

MEETING OF THE PARLIAMENT

Thursday 4 November 1999

Volume 3 No 4

£5.00

© Parliamentary copyright. Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body 2000.

Applications for reproduction should be made in writing to the Copyright Unit,
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 The Stationery Office Ltd.

Her Majesty's Stationery Office is independent of and separate from the company now
trading as The Stationery Office Ltd, which is responsible for printing and publishing
Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body publications.

CONTENTS

Thursday 4 November 1999

Debates

	Col.
AGRICULTURE AND RURAL AFFAIRS	273
<i>Motion moved—[Alasdair Morgan].</i>	
<i>Amendment moved—[Ross Finnie].</i>	
<i>Amendment moved—[Alex Johnstone].</i>	
Alasdair Morgan (Galloway and Upper Nithsdale) (SNP)	273
The Minister for Rural Affairs (Ross Finnie)	280
Alex Johnstone (North-East Scotland) (Con)	286
Mr Mike Rumbles (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (LD)	291
Michael Russell (South of Scotland) (SNP)	292
Lewis Macdonald (Aberdeen Central) (Lab)	294
Mr Jamie McGrigor (Highlands and Islands) (Con)	296
Fergus Ewing (Inverness East, Nairn and Lochaber) (SNP)	298
Maureen Macmillan (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)	299
Robin Harper (Lothians) (Green)	301
Mr Duncan Hamilton (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)	301
Dr Sylvia Jackson (Stirling) (Lab)	303
Mr Murray Tosh (South of Scotland) (Con)	305
Irene McGugan (North-East Scotland) (SNP)	307
Euan Robson (Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (LD)	309
Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)	310
Colin Campbell (West of Scotland) (SNP)	312
Mary Scanlon (Highlands and Islands) (Con)	313
Christine Grahame (South of Scotland) (SNP)	314
Mr Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD)	316
Mr David Davidson (North-East Scotland) (Con)	317
Dr Winnie Ewing (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)	319
Mr John Munro (Ross, Skye and Inverness West) (LD)	321
George Lyon (Argyll and Bute) (LD)	322
Alex Fergusson (South of Scotland) (Con)	321
Ross Finnie	326
Richard Lochhead (North-East Scotland) (SNP)	329
BUSINESS MOTION	334
<i>Motion moved—[Mr McCabe]—and agreed to.</i>	
QUESTION TIME	336
OPEN QUESTION TIME	350
STRATEGIC ROADS REVIEW	357
<i>Statement—[Sarah Boyack].</i>	
The Minister for Transport and the Environment (Sarah Boyack)	357
Mr Kenny MacAskill (Lothians) (SNP)	369
Mr Murray Tosh (South of Scotland) (Con)	373
Tavish Scott (Shetland) (LD)	377
Margaret Jamieson (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (Lab)	379
Mr Gil Paterson (Central Scotland) (SNP)	381
Des McNulty (Clydebank and Milngavie) (Lab)	382
Mr Nick Johnston (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)	384
Malcolm Chisholm (Edinburgh North and Leith) (Lab)	385
Nora Radcliffe (Gordon) (LD)	387
John Young (West of Scotland) (Con)	387

Linda Fabiani (Central Scotland) (SNP)	390
Sarah Boyack	392
LEAD COMMITTEES	397
<i>Motion moved—[Mr McCabe]—and agreed to.</i>	
AMNESIC SHELLFISH POISONING	397
<i>Motion moved—[Mr McCabe]—and agreed to.</i>	
DECISION TIME	398
SCOTTISH PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS	405
<i>Motion debated—[Lord James Douglas-Hamilton].</i>	
Lord James Douglas-Hamilton (Lothians) (Con)	405
Mrs Margaret Smith (Edinburgh West) (LD)	407
Fiona Hyslop (Lothians) (SNP)	409
David McLetchie (Lothians) (Con)	409
Robin Harper (Lothians) (Green)	410
Donald Gorrie (Central Scotland) (LD)	411
The Deputy Minister for Justice (Angus MacKay)	412

Scottish Parliament

Thursday 4 November 1999

[THE PRESIDING OFFICER *opened the meeting at 09:30*]

Agriculture and Rural Affairs

The Presiding Officer (Sir David Steel): The first item of business is the non-Executive business debate on motion S1M-242, in the name of Mr Alex Salmond, on agriculture and rural affairs, and on two amendments to that motion.

Before we begin the debate, I want to make it clear that the rule about summing up at the end has, as I requested, been defined by the Procedures Committee. Members will recall that, in previous non-Executive debates, I said that the spokesman for the Executive should wind up. The Procedures Committee has now carefully considered the matter and decided that, in non-Executive debates, a member of the party that moved the motion should be called to wind up. That was the committee's advice, which I propose to accept—as from today, that will be the practice. The final speaker will come from whichever party has moved the motion.

This morning, many members want to speak. The time allotted to opening speakers is generous: 20 minutes for the mover of the motion and 15 minutes each for the movers of the amendments. I propose to stick rigidly to those times in the interests of the debate.

09:31

Alasdair Morgan (Galloway and Upper Nithsdale) (SNP): It is with great pleasure that I move the motion on agriculture and rural affairs. Let us hope that the debate stimulates more interest on the as yet fairly empty Government benches as the morning goes on.

As I said a couple of weeks ago during the short, Government-sponsored debate on agriculture, it is a shame that so little time has so far been allocated to the subject. That is one of the reasons why we lodged today's motion, which refers to some of the severe problems affecting parts of the rural economy and rural society, and seeks more concerted and effective Government action to tackle them.

