different approach might be taken when the contract is next due for renewal?

John Swinney: As Mr Gibson will know, we signed the contract with CalMac Ferries Ltd on 20 September, and it began on 1 October. We will certainly consider the experience of tendering in such a fashion. When we came into office, the Government took the view that because the existing approach to addressing European state-aid issues was at a highly advanced stage, it was best to allow matters to run their course and come to a conclusion to ensure continuity in the development of the Clyde and Hebrides ferry services. However, I will certainly examine previous experience when we determine how to deal with the contract in the years to come.

Rob Gibson: In due course, will you approach Europe to sound out how we might handle such matters?

John Swinney: Many discussions take place between the Scottish Government and the European Commission on ferries issues.

David Stewart: I will carry on with the ferries theme. I have a few questions on road equivalent tariff, on which we have had evidence from Stewart Stevenson. We are aware of the pilot around the Western Isles. If I remember, Mr Stevenson suggested that up to 69 routes might be involved, including mainland-to-island, inter-island and mainland-to-mainland services. Do your officials have an indication of how much that might cost? Some outside observers have quoted figures of around £200 million. Will local connections be a factor, as is the case with the air discount scheme, to which people who live in the Highlands and Islands have access? Will Shetland get a special exemption, given that it is 200 miles from the mainland? Some critics have said that a RET scheme will not work for areas that are furthest from the mainland, but representatives of the Highlands and Islands, such as Rob Gibson and I, are keen that Shetland be covered by any such scheme. What thoughts have you and your officials had about costs, eligibility and implementation dates?

John Swinney: For all the reasons that you gave, the Government has, in the first instance, established a research study on the roll-out of a pilot. That exercise is under way. We will look to roll out the pilot, which we have said will be on one or more Western Isles routes. I imagine that that will be undertaken towards the middle of next year. Our approach has been designed to examine all the practical issues that are involved in the rolling out of road equivalent tariff. I expect that many of the questions that you have asked will be addressed by the study and the experience of the pilot exercise.

David Stewart: Capacity, rather than price, is one of the biggest issues in ferry services, although both factors come into play. Will you and your officials look closely at capacity in the roll-out of the RET study?

John Swinney: As part of the Clyde and Hebrides ferry services contract, there has been an expansion of capacity on a number of routes, which has been warmly welcomed. There has been particular demand for Islay ferry connections.

The Government's approach, which is shared by Highlands and Islands Enterprise, is based on a desire to increase economic activity in general and to support the process of economic growth. With HIE, we have a shared interest in achieving a formidable expansion of economic growth in the island communities, and the provision of connections is a significant part of making that happen.

The last thing that I want is for capacity constraints to become an obstacle to the development of vibrant economies in our island communities. I know from the communications that I receive from members who represent island communities and from my visits over the summer to Orkney and the Western Isles that capacity and connectivity are significant issues for the prosperity of such communities.

The Convener: We mentioned climate change policy. Have any additional policy decisions been made about the content of the climate change bill? Will it include measures in addition to targets?

John Swinney: A significant amount of discussion is under way about the process of enacting the bill and consulting on its contents. I expect that there will be provisions that go beyond targets. We will consider a number of other questions in relation to energy efficiency, building standards, energy and heat, waste, the role of public bodies, business issues and transport issues. The Government is involved in discussions with stakeholders on some of those elements. We are conducting our own research on how provisions would contribute to achieving the global targets that the Government has set.

The Convener: We were previously told that we might see a consultation around the turn of the year. Are you still working to that timetable?

John Swinney: That is correct.

Shirley-Anne Somerville: Most of my questions are about commitments that you have already given. However, I also want to know about the UK climate change bill. Will relations between the Scottish and UK Governments ensure that there is good joint working on it?

John Swinney: There has been a formidable amount of contact between our officials and

officials in the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs on many detailed operational questions in relation to the UK climate change bill. We want to introduce legislation that contains more demanding targets than those in the UK bill, but we want to work closely with the UK Government on pursuing the issues about which we have shared and equal concerns. There have been a number of ministerial discussions about the contents of the UK climate change bill. The week before last, I spoke to the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs about some of the outstanding issues, which I am pleased to say look as though they have been resolved. I suspect that the United Kingdom Government will make announcements about that shortly.

Alex Johnstone: You mentioned building standards in your list of things that might be included in the Scottish climate change bill. Would such provisions extend into energy efficiency and microrenewables, or do you see those areas being separate and different from what would be covered in a climate change bill?

John Swinney: I suspected that we might be getting on to that ground, which is precisely why I have indicated to Sarah Boyack, who I know has a close interest in legislation in this area, that I would be happy to discuss with her how the provisions that she proposes to introduce through her member's bill might be best incorporated into the Government's climate change legislation. That will ensure that we have one piece of legislation that sets demanding and exacting targets that can focus policy making and decisions in Scotland. I hope that we can have some constructive discussions on the incorporation of those issues into the Government's wider legislation.

The Convener: Your remit also includes the planning system. The national planning framework will be of interest to this committee. When do you expect to submit it to Parliament for consideration?

John Swinney: The draft national planning framework will be submitted to the Parliament before the Christmas recess, and there will be further parliamentary dialogue about it. The format that I propose to adopt is to submit the framework to the Parliament, give members an adequate opportunity to reflect on its contents and have a full parliamentary debate on it thereafter.

The Convener: I thank the cabinet secretary and his colleagues for coming along and answering questions. We will have a brief suspension to allow for the changeover of witnesses.

15:00

Meeting suspended.

15:03

On resuming—

Abolition of Bridge Tolls (Scotland) Bill: Stage 1

The Convener: I welcome our second panel of witnesses for the afternoon: Stewart Stevenson, the Minister for Transport, Infrastructure and Climate Change; David Patel, deputy director of the transport directorate; and Chris Rogers, the team leader for tolled bridges. They are here to speak to our second item, which is stage 1 evidence taking for the Abolition of Bridge Tolls (Scotland) Bill.

Does Stewart Stevenson want to make any opening remarks?

The Minister for Transport, Infrastructure and Climate Change (Stewart Stevenson): If I may, convener. I am grateful for the opportunity to appear in front of the committee. I have followed earlier evidence-taking sessions and noted the evidence that has been put before the committee. Indeed, I listened carefully to what the cabinet secretary just said on the subject as well.

I will use these opening remarks to reassure the committee about the bill and some of the issues that were raised in the earlier evidence-taking sessions. In the debate on road bridge tolls on 31 May, I said that it was the Government's intention to discuss the simplest method of removing the bridge tolls with the two bridge boards and to introduce legislation to that end in September. We have done that. I also said that it was my expectation that the Forth Estuary Transport Authority and the Tay Road Bridge Joint Board would remain as road and traffic authorities and would retain responsibility for the management and maintenance of their respective structures. That is the case.

When I appeared before the committee on 11 September, Alex Johnstone asked me whether the sections of the Transport (Scotland) Act 2001 that empower traffic authorities to introduce road user charging schemes could be repealed as far as FETA was concerned. I agreed that I would examine that point. The Government continues to look into what form such an amendment could take. I hope that that is helpful to the committee, and you will hear more later.