One of the arguments of those who opposed the setting up of this Parliament was that devolution would lead to the domination of Scotland by the industrial areas of the central belt, to the detriment of the rest of Scotland, particularly rural Scotland. However, it was always the Scottish National

party's contention that rural Scotland would be better represented and its needs more sensitively addressed in a Scottish Parliament than they had ever been at Westminster.

Why should we believe that rural Scotland is important? First—but in no particular order—it contains a significant and increasing percentage of our population. Secondly, it makes a vital contribution to tourism, one of our most important industries. Thirdly, through agriculture, horticulture and, of course, their ancillary industries, including whisky and other distilling, it plays a crucial part in our economy. Fourthly, it is an essential leisure resource for those who live in our urban areas—I might say for those who are unfortunate enough to live in our urban areas.

Although rural Scotland has many distinguishing characteristics, we should not let ourselves get caught in the trap that some would lead us into for their own political or campaigning ends, which is to believe that there is a huge gulf between town and country and that the interests of the two groups are essentially different. In fact, the needs of those who live in rural Scotland are essentially the same as those of people living anywhere in Scotland.

People need good services, be it health services, social services or transport; they need adequate housing provision; their industries, just as industries elsewhere, need guidance, assistance and an understanding of their needs. All that must be linked with an understanding that meeting those needs in rural areas may require a different approach and that there will be significant differences even between rural areas—between Galloway and Unst, for example.

Most country people wish to stay and work in the country and many other people move into the country, either to retire or to use it as a base for commuting to an urban area. Both factors bring their own problems and challenges for local authority and Government funding.

It would be wrong to think that, just because the country is attractive, life there is a rural idyll. The same problems exist in the country as in our towns, although they are often concealed by the sparseness of the population. In many country areas, we find high unemployment, a high incidence of homelessness, a serious problem with low wages and sparse public services. I do not want anyone to go away with the impression that those problems started with the current Government or are a result of the current crisis in agriculture—although that has certainly not helped. In many rural areas, although not in all, the endemic problems of poor housing, low wages, high unemployment and poor public services have persisted for decades and have been left largely unsolved by both local government and central Government.

Just as the problems of our rural areas are not unique, so the effects of Government policy do not stop at our urban boundaries; in fact, those policies often impact disproportionately on our rural areas. That is certainly the case today—when many of the policies of the current Government at Westminster have a serious and disproportionate effect on our rural areas. Every MP or MSP who has any contact with rural Scotland cannot fail to pick up the same two messages that come from all parts of society and from all business and industry—about the impact of road fuel prices and about the double-sided coin of high interest rates and the high pound.

The Conservative Government introduced the fuel duty escalator. However, Conservatives have opportunistically dumped that policy as they see the Labour party stealing their clothes. The fuel escalator was, allegedly, introduced to protect the environment. In reality, it is a blunt instrument that serves only to fill Gordon Brown's coffers.

Ben Wallace (North-East Scotland) (Con): Could you confirm, Mr Morgan, that during the election you removed the fuel escalator from your calculations for an independent Scotland and for the SNP budget? I cannot remember whether that was revealed.

Alasdair Morgan: No, we did not take out the fuel escalator. My point is that your party introduced the fuel escalator and you were quite happy to carry on with it—

The Presiding Officer: Order. Members must speak through the chair.

Alasdair Morgan: We had no plans to continue with the fuel escalator had we been in power at Westminster, which is the crucial difference.

Lewis Macdonald (Aberdeen Central) (Lab): In light of that comment, what alternative proposal do you have to meet our obligations to reduce emissions under Kyoto—

The Presiding Officer: Before we go any further, can we please leave you out of this debate, except in the context of Mr Finnie's definition. [*Laughter.*]

Alasdair Morgan: I dare say that we may come on to that definition later.

The scandal about the fuel escalator is that it is not helping us to meet our Kyoto commitments. The polluters in our main cities simply pay the extra duty and carry on polluting, while those who live in rural Scotland, who can least afford it and who contribute least to pollution, have to pay as well.

I give a simple, but typical, example from my constituency. My constituency forms half the local authority area that was shown in a recent survey

to have the lowest pay rates of all local authority areas in Great Britain. However, it is near the top—seventh out of the 73 Scottish constituencies—in the car-ownership tables. In other words, people are much less well-off but are more likely to run cars. They do not do that for fun or because they have a distorted sense of priorities; they do it because they have no alternative. Moreover, they have to pay the Chancellor of the Exchequer sweetly for the privilege.

The partnership agreement between the coalition parties, which is referred to in the Executive's amendment, states:

"We recognise, however, the widespread concern about travel costs".

It goes on:

"We recognise that for many people, particularly in rural areas, there is often no alternative to car use".

I could not agree more. However, we need not just recognition of the problem, but action to address it.

The situation would be bad enough if all things were equal, but they are not. The First Minister, when he was Secretary of State for Scotland, said as recently as 1 February:

"The oil price is likely to stay at about \$10 to \$12 a barrel at least in the foreseeable future."—[*Official Report, House of Commons, Scottish Grand Committee, 1 February 1999; c 8.*]

By August—only seven months later—the price had risen to \$18.90. Yesterday, the price of Brent crude stood at \$21.35. The foreseeable future is very short indeed. The whole point—apart from the fact that one would not ask the First Minister for advice on oil futures—is that those buying road fuel have to meet not only the steeply rising cost of the basic product, but the increasing tax levy.

Similarly—as if all forms of agriculture did not face enough problems—the impact of the continually high rate of sterling is simply twisting the knife in the industry's wounds. Where export markets have not been lost in the short term—such as has happened in the case of beef because of the BSE crisis—they struggle to survive because they are being priced out of the market. At the same time, domestic sales are being undercut by imports that are made all the cheaper by the exchange rate.

Tourism, the other main industry in our rural areas—into which, ironically, some farmers have wholly or partly diversified—is now suffering precisely the same problem. It takes a very keen foreign visitor to be unaffected by the relatively high cost of a holiday in Scotland and an increasing number of United Kingdom residents find it difficult to resist not just a first but a second holiday abroad in the sun, with cheap currency,

instead of in Scotland.

Currency levels also have an adverse effect on the third of our major rural industries, forestry, in which output is due to peak in the early part of the next century and will remain high. The industry faces problems because its production levels cannot readily be altered to a significant extent in the short term.

On both issues—road fuel taxes and currency levels—our domestic industry in rural areas is being put at a competitive disadvantage by the Government's actions. Scottish people want to hear the voice of the Scottish Parliament; in particular, they want to hear Scottish ministers arguing their case against damaging policies introduced by a Government of the same party. Scottish people want to know that a strong case is being made on their behalf. It would be interesting to know whether the Secretary of State for Scotland, in the liaison role that he claims to perform and for which he seems to be grossly overstaffed, is also making that case.

We had all hoped—perhaps even believed—that, following the most recent developments, the beef crisis was nearing a final solution. First indications from Brussels on Tuesday were that Nick Brown had lain down and invited everyone to walk all over him. Now Commissioner Byrne would have us believe that Tuesday's discussions were

“an intelligent, rational and reasonable approach towards the situation.”

What input did the minister have to the discussions and to the decisions that were made? Was he told of the need to clarify the technical detail before the event, as we are being told, or afterwards? Was he told at all? Did he perhaps, like the rest of us, simply hear of it on the radio or television? There is a serious point to be made here, which applies to the beef sector in particular but is also of more general importance—Scotland has a different tale to tell and a different message to sell to our continental partners.

George Lyon (Argyll and Bute) (LD): The SNP's Alex Salmond and Mrs Ewing advocated throughout 1996 and 1997 that we should follow the same principles that were applied to the special deal under which the Northern Irish export ban was lifted. Can Mr Morgan tell us how many tonnes of beef are being exported from Northern Ireland as a result of that scheme, and how many firms are engaged in that process?

Alasdair Morgan: I suspect that George knows the answer to that question—however, not many tonnes would need to be exported from Northern Ireland to exceed what is being exported from Scotland. The point is that a Scottish voice in Brussels can make the case more effectively than can the Westminster Government, and it can

certainly make it more effectively than the previous Government could.

George Lyon rose—

Alasdair Morgan: I will carry on—I have let George in once already. I am sure that he knows the facts. If he is called in this debate, he will have a chance to put his points to an audience that is waiting expectantly for them.

I ask our ministers to go to Brussels and to other European capitals to make the case—ministers may not have the clout that they would have if Scotland was an independent member of the European Union, but there is a case to be made and one suspects that there are people in those places who are ready to listen.

I do not have time to deal with every agricultural sector—although all deserve much of our time—but I will mention the pig industry. Most members will be familiar with some of the facts relating to loss of income and the closure of firms in that industry. Unlike the beef industry, the pig industry hardly benefits from any of the European Union's support regimes. It must sink or swim unaided. Until recently, it swam very well. It must now contend with welfare regulations that have been enforced unilaterally by the UK Government and that must be implemented at considerable cost to farmers. It must compete with imports from EU countries that are largely free from such costs.

That industry is also faced with charges for the disposal of offal that were imposed only because of the offal disposal ban relating to BSE and the beef herd. That problem is not of the pig industry's making, but it results in disposal charges that amount to some £5 per pig. The industry has for some time been lobbying for extra state aid to be allowed under European rules to compensate for that.

Pig farmers believe that the Government has not pursued this matter vigorously enough with the Commission. They point to the example of the Belgian farmers who were compensated when there was a dioxin problem in the Belgian herd. The industry believes that the Government has not pushed hard enough in Brussels—that opinion will be compounded by what happened in Brussels on Tuesday.

I will now move away from agriculture—we have so little time to cover such a vast subject. The development and health of the rural economy depends on the infrastructure and availability of services. Many of my colleagues want to develop this topic, but I want to talk specifically about rural post offices—although what I say applies also to many urban post offices.

Most of our rural post offices are barely viable. Recently, a sub-postmistress took—rightly in my

opinion—the Post Office to court in connection with the minimum wage legislation. If that proves to have wider repercussions, the lack of viability will become even more serious. Marginal viability is something that we have always lived with, but there is a problem looming on the horizon—the Government intends to pay benefits by automated bank giro transfer. That will remove many of the post offices' customers and much of their income.

Members must realise that, in many rural areas, the post office is not just a post office; it is the only shop. For a large part of the day, it is one of the few places where local people—particularly older people—can meet socially. Removing those post offices, whether by design or by default, will be another nail in the coffin of some rural communities. Some communities enter a cycle of decline—a cycle in which the main features of a sustainable community disappear.

Mr Mike Rumbles (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (LD): Liberal Democrat MPs tabled an early-day motion in Westminster in September 1998 to campaign for rural post offices to be given the equipment to process automated benefit payments through the use of swipe cards. That would have helped rural post offices. Will Mr Morgan comment on the fact that no SNP MPs bothered to sign that motion?