There has been considerable consultation on and discussion of tolls in Scotland in recent years. The views are in the public domain. The Parliament debated the subject regularly and voted in favour of removing the tolls, with 120 votes supporting. We have introduced a simple and specific bill that acts on that broad agreement to remove tolls from the Tay and Forth road

bridges. We have consulted the two bridge boards thoroughly on the bill's effects and, in particular, on the financial, staffing and traffic management implications. It is crucial that staff are treated with dignity, and my officials have kept me informed of the boards' discussions with staff and the unions. Discussions between the boards and my officials will continue in the coming months. We have also consulted the adjoining local authorities—in particular, Dundee City Council and the City of Edinburgh Council—directly on points on which their responsibilities are affected, particularly where traffic management is concerned.

Prior to introducing the bill, we published the toll impact study that the previous Administration commissioned. I note that there has been considerable debate on that study in committee evidence-taking sessions. Some people take the view that the bill could have significant impacts, while others take the view that the effects of removing 80p and £1 tolls would be marginal. Some people even believe that removing tolls will be beneficial to traffic flows, especially on the Tay road bridge. I will certainly want to monitor the actual impacts rigorously. We will continue to invest in public transport and to address the growth in traffic that has been taking place steadily for a number of years.

I would be grateful if the committee would bear in mind a few points on the toll impact study. The study indicates that any additional commuting from Fife into Edinburgh would be offset by less commuting from elsewhere. It also predicts that, in the longer term, there would be some 1,000 extra employed Fife residents working in Edinburgh or Dundee. Understandably, the Government welcomes that predicted widening of the employment opportunities as part of its wealthier and fairer agenda.

The majority of the congestion impacts that are quoted in the toll impact study are in the off-peak periods. That implies some increase in individual journey times rather than queues, as the roads are rarely used to capacity outside peak periods. I recognise the concerns that have been expressed for the protection of the environment if the number of journeys across the Forth and Tay increases. However, the potential impacts are modest and, as with any of our individual proposals, should not be viewed in isolation but should be considered alongside our full programme of commitments. The Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Sustainable Growth referred earlier to our substantial programme of announcements last week on public transport and the rail network.

The Government did not accept the toll impact study's policy conclusions. The tolls on the two bridges were introduced for the users to pay for their construction. The legislation that introduced

them was not introduced with a view to restraining the bridges' use and was not introduced for all eternity. The fact that Fife residents have been paying the tolls for 40 years cannot reasonably be ignored. Mr Swinney said in response to the study:

"While I note the consultants' conclusion that congestion may increase as a result of the decision to lift tolls on the Forth and Tay bridges, the government is clear that it would be an injustice to the communities of Fife, Tayside, and the Lothians to keep tolls when elsewhere in Scotland they have been removed.

We will instead continue to invest in initiatives which reduce congestion, such as improved Park and Ride facilities, and improved rail, bus and cycle links."

I finish with a comment from Tricia Marwick, which I also quoted in the debate of 31 May. She said:

"The debate is about fairness. Scotland has nearly 30 road crossings of tidal waters, but only two are tolled and both are in Fife. Why does no other part of Scotland have any tolls when we in Fife have two?"—[*Official Report*, 8 February 2007; c 31888.]

The Convener: I point out to members that we have received supplementary evidence from Government officials, which has been circulated. I remind members that the questions that were previously intended for Transport Scotland have been sent in written form to the minister.

You addressed some of your remarks to the issue of consultation. You mentioned how much the proposal has been debated, but a number of witnesses told us that there has been no contact of any kind—not only no formal consultation process but no informal dialogue—since the Government announced its intention to introduce the bill. Why has there been no such contact?

Stewart Stevenson: There has been substantial consultation. The toll impact study that the previous Administration initiated sought responses from all local authorities that were affected, and four authorities provided responses. We discussed the effect of the bill with FETA and the TRBJB. At the most recent election, we made removal of the tolls a key part of our manifesto offering to the electorate. The proposal has been discussed widely and the views of a wide range of stakeholders have been heard. We debated the proposal in Parliament, where 120 of the 129 members voted to support it and no one opposed it. I recognise that the convener and his party colleague abstained on the motion that was before the Parliament.

It is clear that we have engaged on the issue over a period of time. We are building on the actions of the previous Administration and have brought forward this simple measure on the basis of equity for the people of Fife. Nothing in what we propose today will be a surprise to anyone who is engaged in public debate in Scotland.

The Convener: Other members have questions on several issues, including that of equity. You mentioned the debate of 31 May. You may have the numbers wrong—there could not have been 129 votes in favour and two abstentions. However, the motion to which a majority of MSPs agreed on 31 May required that there should be

"consultation aimed at bringing forward proposals leading to the removal of the tolls as soon as practicable"

and that because

"any additional vehicle traffic increases congestion problems in Edinburgh and the wider region, existing commitments to trams and Edinburgh Airport Rail which have already been scrutinised ... should not be arbitrarily delayed or cancelled and that all future major transport project proposals be properly costed, evaluated and prioritised."

The motion also mentioned specifically funding options for the replacement Forth crossing. None of the detail that the motion requested has been provided. The Government is not yet able to answer questions on the funding of the replacement Forth crossing, and there has not been the consultation that the Parliament sought in the motion.

Stewart Stevenson: I will not address the issue of the replacement Forth crossing today, as our focus is on the abolition of tolls, which is a purely financial arrangement. We have sought to bring forward

"proposals leading to the removal of the tolls as soon as practicable".

The consultation that we undertook with the bridge boards was aimed at ensuring that our proposals in the bill are consistent with the proper management of the bridges and the proper financing of the crossings. We wanted to ensure the proper future maintenance of the bridges and their safe operation. I believe that we have discharged our obligations on toll abolition contained in the motion that was agreed to. As you have quite properly identified, the motion mentions a number of other issues, which the Government will of course address in a number of other ways at a later date.

15:15

The Convener: Forgive me, minister, but the motion that the Parliament agreed to—which you have cited as one reason why no further formal or informal consultation is needed—is very clear. It clearly states that the Parliament

"further requires that the government's proposals"—

that is, the proposals to remove the bridge tolls—

"set out clearly what the financial consequences of the removal of tolls on the transport budget are and outline funding options for the vital replacement Forth crossing".

Those requirements have not been fulfilled.

Stewart Stevenson: We have clearly set out the financial implications of the bill, but I will be happy to answer detailed questions if members feel that we have not addressed those. Earlier, the cabinet secretary informed the committee about the work that we are undertaking on the funding options for the replacement crossing. There is, of course, no material connection between the replacement crossing and the bill that is before the committee. As the cabinet secretary indicated, the financing options for the replacement crossing and the decisions that the Government makes on that are matters that we will bring to Parliament.

The Convener: Do you suggest that the committee should make no comment on the fact that a string of witnesses have told us that they have had no contact from the Government on the issue?

Stewart Stevenson: I would not instruct the committee on what it should say—the convener would rightly rein me in if I were to do that—but I will say that we have had really quite extensive discussions. We continue to be open to hear any material facts about the bill, which is a tightly drawn bill with a narrow focus. My officials have had regular meetings with the two boards and I have met representatives of the boards and the management of the two bridges to ensure that our proposals are consistent with managing the crossings safely and in an operationally optimum way. Of course, we have also considered the finance and how staff will be affected by our proposals.

Cathy Peattie: Several witnesses, including representatives of the Scottish Trades Union Congress, have raised concerns that the bill includes no firm date for the abolition of tolls and that that uncertainty is having a negative effect on bridge staff. Given the minister's comment about the need to treat with dignity the people who work within the system, I will pursue that issue a bit. When will the tolls be abolished if the bill is passed by Parliament?

Stewart Stevenson: That is a perfectly reasonable question, but the deputy convener has in a sense answered her own question. The progress of the bill is dependent on the parliamentary process. We are looking to have the bill on the statute book before the turn of the year—that is our objective—but we are in the hands of Parliament in that regard. It would be unwise of me to go beyond that, given that there is another process for approving the order thereafter. At the earliest possible opportunity after the bill is passed, we will seek to make an order to abolish the tolls. Because of the parliamentary processes, I cannot give the actual date on which the abolition will take place. However, I can give an absolute assurance that we are determined that they will be

abolished at the earliest possible moment that is consistent with the proper parliamentary process after royal assent.

Cathy Peattie: Do you understand the workforce's concerns about the uncertainty? Have you agreed to meet representatives of the bridge workers to discuss their concerns?

Stewart Stevenson: My understanding is that the workers and management have now agreed. I ask Chris Rogers if he would like to—

The Convener: Before you bring your officials in, I remind you that the question was whether you have met the representatives of the workforce.

Stewart Stevenson: I answered an oral question from John Park on 6 September. I have said that I am more than willing to meet those who work on the bridges to discuss the safe operation and the running of the bridges. It would be unhelpful for me to intervene until the management and the staff have agreed terms. Once they have done that, I will meet anyone on matters of importance affecting the bridge, including this issue.

Cathy Peattie: There was a request from the trade unions to meet you in order to discuss this issue. It is October now and, as I have said, the uncertainty is difficult for the people who are working on the bridges.

Stewart Stevenson: I am happy to meet the unions on that subject, once the terms between the employers and the unions have been signed off. If that has not yet been done, it is on the brink of being done. I am willing to discuss the subject, but I will not be able to give the unions an answer other than the one that I have given you. I will guarantee to the committee and to the employees themselves that they will be treated with dignity and respect, as befits the contribution that they have made to two major parts of Scotland's transport infrastructure.

Cathy Peattie: I hope so, because at the moment the employees do not feel that they have been treated with dignity or respect, or that anyone is listening to them. We will watch this space.

The Convener: The feeling of being treated with dignity and respect is not going to be engendered by the unions being told, "Not yet," when they ask to meet you. The committee wrote to you making the point that it would be useful for members to know in advance of the close of our stage 1 consideration whether you had met the unions. Why have we not yet had a reply to that letter?

Stewart Stevenson: I beg your pardon. I am afraid that I missed the—

The Convener: Why have we not yet had a reply to our letter indicating that it would be useful

to know in advance of the close of our stage 1 evidence taking whether you had met the unions?

Stewart Stevenson: It is important to recall that the bridge boards are the employers. It is not appropriate for the Government to intervene in the detailed discussions that should properly take place between the employers and the staff. However, as soon as an agreement has been reached, I am happy to meet the workers on the bridges. I cannot say for certain when that will be possible, but I stand ready to do so.

The Convener: I hear the answer that you have given to the previous question about when you are willing to meet the unions. Meeting the unions would not necessarily be an attempt to intervene in the process but would be merely a signal that their concerns are being taken seriously. I was asking why we have not had a reply to our letter to you asking what your position was on the matter.

Stewart Stevenson: None of us has, apparently, seen the letter. We are aware that it has been received, and we will deal with it as rapidly as we can.

The Convener: The committee seems to be experiencing a number of breakdowns in communication with the Government. I will move on, as we are not going to get much further on that at the moment.

It has been predicted that the additional congestion that is expected to arise as a result of the abolition of tolls will increase greenhouse gas emissions. We have heard some suggestions that that will be a relatively minor effect, but the minister will understand how a Government that justifies various minor effects in the wrong direction will be perceived. It does not necessarily give people confidence in the Government's ability to achieve its longer-term climate change objectives. How do you reconcile the Government's climate change objectives with minor steps in the wrong direction?

Stewart Stevenson: We ask that our plans are looked at in the round for their overall effect. Last week, I made a statement to Parliament that was essentially about EARL but which talked about a substantial and wide range of measures that will improve public transport offerings right across central Scotland. We have also previously committed to signalling improvements that will improve journeys by rail from Fife, and in drafting the bill we have considered bus priority lanes and multi-occupancy vehicle priority. The overall positive effect of last week's announcements on the balance sheet is likely to be substantially greater than the negative effect of abolishing tolls on the two bridges.

The Convener: Since devolution, a common criticism has been that additional public transport

spend does not necessarily reduce the levels of road traffic. Road traffic levels have continued to increase despite additional public transport spend. The new Government's approach has been to talk about a balance sheet. When are we going to see that so that we can tell whether the Government's proposals are negative in isolation but positive in combination?

Stewart Stevenson: We will be in a position to make some statements on the matter in relation to our climate change programme.

The Convener: Do you mean according to the timescale for the proposed climate change bill?

Stewart Stevenson: Yes.

Alex Johnstone: When did you receive the report of the toll impact study and how did it inform the preparation of the bill?

Stewart Stevenson: My officials will ensure that I give a consistent answer. The toll impact study was seen at the end of June. Given that it was a manifesto commitment, we came to the issue of the tolls with a view. We knew of the existence of the toll impact study, which has helped to inform our understanding of the effect of what we propose and the measures that we need to take.

Alex Johnstone: To what extent were you able to take into account information or results of studies within the toll impact study before the bill was drafted?

Stewart Stevenson: The bottom line is that, in drafting the bill, we focused on the narrow objective of addressing the injustice of tolls for the people of Fife, who must pay tolls both to the north and to the south although the rest of Scotland does not suffer the same impost.

The study suggests that there will be an increase in off-peak utilisation of the bridges, which may lead to longer journey times. However, our basic motivation is to address an inequity. We have an extensive network of monitoring equipment to the south and north of both bridges as well as on the roads leading off them. We will ensure that we have a good, accurate understanding of the effects of the removal of the tolls and that we are able to respond to any unexpected effects that may arise from the lifting of the tolls.

Alex Johnstone: I am anxious not to overstep the mark with this question. During the course of the committee's scrutiny, I have addressed the toll impact study from various different directions to see where I can get with it. Is it your view that the toll impact study is a reasonable piece of work, which came up with traffic modelling predictions and other results that were not unexpected?