Alasdair Morgan: If one of those Liberal Democrat MPs had brought that motion to my attention, I would gladly have supported it. That is a cheap point.

We are all keen for rural post offices to survive and prosper. I do not think that the transfer to the automated payments system will be good for the post offices. If the Government is determined to go down that route, to save costs to the social security budget, it must give a commitment to subsidise rural post offices. So far, that commitment has not been given. All that the Government has said is that it will perhaps allow time for the post offices to seek alternative businesses. All members know that, in many rural areas, there is little alternative business to be had. That would be the final nail in the coffin for many of our rural communities.

Electronic commerce is one area in which the rural economy can compete on a level playing field with the urban economy. I ask the Executive to ensure that a strategy is in place whereby the development of e-commerce is regarded as a key building block in the growth of the rural economy.

I conclude by quoting the former Secretary of State for Scotland, from his foreword to the Scottish Office document that was issued a year ago, "Towards a Development Strategy for Rural Scotland". He said that the Government recognised its

"commitment to sustain vibrant local communities in rural and remote areas."

If a straw poll were taken at the moment, in our rural and remote areas, I do not think that the Government would receive a pass mark. Our vibrant rural communities are vital to the health and well-being of the whole Scottish nation; if we are still to have them, they must be one of our main priorities in the months and years to come.

I move,

That the Parliament recognises the drastic effects of the agricultural recession which has been exacerbated by successive governments' ineptitude over matters such as BSE, Beef on the Bone, the present difficulties in pig farming and the failure to secure European help for hill farmers; acknowledges that there is now a crisis in rural Scotland and that it is being made worse by the continuing effect of the fuel price escalator, the decline of rural public transport, the shortage of affordable rural housing and the failure to support successfully Scotland's tourist industry, and therefore calls upon the Scottish Executive to devise a real and effective rural strategy which could command the backing not only of the whole Parliament but also of the whole of Scotland.

09:52

The Minister for Rural Affairs (Ross Finnie): I am pleased to have this opportunity to respond to the motion that has been moved by Alasdair Morgan. With one or two minor exceptions—and I say that constructively—there are many areas on which we find common ground.

It is important that we question Government policies, as, in the past, our rural areas have not received sufficient attention. That is not to say that previous Governments entirely ignored rural areas; it is just that I do not think that they gave them enough attention. It is my view, and the view of the Executive, that that approach must change. As Alasdair Morgan says, Scotland has its own Parliament, and it is right that this body should reflect the balance of Scottish interests. Alasdair did not give a figure, but 89 per cent of Scotland's landmass is designated rural, and almost a third of our fellow Scots live in rural areas. The focus of political debate must change to reflect that.

That is why the Executive has gone out of its way, in its first few months, to emphasise the rural agenda. For the first time in the UK, there is a rural affairs department and a minister with responsibility for overseeing the whole rural agenda. Alasdair mentioned the partnership document. Yes, we committed ourselves to addressing the problems to which he referred, and we understand that that document must be translated into action. That is not a pledge that I take lightly. We are working, throughout the programme of government, to ensure that the rural dimension is included at every point.

We remain committed to supporting the

progress of the University of the Highlands and Islands and to investigating the creation of a south of Scotland university. We will publish a social inclusion strategy that will not be focused entirely on urban areas, as happened in the past, but will have a rural dimension. We are working closely with enterprise bodies to develop a food strategy that will not only embrace the central Scotland interest in processing, but will bring into play the primary producers who live and work in our remote rural areas.

Since May, we have spent a lot of time seeking different ways in which we can address some of those problems. The SNP motion talks about a crisis in rural areas, but that does not apply all round. We must be careful about using such language. We do not want to play down the problems that people in rural areas face, but nor do we want to diminish the contribution that those people make. We should be proud of the large part of our country outside our congested urban centres that is designated rural. Members who have rural constituencies will know that there are many energetic, imaginative and successful people living and working in rural Scotland. The job of the Executive is to recognise the problems, but also to harness the talents and natural resources that exist in rural areas.

There are things that we want to improve on, but we should not forget that, strangely enough, the population of rural areas has increased over the past eight years. Moreover, unemployment remains below the national average, although we must not underestimate the problems of growing underemployment. We should identify and build on those strengths. As Alasdair said, we have often fallen into the trap of comparing rural and urban areas and of seeing rural areas as different or as something apart. We must look at Scotland as a whole and recognise that many of our mainstream policies also affect rural areas.

I do not know whether people in other parts of the United Kingdom feel that rural areas are not important, but that is certainly not the view in Scotland. Our rural areas should be seen as an integral part of the country and I believe that we should make more of them. In world trading terms, they are a priceless asset on which we should build.

We should not deny the problems, and I want to mention some of the points that Alasdair raised about the primary sector. A month ago, I talked about the difficulties that farmers face and I explained what the Executive was doing to address the situation in the short term and in the medium-to-longer term. There are no easy solutions to some of the problems, but it is nonsense to suggest, as the SNP motion does, that the European Commission is not helping hill

farmers. Having seen all the evidence, I do not think that there is any basis for such a claim. We are all bitterly disappointed that the Commission failed to approve a cull ewe scheme, but we should consider the aid package that is available to hill farmers through the common agricultural policy. On top of that, I was able to announce £40 million in additional funding. The hill farmers will be the main beneficiaries of that.

Scottish farmers will also benefit from the new money that they will receive in the next few days to compensate them for the relative weakness of the euro. Sheep farmers were recently given £7.3 million in compensation and, over the next few days, £6.4 million will be paid to beef farmers and £19 million will be paid to the arable sector. That will not solve the industry's problems, but Europe is not abandoning the hill farmers.