15:30

Stewart Stevenson: The toll impact study was done under the direction and terms of reference of the previous Administration. It largely confirms what one might expect. A range of possibilities emerges from the study—the modelling resulted in a range of predictions. In a sense, the study's results are not unexpected.

The study helps us in that it predicts 1,000 extra jobs in Fife. It also suggests that traffic congestion in Dundee will reduce, because traffic will not be queueing to pay the toll—different effects are predicted for the two bridges. The study is based on a reasonable set of assumptions, although other assumptions could have been made. The statistical approach that is taken in the study is a not unreasonable way of looking at what will happen when we abolish tolls.

Alex Johnstone: If we agree that the toll impact study is reasonably accurate and that its results fall within the range that we might have expected, the next stage is to consider exactly what impact the changes will have. Is it reasonable to say that the study suggests that there will be no significant or enormous change in the behaviour of people who use the bridges as a direct result of the removal of tolls?

Stewart Stevenson: As I said, the study makes a range of predictions, not a single prediction, as is quite proper in a study of that kind. One witness who gave evidence to the committee suggested that, against a background of an increase in traffic, the effect of removing the tolls could be as little as two or three months' worth—although it might be longer—of background growth. The point is that removal of the tolls will not overwhelm the system—we know that.

The toll impact study makes the important point that traffic utilisation will rise largely in the off-peak period, when there is capacity to accommodate more traffic. Journey times will increase slightly. I will allow myself to be corrected on this, if I must, but I think that journey times could increase by in the range of 43 seconds to two minutes on the Tay road bridge and by a little more than that on the Forth bridge. As some witnesses told the committee, the impact will not ultimately be substantial.

Alex Johnstone: Is it reasonable to suggest that in many cases impacts are incremental, not decisive?

Stewart Stevenson: That is quite a good way of putting it, Mr Johnstone.

Shirley-Anne Somerville: We have discussed the toll impact study's prediction of increased congestion. However, witnesses have told the committee that congestion might not increase.

There seems to be confusion about the study's conclusions. Will congestion increase significantly?

What impact will there be on the economy? The evidence from the toll impact study and organisations such as the Federation of Small Businesses Scotland and Scottish Chambers of Commerce is contradictory.

Stewart Stevenson: It seems clear that increased utilisation of the Forth bridge will largely be off peak, as I said. It is suggested that congestion on the Tay bridge might reduce, simply because, given the location of the toll booths almost in the city centre, removal of the tolls will stop traffic queueing in Dundee as it waits to go on to the bridge and reduce congestion for through traffic. When we rise above the detail of the statistics and consider what is likely to happen on the ground, it is clear that there will be a mixed picture of effects and that congestion will reflect itself primarily in longer journey times rather than in longer queues.

In increasing off-peak use of the Forth road bridge, we are not talking about reaching the point of capacity. There will still be capacity after the predicted increases.

Shirley-Anne Somerville: The second part of my question was about the impact on the economy.

Stewart Stevenson: The study suggests that there will be 1,000 extra jobs in Fife. That will be welcome in Fife, which had a significant commitment to the electronics industry and therefore paid some significant prices as the well-documented difficulties with that industry were experienced. For the people of Fife, as well as broad equity—the argument for which drove our proposal to abolish the tolls—we are delivering the economic benefit of greater access to employment. That will be welcome.

The Convener: There is a debate on the extent to which the Government accepts the toll impact study's findings on pollution, congestion, economic impact and so on. Previously, you stated that the objective is to contain traffic on the existing Forth crossing at 2006 levels. Today, we heard from Transport Scotland that no other independent assessment of the likely impact has been undertaken, so the toll impact study is all we have to go on. How can you convince us that traffic will be contained at 2006 levels despite the abolition of tolls?

Stewart Stevenson: We have to seek to contain traffic at 2006 levels. I make the point again that the increased utilisation will be at off-peak times. At the busiest times, which, incidentally, are earlier than the busiest times on other parts of the road network, we are looking at

little or no change. There will be greater off-peak utilisation, but we are also looking at measures. I think that you heard about the work that the south-east Scotland transport partnership is doing with Transport Scotland—if not, you are hearing about it now—to increase access for buses on the M90 and speed their passage. We are looking at providing priority, if we can, to multi-occupancy vehicles, and at ensuring that public transport has greater access on northbound trips. The quality of the bus offering is improving.

All that work is directed at ensuring that we can maintain service levels and that people who use the bridge at present can continue to do so. The work is also directed at capping use at a sustainable level.

The Convener: You accept the factual findings of the toll impact study, if not the policy recommendations, so you know that your proposal will take us in the wrong direction. There will be increased traffic levels on the bridge. However, you are giving us a commitment that traffic in the future will reduce to 2006 levels. When you discuss the policies that you will put in place to achieve that, you can express them only in terms of what you are looking at. How can the committee be content that you will be able to achieve a reduction to 2006 levels?

Stewart Stevenson: Last week, Iain Docherty made reference to the fact that the increase that we might see is equivalent only to two or three months' worth of background growth in traffic.

I return to the proposition of making public transport a more attractive option. That is about ensuring that we are able to get more trains across the rail bridge; improving the timekeeping and length of the trains—their carrying capacity; improving offerings on the bus services; and improving and expanding the successful Ferrytoll park-and-ride service. All those measures contribute to the improvement in public transport offerings, which are directed at increasing the number of people we can transport across the various crossings by various means, but will nonetheless mitigate the effects of the suggested few months of natural background increase in traffic following the bill and abolition of the tolls.

David Stewart: You mentioned congestion and off-peak times. I am sure that you are aware of the evidence that we have heard, particularly about the Forth from the bridgemaster, that at peak times the bridge is already at capacity and that the toll plaza is, in effect, the traffic management system for the bridge. Do you not accept that, with increased congestion at peak times when the tolls are gone, all that will happen will be much greater queueing in the lead-up to the Forth bridge, but without a toll plaza in its current form?

Stewart Stevenson: We might not have a toll plaza, but we are certainly encouraging FETA to consider—I know that it is doing so—measures that will enable it to control access to the bridge in a similar way to ensure that capacity and utilisation are managed for traffic heading north as well as south. The toll plaza is no material restriction on traffic heading south to Edinburgh—it is only a northbound constraint. FETA is looking at alternative measures. For example, there are already bus priority traffic lights for traffic coming into the city and similar methods are among the measures that are being considered to ensure bus priority for traffic heading north when the toll plaza has been removed. Although I am not making a commitment, I am saying that one of the outcomes might be that we can improve priority for certain parts of public transport, such as buses, in an environment in which the toll plaza has been removed and FETA has put in place other ways of controlling the traffic.

Alison McInnes: You listed a number of attractive suggestions that would help you to meet the commitment to maintain traffic at 2006 levels. Is it essential that those suggestions be put in place before the tolls are lifted?

Stewart Stevenson: The bridge is running at capacity at peak hours, so it will not carry any more traffic at peak hours when we lift the tolls. I welcome the member's observation that we have presented a number of attractive options; they will be implemented over time. We continue to look at the options; we have long-term options for improving public transport capacity on the rail network, shorter-term options to prioritise public transport and shorter-term options for multi-occupancy vehicles. Our responses not only to the removal of tolls but to the steadily growing utilisation of the M90, the A90, the adjacent roads and the bridge are both short and long term. We would have to put in place many of those measures in any event and I return to the fact that the effect of abolishing the tolls will be comparatively modest in drawing the timeline closer.

Alison McInnes: We heard from the bridgemaster that the Government was going to fund the redesign of the toll plaza and the new road layout. Given what you have said this afternoon, do you agree that it would be entirely inappropriate for the Government to fund any redesign of that road layout that did not include bus priority measures?

15:45

Stewart Stevenson: We have agreed that we will pick up the tab for all the effects of the abolition of tolls—redesign and so on—that are necessary for FETA and the Tay Road Bridge

Joint Board. At the end of the day, it is up to the City of Edinburgh Council and FETA to pursue the subject that you mention. However, if it is part of the effects of our abolishing tolls, we would expect to reflect that in our commitment to FETA.

Alison McInnes: Let me push you a bit further. Do you not think that there would be a missed opportunity—and perhaps a failure of leadership—if the Government were to spend significant amounts of money without insisting on bus priority measures? Whether or not FETA and the City of Edinburgh Council can finally agree on a scheme, surely it is for the Government to suggest that any redesign should include such measures.

Stewart Stevenson: Discussions on the subject are already under way. FETA is the roads authority for the area concerned, so it is up to FETA to pursue those measures; I know that the measures are on its radar, and I would expect that it will make the best possible speed on the subject.

I have been pressed on when the tolls will come off, and I return to equity for the people of Fife. We will seek to abolish the tolls as quickly as we reasonably can. I expect the various authorities to progress with the various measures that I have described as quickly as they reasonably can, and I know that they are doing that.

Alison McInnes: Perhaps I can phrase the question differently. Will the Government fund a road layout that does not include bus priority measures? Will you ask the authorities to go back to the drawing board if such measures are not included?

Stewart Stevenson: FETA is responsible for the area in front of the bridge. We have said that we will fund what FETA reasonably proposes as a response to the changes that derive from the abolition of tolls. It is up to FETA, and it is actively engaged in discussing the subject. I know what FETA is discussing, but I will not know the exact detail of its plans until it brings them forward. It is important that I do not step on FETA's toes in that regard.

The Convener: Let me have one last crack at this. Can we have an assurance that we will not see the Government funding the redesign and then other revenue sources being used to redesign the layout again later to include bus priority measures, cycle links or other such aspects?

Stewart Stevenson: I hope that you heard me say that discussions are already in course. We will certainly examine bus priority with FETA—the subject is being discussed. That discussion also involves the City of Edinburgh Council and, at the north of the bridge on the M90, Transport Scotland. All the players are party to the discussion. I am not in the slightest bit anxious to

spend more money than I have to; I am anxious that we get it right in a oner.

The Convener: In short, you cannot give us an assurance about the prospect of wasted money on a wasted redesign.

Stewart Stevenson: We will not waste money.

Rob Gibson: Three key strategic outcomes are set out in the national transport strategy. Minister, how do you consider that the decision to abolish the tolls meets them?

Stewart Stevenson: The abolition of the tolls is based on simply the argument of equity for the people of Fife and the users of the only remaining estuarine crossings in Scotland that people have to pay for. In fact, it has always been a matter for the people of Fife that both toll plazas require people to pay to get into Fife while they can leave for nothing. In abolishing the tolls, we are relying on equity for the people of Fife and we are seeking to ensure that the effects of the abolition of tolls are consistent and integrated with our work on transport throughout Scotland.

Rob Gibson: I hear what you are saying. We have received evidence from the National Alliance Against Tolls, which said that the equity argument is the most important. However, Iain Docherty said that equity is a red herring because no transport system gives equal access to all people living in all parts of the country. Some witnesses suggest that the abolition of tolls would create inequality between road users and the general public, through the use of general taxation to fund the bridge. Others suggest that the equity argument is outweighed by economic and environmental arguments.

Stewart Stevenson: The trunk road network reaches all corners of Scotland and, of course, it is provided by general taxation. Inevitably, there will be variation in people's ability to access the network. However, when we invest public money in roads, railways or any other part of the public transport system, we consider need, the value to local communities, and our strategic objectives. Putting economic development at the heart of Government strategy involves having a transport network that supports all parts of Scotland according to their needs. In the central belt, issues arise because of high volume; in other parts of Scotland, needs are different but we still require trunk roads of good quality.

Rob Gibson: Is accessibility a plus point in your programme?

Stewart Stevenson: Yes—accessibility to our trunk road network. Also, it is not right that a financial impost should be placed on people in one particular part of Scotland—Fife—when they want to return home after making a visit to Dundee or

Edinburgh. The situation has been unfair for a long time. The tolls were originally brought in not as a restriction on people's ability to travel, but as a tax to pay for the construction of the bridges. Forty years on, it is time to right that wrong. That is what the bill will do.

The Convener: Is equity a strategic transport objective for the Government?

Stewart Stevenson: In all that we do, we have to seek to deliver the equity that we can. An attribute of joined-up Government is that we can look at a range of objectives. To be fair, I should say that any Government does that. There are very few one-dimensional policies, if I may put it that way.

We are delivering equity for the people of Fife through a project that relates to the transport network. Of course, the Government has to consider other ways of delivering equity as well.

The Convener: I understood that transport policy was not one-dimensional but three-dimensional, and that the three dimensions were: improving journey times and connections; reducing emissions; and improving quality, accessibility and affordability. The proposed measure falls at two of those hurdles. First, it will increase journey times by extending the peak period. Time is money, so if people are spending more time in traffic jams, that is money; if people are spending more money on fuel because their journey takes longer, that is money too. Secondly, if the bus operators are right when they say that buses will spend more time sitting in traffic jams, the quality and accessibility of public transport will be reduced. The policy will also increase emissions, although you argue that the increase will be modest.

You answered a question on the transport strategy by making the equity argument. That is surely an admission that this measure fails on all of the Government's strategic transport objectives.

Stewart Stevenson: I return to suggestions that were made earlier. If congestion in Dundee city centre is reduced, there is a good chance that journey times will be reduced too. Emissions will certainly be reduced, because less traffic will be queueing.

The Convener: Have you accepted the overall findings of fact in the toll impact study?

Stewart Stevenson: I am pointing to the diversity of impacts in different parts of the network. When a change of this kind is made, some things will be moved round. I am quite confident that emissions will be less concentrated in the centre of Dundee. The quality of life will be improved in Fife.

As I indicated, journey times, particularly at peak time—which is the most critical time for crossing to

Edinburgh—are unlikely to change substantially. It is perfectly clear that the strategy will have different impacts and different objectives, but I think that, at the end of the day, the proposal has been widely welcomed in Fife and in the Parliament.

The Convener: Surely a transport policy that had equity as one of its strategic objectives would look dramatically different. Instead of simply concentrating on one particular element of transport infrastructure—in this case, bridges—it would look, for example, at the equity between public transport costs and the costs of private car use and at the equity between different areas of the country. However, equity is not a fundamental strategic objective for much the same reason that Professor Docherty suggested; it would be an impossible ask, given the inherent costs of running a complex transport network.