Alasdair was right to point out that the pig sector is experiencing extreme problems at the moment. I am concerned that all the work that the Scottish pig industry initiative did on marketing, which for a brief period gave a differential to pigmeat in Scotland, appears to have been swept away so that we are now trading at a commodity price that is deeply damaging to the pig sector in Scotland.

With ministerial colleagues throughout the United Kingdom, I tried to find out whether we would be able to give direct compensation to the pig sector. We are running up against a brick wall in trying to get state aid, but I do not want any member to believe that we are not pressing hard for it. The pig sector is perhaps in a worse situation than are our other livestock sectors because the rules that govern it specify that there should be light regulation. That makes it even more difficult to overcome the already high hurdle of securing state aid.

We are still consulting on how to tackle misleading labelling and I hope that that will assist the sector. Last week, in answer to a parliamentary question, I announced that £5 million is being made available for additional marketing. Scotland will get its share of that and we are discussing with the industry how it will be used.

Alasdair Morgan: People feel that successive Administrations have been talking about the need for better labelling for a long time. Progress in the area seems to be excessively slow.

Ross Finnie: I share that concern. We are tackling the matter in two ways. There are problems with trying to tackle the matter through Europe, because the Commission does not exactly move swiftly. The purpose of the regulatory change that I announced last week is to address the problem that people can legally import produce into this country, process it and then

claim that it is Scottish. That is what it is competent for us to do in Scotland and throughout the United Kingdom. I take the point that we must go further than that on the labelling issue, but I hope that our initiative will go some way towards dealing with the matter.

In view of the collapsed pig market, we have again asked Europe to reinstate private storage aid. I hope that that discussion will be reopened, because the facts that caused that aid to be withdrawn are now completely different. I have also asked that all Executive ministries in Scotland ensure—as far as they can without interfering with competitive tendering—that pork and pigmeat of the high quality that is manufactured in Scotland is the preferred choice throughout all Government departments. I have made a similar request to our local authorities.

The continuing French ban on UK beef exports is a difficult, serious problem, which has been confused in the press. We must remember that it was all started by the French equivalent of the food standards agency saying that it believed that there was new evidence to suggest that the way in which we were treating BSE was unsatisfactory. That report was, unsurprisingly, endorsed by the French premier, Monsieur Jospin. We are now in a position where a Prime Minister has endorsed his own committee; we must work out how we get out of that.

We are greatly encouraged by the fact that the scientific steering committee delivered a resounding yes to the date-based export scheme. That committee's findings did not, however, ensure that a French Government, which had been hoist by its own petard, was going to give way instantly. I assure members that I was involved in discussions and that I was well aware of the possibility that we might have to discuss giving the French further assurance on technical matters if that meant that we would get out of this logjam.

David McLetchie (Lothians) (Con): Could the minister advise us whether the French food standards agency regards it as healthy and acceptable to produce meat using some of the disgusting feeding practices that go on in relation to French produce? If not, why not?

Ross Finnie: That question is more properly directed at the food standards agency in France. I do not know that I have either the authority or the competence to answer that.

David McLetchie: With respect—

Ross Finnie: What is important is that we deal with the substantial point about getting British beef back into Europe. The substantial point is—I repeat—that no compromises have been contemplated or made. We are seeking to break

the logjam and it is the Executive's view—in discussion with UK ministers—that if our giving the French assurances on technical matters enables them to lift the ban instantly, that is a much better and more progressive way of dealing with the problem.

If that does not work and the French remain obdurate, we are in for protracted legal discussions. That will not do Scottish beef one bit of good. We have taken the view that, if we can, we want to solve this problem as quickly as possible. We are wholly supported by Commissioner Byrne, who has indicated that he wishes to see France's further considerations concluded by Thursday. If that happens, we expect that that will lead to an early resolution of the matter.

Time is precious, so I will move on to other issues. The SNP suggests that the Executive has failed to support successfully Scotland's tourism industry. I recognise that industry's importance—it is worth around £2.5 billion annually and supports around 177,000 jobs. The Executive has demonstrated its commitment by promising to launch a new strategy for the industry by January 2000. That strategy was subject to a wide and highly successful consultation exercise during August and September, which was made more valuable by the fact that many of the submissions came from the sharp end of the industry.

Fergus Ewing (Inverness East, Nairn and Lochaber) (SNP): I am obliged to the minister for giving way. Does he agree with the remarks made by Tom Buncle, chief executive of the Scottish Tourist Board, at a major tourism conference a week or so ago? He said that the fuel duty escalator was damaging tourism because it increased the costs of transport and that it was especially damaging tourism in the Highlands and Islands.

Ross Finnie: I had a meeting with Mr Buncle last Wednesday at which that was one of a number of matters that he raised. I will come back to the point on the fuel escalator in a moment.

The Presiding Officer: It will have to be a moment.

Ross Finnie: The key issue is not just the fuel escalator but accessibility—to shops, to work, to medical services and so on, all of which can cause problems in rural areas. That is why we have added a distinctive rural dimension to our social inclusion partnerships.

We have taken action to help address the distinctive transport needs of rural areas: £14 million over the next three years for rural transport; 350 new or improved public transport services; and funding for 53 community transport schemes across rural Scotland. That remains a priority for

us.