Stewart Stevenson: I suspect that the convener might be teasing me slightly in light of last week's very substantial announcement, which set out an investment in the rail network of perhaps up to £1 billion and which will deliver substantial equity to people across the central belt. In Inverness, we are improving the frequency and reducing the time of journeys; in Aberdeen, we are improving the rail network infrastructure to reduce journey times; and we are improving journey times to the south and south-west of Scotland, again in respect of infrastructure. Moreover, the road equivalent tariff study that we are undertaking is delivering equity for people in the islands, and its impact will increase as things develop. As for the suggestion that we are not treating people across Scotland with equity—which was made after looking at only one comparatively modest part of our transport activity—I believe that we have probably not seen for a considerable time a Government that is quite this ambitious to deliver equity in transport for the people of Scotland.

The Convener: Will that include equity for public transport users?

Stewart Stevenson: Of course. As you know, this minister is a regular and enthusiastic user of public transport. Informally, I have calculated that, since becoming a minister, I have used the train on a greater number of occasions than I have used the Government car—although not necessarily on official business.

The Convener: We have to move on, but I will wait and watch with interest for the minister's innovative ways of using public revenue to reduce the cost of public transport for many people in Fife and elsewhere.

Alison McInnes: How do you respond to the suggestion that has been made to the committee that the people of Fife might benefit more if you

invested the revenue that you are using to finance the abolition of tolls in other transport initiatives or economic development?

Stewart Stevenson: There is not much evidence that the people of Fife agree with you. Our proposals to abolish tolls have received a very wide welcome, and I am quite confident that the people of Fife are very much behind us on this subject. Indeed, support crosses political and social divides. People are very enthusiastic about it. The pressure that was put on me earlier in the committee's deliberations—to some extent by the deputy convener—indicates enthusiasm for ensuring that we abolish tolls at the earliest possible date.

Alison McInnes: That might well be the case, but you have not answered my question. Would the money that you will invest in removing the tolls be better spent on economic development or other transport initiatives, which would create more benefit for the people of Fife? I want to hear your views on the matter, not the views of the people of Fife.

Stewart Stevenson: The question presents a bit of a false choice. In the past week, we have announced plans that will ensure that we are able to engage more effectively with economic development throughout Scotland. Fife will be one of the beneficiaries of that approach.

In any event, you appear to be setting out the rather uncomfortable idea that the people of Fife should pay a special tax that people elsewhere do not pay and which, in part, pays for economic development elsewhere in Scotland. The bottom line is that, in the interests of equity, we are removing a tax—and that is the right word to use—on the people of Fife. In evidence to the committee, Alan Russell said:

“The tolls are a restraint on trade.”

He went on to say that

“businesses in Fife are taxed an estimated £3.4 million per annum just to use the national road network”.—[*Official Report, Transport, Infrastructure and Climate Change Committee*, 25 September 2007; c 129.]

16:00

The Convener: Have any measures been planned to mitigate the negative impacts of the abolition of tolls? I am talking about pollution, congestion and the potential economic impact. What discussions have been held with stakeholders such as local authorities or indeed the voluntary sector, which owns and operates a number of, for example, cycle links in Scotland, about any mitigation measures that will be implemented?

Stewart Stevenson: Officials are certainly aware of the measures that councils are taking. It

is not clear that there will be significant environmental impacts; the study that is before the committee and elsewhere indicates that there will be a very small net increase in emissions and air pollutants. The percentages are very marginal indeed. However, it is important to measure and manage all pollutants, and I am confident that the local authorities will discharge their duties in that respect.

The Convener: The Government's decision to fund the redesign of the toll plaza seems to imply that it has a sense of responsibility, given that it has made a political decision at national level. Does that sense also apply to mitigation measures such as funding for cycle links to enable sustainable commuting from Fife to Edinburgh?

Stewart Stevenson: The very high quality cycle links on the existing crossing will not be affected by our proposals.

The Convener: On the existing crossing, yes, but once cyclists get off the bridge they still have to get into the city, and the cycle links are not regarded as safe and attractive. Will the Government commit funding to mitigation measures including cycle links?

I draw the minister's attention to the written evidence that we have had from Spokes, which includes reference to a commitment made by John Swinney:

“We will continue to invest in initiatives which reduce congestion, such as improved park and ride, and improved rail, bus and cycle links.”

Is there a commitment to put Government money into the mitigation measures? Will that include getting commuters to use a bicycle wherever possible when commuting from Fife to Edinburgh? They find it difficult to do that at the moment.

Stewart Stevenson: Convener, you know of my cabinet secretary's enthusiasm for cycling; I heard him express some disappointment that his ministerial duties are reducing his time in the saddle.

As part of the comprehensive spending review and determining the local authority settlement, we will be happy to talk to local authorities about that subject.

The Convener: You said “happy to talk to”, so there is no commitment.

Stewart Stevenson: How can I make a commitment until I have specific proposals?

The Convener: The same question could be raised in respect of the redesign of the toll plaza, but you are able to make that commitment.

Stewart Stevenson: That specific item is FETA's responsibility and it clearly has to do the toll plaza redesign as part of the abolition of tolls.

I repeat that if a case is to be made, I wish to hear it. This is part of the local authority settlement process and we are happy to talk about mitigation as part of the comprehensive spending review. However, I reiterate that the crossing has a first-class set of cycle lanes that can also be walked for that matter, although walking from Kirkcaldy to Edinburgh every day might be a bit perverse.

The Convener: If all one wanted to do was cycle up and down the bridge every day, that might be enough.

David Stewart: Is there a danger that the abolition of tolls could have a negative knock-on effect on other modes of travel, such as rail which, as you know, has strong environmental credentials? Is there a danger that rail will seem less attractive and that the public will use their cars instead? Do you share the view of the City of Edinburgh Council that cross-Forth rail fares should be reduced when the tolls go?

Stewart Stevenson: You will be aware that there has been a significant year-on-year increase in the uptake of rail travel. Our plans to invest further in the rail network—in frequency, capacity and speed—will create significant opportunities for further modal shift. I am sure that people will move to rail travel. Given that we are improving capacity—and everything else I mentioned—in the rail service, there is likely to be a far more significant move to rail than on to a road bridge that is at capacity at peak times. The move will continue to be in quite the opposite direction to the one you suggest.

After nearly 40 years of pretty continuous decline, bus utilisation has increased in the past couple of years. That increase pre-dates the introduction of the national concessionary fare scheme. I am confident that we are beginning to see a move towards public transport. It is certainly this Government's intention to continue to support that.

David Stewart: You will know that we are at capacity in terms of infrastructure, seating and signalling on the Forth rail bridge, too, at peak times—you made that very point when you gave evidence previously. The point that I am making is that there is a danger of a transfer from rail to road.