The Executive fully recognises the deep concerns in rural Scotland about high fuel prices. I assure members that my ministerial colleagues are making the extent and nature of that problem very clear to our colleagues down south and that the Chancellor of the Exchequer is well aware of Scotland's problems and the difficulties in its economy, both broadly and specifically in relation to the tourism industry. I assure members that the interests of Scotland's rural communities are firmly on the agenda in Westminster and in Whitehall.

The SNP motion refers to the shortage of affordable rural housing. That is a matter that we, too, are taking seriously—we are ensuring that 18,000 new and improved homes will be built over the next three years.

Post offices are a reserved matter. However, after the white paper was published, I arranged a meeting with the Post Office Counters Ltd manager for Scotland. While I share concern about the problems that could arise as a result of benefits being paid by automated transfer, I was much encouraged by the commitment that the Post Office showed in that document and in that meeting to introduce technology in every post office, including rural post offices. That will give post offices the opportunity to act as a banking service, which may result in their retaining some of the custom that, as was rightly pointed out, could otherwise be lost. I intend to keep pressing that matter with Post Office Counters Ltd and I am glad that the point was made.

There is no real substance in the SNP motion. The Tory amendment is extraordinary, as all it seeks to do is to absolve the Conservatives of responsibility for the BSE crisis. [MEMBERS: "Hear, hear."] I hope that the Tories will confine their remarks to that point, as it seems to be the only point that they want to make.

I move amendment S1M-242.2, to leave out from "drastic" to end and insert:

"difficulties being faced by the agriculture industry; endorses the principle contained in the *Partnership for Scotland* agreement of working to support and enhance rural life and the rural economy; commends the steps already taken by the Scottish Executive to achieve these aims; and supports the Executive in its determination to promote long-term sustainable development, both in the agriculture industry and throughout rural Scotland."

10:08

Alex Johnstone (North-East Scotland) (Con):

I draw attention to my entry in the register of members' interests, which shows that I make my living as a farmer.

I congratulate the SNP on introducing this matter as opposition business. It was a disappointment to members of every party that the time allowed for the previous debate, on the Executive motion, was so short. It was noted throughout the farming community that so little time and interest in their plight was shown by some members.

It gives me great pleasure to address the accusation Ross Finnie has levelled at us. In fact, the amendment was lodged partially for the reason Ross Finnie suggested: we deny responsibility for much of what we are accused of in the SNP motion. Some of what appears in it is not only divisive in political terms, it is divisive in industry terms, in that it singles out certain areas of the rural economy and the farming industry for special attention, while ignoring others that may be in a similar, or perhaps worse, condition. For that reason, we were delighted to take the opportunity to amend the motion—but only partially, because we agree with much of it.

We hope that our amendment has distilled the SNP motion so that it can enjoy the support of every party in the chamber. We commend the amendment to the chamber.

Mr Rumbles: That is a short speech, then [Laughter.]

Alex Fergusson (South of Scotland) (Con): It is a good one and it will get better.

Alex Johnstone: I agree.

I must move on to the minister's amendment. If we were being accused of avoiding responsibility for what some might think ought to be our responsibility—

George Lyon: Will Alex Johnstone give way?

Alex Johnstone: I would be delighted.

George Lyon: To pursue your line of absolving yourself from any responsibility, do you agree with William Waldegrave, who stated on a television programme the other night that he was ashamed of the Major Government's handling of the BSE crisis? He said that the Major Government turned the BSE crisis into an anti-European crusade to satisfy Eurosceptic back benchers.

Do you agree with that sentiment?

The Presiding Officer: I do not have to agree with anything.

Alex Johnstone: I have been a member of the

Conservative party for approximately 17 years and I have rarely, if ever, agreed with William Waldegrave. [*Laughter.*]

The minister's amendment is an example of a member of this Parliament trying to absolve himself of some responsibility. We are absolving ourselves in equal measure. The minister's amendment will be viewed in Scotland, particularly rural Scotland, as complacent. It fails to recognise the extent of the crisis that is facing rural Scotland and its primary industries. The tone adopted by the SNP motion reflects, more than does the minister's amendment, the view that is held in rural Scotland: that our rural industries and economy are now at breaking point. We must seriously examine how we address those matters in future.

As an aside, I draw to members' attention an article by Dan Buglass in today's business section of *The Scotsman*. He says that the farming-related suicide rate in Scotland has almost doubled since last year. That shows the stress and emotional pressure that is being placed on those who work in rural Scotland. The figures show the serious trouble in which the rural economy finds itself. That is why I believe the Executive's amendment is dangerously complacent.

We must address the key points that affect the rural economy. Since Labour came to power two and a half years ago, incomes in rural Scotland have halved—and halved again. Labour and the Liberal Democrats have blamed the farming crisis on everything and everyone apart from themselves. After two and a half years of a Labour Government in Westminster, responsibility must begin to move to the incumbent Government. The Executive here must also carry some responsibility.

Mr Rumbles: Is Mr Johnstone absolving the previous Tory Government of any responsibility for the crisis in agriculture? Is he saying that the crisis began in May 1997?

Alex Johnstone: The situation that rural Scotland finds itself in today has developed over a considerable period of time. The Liberal Democrats have chosen to take the view that the crisis was caused entirely prior to 1997. That is the view that Mr Rumbles has often expressed in the chamber and it is one the Conservatives must put up a defence against.

Ross Finnie: Will Mr Johnstone give way?

Alex Johnstone: No, I will move on quickly with the points that I have to make, as time is limited.

The Scottish Executive and the Labour Government in Westminster have implemented unprecedented regulation and taxation on farming and the farming industry.

Ross Finnie: Will Mr Johnstone give way?