I welcome your positive comments about speeding up rail. One of our worries is that rail times for journeys north have hardly changed in a generation, which is not good enough. I would welcome any commitments you make on that. I understand some of the constraints around signalling and stock, but you have not answered my question about the transfer from rail to road.

Stewart Stevenson: Given that the bridge is at capacity at peak times, we expect an increase in

rail utilisation at peak times—the toll bridge study suggests that. We are undertaking signalling improvements on the rail bridge, which will double the number of blocks that are available. That will provide a theoretical doubling in capacity. In fact, one cannot realise all that, but we can get a significant increase just by putting in another signal. We have improved the junction just north of Inverkeithing and there are other improvements. As we improve services in the central belt and electrify rolling stock in the rest of the network, rail will simply become a much more attractive option.

I very much welcome Mr Stewart's comments about the need to improve services to the north. I share that belief, which is precisely why we are acting to improve services to Inverness and Aberdeen.

The Convener: I want to pursue the point about modal shift. You talked about increases in public transport usage. If that were accompanied by a decline in road traffic levels, perhaps it would be okay to describe it as modal shift, but we have been seeing modal spread, not modal shift, have we not?

Stewart Stevenson: I return to what we are seeking to do to improve modal shift. I reiterate my points about multi-occupancy vehicles being prioritised on the bridge to reduce the number of cars, if not necessarily the number of people. We are improving the public transport offering in a wide range of ways and I am confident that, as more people use it, we will see modal shift. As I have engaged as Minister for Transport, Infrastructure and Climate Change—which makes one think about things differently—I have experienced modal shift and I know that other people have, too. This is an ad hominem debate.

We are determined to deliver on modal shift, which is why we are focusing on improving the rail network and the speed at which buses can move over significant distances—and why we have the policies we have.

The Convener: We will discuss buses in a moment, but I want to be clear on this point. As we consider the impact of abolishing tolls in the months and years to come, will the Government be satisfied that it is achieving modal shift simply if public transport use increases, even if road traffic also increases?

Stewart Stevenson: We have more to do in public transport to address the climate change agenda. We can do it in lots of ways, but improving public transport is a key part of that. I return to the point that that is why we seek to make the investments that we are making.

Alison McInnes: You referred to existing schemes that successfully encourage modal shift to buses in the area that is involved. Organisations

such as the Confederation of Passenger Transport UK have expressed concern to the committee that increased congestion arising from the abolition of tolls—however small that increase is argued to be—would impact on those successful schemes. The CPT has requested the construction of a park-and-ride facility to the south of the Tay road bridge and bus priority measures at the southern approach to the Forth road bridge. What is your response to the CPT's concerns? Will the Scottish Government support the construction of the additional facilities that have been proposed?

Stewart Stevenson: I understand that SEStran and tactran are considering that idea, but I am unaware of any proposals to the Scottish ministers, unless I am told otherwise. We are looking at that.

We are enthusiastic about further park-and-ride sites. Ferrytoll park and ride has been spectacularly successful and increasing its number of spaces by 500 is being considered. Ingliston park and ride is expanding. Sheriffhall park and ride, which is south of the river, is due to open shortly, as is Straiton park and ride. Park and rides at Lothianburn and Wallyford are also under discussion.

I very much encourage tactran and SEStran to make best speed with park and ride, which is a spectacularly successful innovation that sustains modal shift. Mrs McInnes will be aware of the park-and-ride schemes in the north-east that have proved successful. It is time that we had more park and rides for the Tay crossing, as we have not had them.

Alison McInnes: I share your enthusiasm for park and ride—the first interurban park and ride in Scotland is in my home town—but my question was about CPT's plea for protection of the success of existing schemes.

Stewart Stevenson: I engaged with people on that subject at the CPT UK (Scotland) conference last week. I return to bus priority lanes and, if appropriate, using extra signals such as those that give priority to buses on the A90. That is precisely the sort of measure that we must take and which I am keen to support to ensure bus journey times. If the convener will forgive me, I would like to mention that the Edinburgh airport bus link takes a consistent 30 minutes or less from the centre of Edinburgh to the airport because of the priority that buses are accorded. We want the same success to be repeated with many other journeys that can be made by bus.

Cathy Peattie: Representatives of the freight industry have suggested priority measures for goods vehicles, similar to those for buses. Do you intend to introduce or consider such measures to ease the passage of goods vehicles over the

bridges following the abolition of tolls, if Parliament agrees to that?

16:15

Stewart Stevenson: It is interesting that about 80 per cent of the goods traffic that crosses the Forth does so at the upper Forth crossing. I have met the Freight Transport Association and the Road Haulage Association in the past three weeks. Neither of them focused on the issue in the hour-long meetings that I had with each of them. They were more concerned with matters that do not touch directly on the bill—in particular, they want to ensure that their interests are reflected in decisions that will be made on the replacement crossing. To be blunt, that is their immediate priority. I have, at their request, discussed with both organisations ways in which we can ease the journey in various parts of Scotland, particularly on the trunk road network, but the issue that the member mentions was not raised with me by those bodies in either of those meetings.

Cathy Peattie: It was raised with the committee, so I am asking for your opinion.

Stewart Stevenson: I will certainly look at what those organisations have to say on the issue, but there is a genuine difficulty in that we cannot give priority to everyone. We must accept that.

Bearing in mind that 80 per cent of the goods traffic crosses on the upper Forth, the Forth crossing is very important for goods traffic that crosses the Forth—such as the traffic for some of the industries in, for example, Markinch. However, much of the goods traffic has a choice about when it travels; in particular, the traffic that goes across the Forth bridge has a degree of choice. There are indications that many of the companies are choosing to schedule in a way that best meets their needs.

I hope to meet some of the Fife companies that are most directly affected to discuss a range of issues. I will be happy to engage with them on the subject and see what we can do. It would be unwise of me to come to the committee and make a commitment without having had such a discussion, but I am actively engaged with all the relevant trade bodies and I expect to meet some of the companies whose interests I think you are raising.

Cathy Peattie: I welcome that. I suggest that you speak not only to the Fife companies but to the wider network.

Stewart Stevenson: There are a number of reasons why I want to speak to them and they want to speak to me. The future replacement Forth crossing is perhaps the top priority. I am now alert to the fact that I should engage on this subject, and I make a commitment to do so.

Charlie Gordon: What impact is the proposed abolition of tolls on the existing Forth road bridge having on Transport Scotland's preparatory work on the replacement Forth crossing?

Stewart Stevenson: Virtually none.

Charlie Gordon: Are we talking only about the capacity of the staff of Transport Scotland, or what?

Stewart Stevenson: One of the reasons for introducing a focused and straightforward bill is to speed up and simplify the process. That allows staff in Transport Scotland to focus on our substantial programme of work, which includes the work that we have inherited from the previous Administration and are carrying forward, and the priorities that we for our part wish to pursue.

As the bill is small and has a narrow focus, the number of people involved is not such as to distract Transport Scotland from its core mission.

Rob Gibson: Can the minister explain what arrangements have been made to secure long-term funding for FETA and for the Tay Road Bridge Joint Board, particularly in the light of concerns that those organisations raised about the financing of multi-year contracts, which are longer than the usual three Scottish Executive budget years?