Alex Johnstone: No.

Ross Finnie: Will Mr Johnstone point—

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Patricia Ferguson): Mr Finnie, Mr Johnstone has not given way. Please carry on, Mr Johnstone.

Alex Johnstone: The Government has allowed the importation of food that does not match the standards expected of British farmers. It is failing to fight for the interests of our farmers on the international stage. The continuing fiasco of the French and German beef bans is an example of that. The Government is attacking the countryside with an unhelpful barrage of irresponsible policies that include land reform, which could be the one that we find ourselves dealing with most in the next few months.

We must consider the importance of various industries to the rural economy in Scotland. The farming industry employs 69,000 people directly and up to 200,000 jobs are partially dependent on it. Scottish farming has suffered much more from price reductions than its EU competitors. British ex-farm prices have fallen by almost 30 per cent over three years, compared with the EU average of 10 per cent.

Scottish farming is in its worst state since the 1930s. Average farm income last year was only £400.

Ross Finnie: Will Mr Johnstone give way?

Alex Johnstone: I will give him this opportunity.

Ross Finnie: Is the inference to be drawn from the economic facts that Mr Johnstone has given that he is about to disclose that he wants a devaluation of the pound? That seems to be the inference that is to be drawn from his remarks. Has there been a serious change in Conservative policy?

Alex Johnstone: I am delighted that Ross Finnie is thinking so far ahead. The inference that is to be drawn from my comments is that interest rates in the UK are too high. Compared with the European average, a greater burden is placed on the British farmer.

The strength of sterling has placed enormous pressure on farmers in the UK and Scotland. The increase in transport costs, which has been dealt with at great length by the SNP in proposing the motion, is an example of how a tax measure can deliberately hit hardest those who are most distant from the centre of their markets. That has caused enormous damage to Scottish rural industries, including farming, tourism and many others.

The loss of value of our livestock and their by-products has resulted in a collapse in the value of the farming industry's produce. Many of the above costs are a result of differential Government

legislation and regulation in the UK and Scotland.

George Lyon: Will the member give way?

Alex Johnstone: No, not at this point. The strength of sterling is the biggest problem we face, and the artificially high interest rates that I mentioned a moment ago are the primary cause of that. That is why we need to take every opportunity to ensure that the chancellor has our words ringing in his ears when in future he considers his advice to the monetary policy committee.

The Scottish Conservative approach is to give our farmers a chance by introducing comprehensive product labelling to safeguard and reward our farmers' high animal welfare and production standards. In the United Kingdom and in Scotland, there is a desire for quality of production in our farming industry. However, if we impose standards that are higher than those imposed in other parts of the single market, we must give our farmers the opportunity of a genuine premium over their foreign competition. To achieve that, we must be able to differentiate the products that are produced under UK or Scottish conditions from those that are produced to lower standards in other parts of Europe.

For that reason, the issue of labelling is of the highest priority. It is essential that we make whatever progress we can on getting to a stage where country-of-origin labelling for food products in the United Kingdom covers all products that are imported from other European countries. We need to know that when we buy Scottish we are buying something that is produced in Scotland, and that when we buy something labelled as being from another European country we are buying something that was produced to that country's standards.

We need action to root out unfair and illegal subsidies. We need to ensure that other countries that choose to support their industries in their own way are not allowed to continue to give them the unfair advantage that they have at the moment.

Christine Grahame (South of Scotland) (SNP): Does the member agree that Scottish farmers are the only farmers in Europe who pay for veterinary inspection certificates, which in other European countries are paid for by the state? Would he like the same to apply here?

Alex Johnstone: Very much so.

Alasdair Morgan dealt at length with the difficulties of our pig farmers. I would like to endorse everything he said, although I would also like to draw his attention—

George Lyon: Will the member give way?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Mr Johnstone,

you are in your last minute.

Alex Johnstone: I am afraid that I cannot give way; I am coming to a close.

I would also like to draw Alasdair Morgan's attention to the position in which our dairy farmers find themselves. There are many farmers throughout Scotland who have experienced a massive collapse in their income. Over the years, dairy farming has occasionally been subjected to the jibe that it is the one sector of our industry that never seems to hit financial problems. Last week, the Parliament received a representation from dairy farmers, who told us that farms that only three years ago were making a comfortable profit are today losing money.

Mr Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): Will the member give way?

Alex Johnstone: I am sorry, but no—I am about to finish.

Many smaller farmers, especially in the west of Scotland, will be driven to a point at which they can no longer continue. I want to emphasise the difficulties of the dairy industry not because I am a dairy farmer—I come from a different part of the country that may not experience the same problems—but because we need to consider the plight of small farmers in the west.

Every day, I hear about long-established farming families who can no longer make a profit doing the work they have done for generations. All over Scotland, men and women—some of whom are at or beyond retiring age—are in such a financial predicament that they have no option but to continue working long hours and seven-day weeks because the value of their stock and machinery, traditionally the farmer's pension fund, will no longer cover the cost of a dignified retreat from a lifetime's work. A farmer whose objective is to earn a decent living wage is only trying to achieve the same thing as any working man.

There are different strategies for coping with mounting losses in a farm business. Some farmers run down their capital investment programme, others borrow increasingly from the banks, others—myself included—have found alternative paid employment. Many do all three.

There can be no doubt that time is running out. The people of rural Scotland have high expectations of this Parliament. The Rural Affairs Committee has demonstrated that it is possible for politicians to work together in the interests of rural Scotland without party political problems coming between us.