Stewart Stevenson: The money that is spent by the two boards comes from a number of sources. Funds that currently come from tolls are being replaced by an alternative revenue stream from the Scottish Government. There will be no change in the income and expenditure of the two boards.

Secondly, the boards are able to borrow money to pay for major projects. One of the bill's provisions in relation to the Tay Road Bridge Joint Board is to allow that power to continue beyond 2016, when it would otherwise have lapsed. The provision represents an improvement on the board's ability to seek funding by that route. We are in no sense disrupting FETA's powers.

The third source of funding is direct grant from the Scottish Government to either board for specific projects. That is entirely unaffected by the passage of the bill. As before, decisions on a grant for a specific project would be made on the basis of the project's merits and the support for it. In financial terms, the bill makes no material difference to the boards' ability to deliver operationally effective and safe crossings of the two estuaries. That is our intention.

Rob Gibson: Your comments imply that the life of the Tay Road Bridge Joint Board will be extended and that the future of both organisations will be secure.

Stewart Stevenson: The bill does not affect the powers of the Tay Road Bridge Joint Board and

the Forth Estuary Transport Authority. We are not planning to change the way in which they operate. Officials are working closely with both boards to ensure that there is sufficient flexibility to enable them to deliver our objectives for the crossings. That work is going well.

Alison McInnes: Elsewhere, the Government has made great play of the need to integrate and simplify decision making. What reasoning informed your view that it is necessary to retain the two boards?

Stewart Stevenson: The management of the two bridges is a specialist activity and the boards' employees have a great deal of expertise. The structure of the boards, which are made up of locally accountable elected representatives, is an important part of the link between the crossings and the communities they serve. We see no advantage in disrupting an arrangement that is working—that is a good test for Governments to apply.

As I indicated to Mr Gibson, we have financial structures that appear to work. Because we are focused on delivering the abolition of tolls to the people of Fife and on removing as quickly as possible the inequity that exists, we have focused narrowly on that objective and have made the minimum legislative changes that are necessary to achieve it. However, we have taken advantage of the opportunity that the bill affords to tidy up the landscape by deleting some residual powers relating to the Erskine bridge. We have sought a simple, quick, effective and unambiguous way of delivering the policy objective on which we were elected and that Parliament voted so decisively to support.

Alex Johnstone: I was about to tell the convener to carry on, as the question that I planned to ask has largely been addressed, but I am tempted to explore the issue one more time.

Some people may be aware that I support the motives behind the bill and regard the removal of tolls as an achievement, but I am concerned that that achievement is threatened by the bill's implications for the independence of the bodies that control the bridges. When they raised a large proportion of their funds, those bodies had financial independence and could plan ahead. The minister has been asked about that and has given fairly robust answers, but could we do anything in the bill to guarantee in the long term the independence of the controlling boards that run the bridges? Can we do anything to prevent any future politicians who have an ambition to centralise and bureaucratised from doing that?

Stewart Stevenson: There is a bill in front of the committee today precisely because the powers that are associated with the bridges are embedded

in primary legislation. It would not be possible for a minister, sitting at his desk, to change things on a whim at the stroke of a pen; it would involve the whole Parliament. The bodies in question are road traffic authorities—that is important—and legislation would be required to change those as well.

You ask about the boards' independence, but you must remember that they have, over a long period, had to come to the Government to make a case for the significant capital expenditures they have made over and above that for the routine care of the bridges. The transfer to central Government of the responsibility for delivering the revenue stream that is currently derived from tolls is a commitment that we make in the long term. Indeed, it is embedded in everything we have put in front of you today. As long as the present Government continues in office, there should be no risk to the independence of the boards. The overwhelming vote that was taken in Parliament on the subject suggested that there is pretty much no divide on the issue across the Parliament. I hope that that continues into the future.

The Convener: That more or less concludes our questioning. I want to wrap things up by referring to the written questions that we have given you, which we intended to ask Transport Scotland. You will be aware that we need answers to the questions to inform our consideration in drafting a report. Will you give us a commitment that we will receive answers to those questions by the end of the week?

Stewart Stevenson: We have the questions and will ensure that you receive answers to them as quickly as possible. That means very quickly indeed. I have the written answers.

The Convener: Will we get them by the end of the week?

Stewart Stevenson: I am sure that the circumstances that have led us to respond in this way have been discussed already.

The Convener: Yes, indeed.

Stewart Stevenson: We have responded absolutely as quickly as we can, and you will have the answers very shortly.

The Convener: Thank you. I am sure that you will want to look behind the back of the filing cabinet for the letter on workforce negotiations as well.

Stewart Stevenson: It would not be for me to explain the processes that have been gone through. We are aware of the matter, and it is being dealt with as quickly as possible.

The Convener: We look forward to answers on both those matters, which will inform our report.

Stewart Stevenson: I am anxious to oblige you in the matter, convener, and I will ensure that I do.

The Convener: I thank the minister and his colleagues for attending the committee today.

We now come to item 3, which we agreed to take in private.

16:28

Meeting continued in private until 17:01.

Members who would like a printed copy of the *Official Report* to be forwarded to them should give notice at the Document Supply Centre.

No proofs of the *Official Report* can be supplied. Members who want to suggest corrections for the archive edition should mark them clearly in the daily edition, and send it to the Official Report, Scottish Parliament, Edinburgh EH99 1SP. Suggested corrections in any other form cannot be accepted.

The deadline for corrections to this edition is:

Thursday 11 October 2007

PRICES AND SUBSCRIPTION RATES

OFFICIAL REPORT daily editions

Single copies: £5.00

Meetings of the Parliament annual subscriptions: £350.00

The archive edition of the *Official Report* of meetings of the Parliament, written answers and public meetings of committees will be published on CD-ROM.

WRITTEN ANSWERS TO PARLIAMENTARY QUESTIONS weekly compilation

Single copies: £3.75

Annual subscriptions: £150.00

Standing orders will be accepted at Document Supply.

Published in Edinburgh by RR Donnelley and available from:

Blackwell's Bookshop

**53 South Bridge
Edinburgh EH1 1YS
0131 622 8222**

Blackwell's Bookshops:
243-244 High Holborn
London WC1 7DZ
Tel 020 7831 9501

All trade orders for Scottish Parliament documents should be placed through Blackwell's Edinburgh.

Blackwell's Scottish Parliament Documentation

Helpline may be able to assist with additional information on publications of or about the Scottish Parliament, their availability and cost:

Telephone orders and inquiries

**0131 622 8283 or
0131 622 8258**

Fax orders

0131 557 8149

E-mail orders

business.edinburgh@blackwell.co.uk

Subscriptions & Standing Orders

business.edinburgh@blackwell.co.uk

Scottish Parliament

**RNID Typetalk calls welcome on
18001 0131 348 5000
Textphone 0845 270 0152**

sp.info@scottish.parliament.uk

All documents are available on the Scottish Parliament website at:

www.scottish.parliament.uk

Accredited Agents

(see Yellow Pages)

and through good booksellers