The amendment, which I am delighted to move, captures the mood of the people in rural Scotland and I commend it to the Parliament.

I move amendment S1M-242.1, to leave out from first "which" to "farmers".

10:26

Mr Mike Rumbles (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (LD): While the Liberal Democrats welcome this second major debate on the crisis in Scottish agriculture, we believe that the motion is not helpful in addressing the problems that are affecting every sector of the industry—although Alasdair Morgan's comments were constructive.

We must not forget the complete ineptitude of the previous Tory Government. I must say that I am amazed at today's Tory amendment.

David McLetchie: I remind Liberal Democrat members that the Government set up an inquiry into BSE in December 1997. Such is the complexity of the issues that the report, which was supposed to be made public by December 1998, is now being deferred until the middle of 2000. It was meant to be reporting to the Secretary of State for Scotland and there will not be a—

Mr Rumbles: Come on. I have only a few minutes. Do not make a speech.

David McLetchie: Why are the Liberal Democrats rushing to judgment before the inquiry makes the facts known?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I ask Mr McLetchie and other members to keep their interventions brief. Mr Rumbles, I will take into consideration the amount of time that intervention took.

Mr Rumbles: The sooner we get the system of speaking times sorted out, the better. The Conservatives have 20 minutes to speak and we have only four.

David McLetchie: The Liberal Democrats joined the Government. They have made their choice.

Mr Rumbles: The Tory Government's mishandling of the BSE crisis helped to cause serious damage to the rural economy. It is wrong of the motion to imply that the Scottish Executive can be compared to the Conservative Government. The Executive partnership between Labour and the Liberal Democrats has established a department of rural affairs that is determined to address the problems in the rural environment in the round.

Ross Finnie is proving to be an excellent Minister for Rural Affairs and he has impressed many observers with his commitment and determination to address the problems. He called for a cull ewe scheme to relieve the crisis faced by Scottish hill farmers. The European Union blocked the move on competitiveness grounds, but that did not stop the Executive using half of the £40 million

emergency package for Scottish farmers to assist the areas that need a ewe cull. He has announced the appointment of a business expert to study new marketing opportunities in the sheep farming industry and has confirmed an increase in funding for the initiative. He has announced the postponement of the proposed £7-a-head cattle passport scheme that was due to be implemented this autumn. I hope that that charge never sees the light of day.

While going around farms in my constituency, I have heard that the excessive bureaucracy that farmers face is a major concern. The Liberal Democrat election manifesto committed us to introducing an appeals procedure to deal with disputes over penalties for alleged inaccuracies in official returns and claim forms. That commitment was incorporated into the partnership agreement and I was pleased last month when the Minister for Finance confirmed that money is to be set aside to fund the procedure. That is a success.

The achievements of the partnership's rural policies should be recognised. I was pleased that Jim Walker, the president of the National Farmers Union of Scotland, came to the Scottish Liberal Democrat conference last month and welcomed the constructive dialogue that his union has had with the Executive on all the issues that I have spoken about, among others.

The motion addresses many issues—I do not have time to address them all—but I hope that there will be some acknowledgement of the partnership's commitment to rural public transport. I had intended to list a few examples, but time is running short.

William Hague blames the EU for banning British beef. In fact, the EU countries are the only significant countries to have lifted the ban; most of the world still bans it. William Hague has called for a unilateral ban on French meat. Not only is that opposed by the NFU, it would be illegal, against the advice of scientists, start a tit-for-tat trade war and put at risk Britain's entire £10 billion European export market for food and drink. It would hit Scotland particularly badly and the north-east of Scotland worst of all.

The Tories do not understand that if they have nothing constructive to say, they should say nothing. For the sake of our rural communities, I urge members to reject the Tory amendment and the SNP motion, and to support the Executive's motion.

10:31

Michael Russell (South of Scotland) (SNP): The important thing about the motion is that it seeks to unite rural and urban Scotland. In fact, it seeks to do what this Parliament is tasked to do. I

do not often quote Liberal Democrats with approval, but I want to quote Tavish Scott, speaking in the debate on the consultative steering group report. He said:

"There is still concern in areas such as Shetland"—

the concern is shared throughout Scotland—

"that the Parliament will concentrate on the needs of the central belt, not on those of peripheral, rural and island areas. It is up to the Parliament to demonstrate that that is not the case and that there are ways in which peripheral, rural and island areas can be at the heart of what goes on in here."—[*Official Report*, 9 June 1999; Vol 1, c 387.]

We are all aware that the flow to urban Scotland is a phenomenon that took place in the late 18th century, throughout the 19th century and into the 20th century. Scotland had the fastest rate of industrialisation of any country in Europe in the 19th century. However, that flow has been reversed to some extent during the second half of the 20th century. Indeed, as Alasdair Morgan said, the population of rural Scotland is growing. Rural Scotland accounts for about 89 per cent of the Scottish land mass and about 29 per cent of the population. The population in Scotland's rural areas has been growing at a rate of up to 3 per cent, partly because it is easier to get to those areas; people can commute into towns and cities. In addition, many people desire—or find it necessary—to work and live in rural Scotland.

It is ironic that while the population is increasing, the problems of transport, housing, provision of utilities and education are deepening. I am glad that the Education, Culture and Sport Committee took the issue of rural schools on board yesterday and appointed Jamie Stone as a rapporteur. I hope that the Parliament can begin to make a difference on that issue and many of the other issues in rural Scotland.

There have been pioneers—including from the Labour movement—who have looked at the gulf between rural and urban Scotland and attempted to solve it. Two of my all-time heroes of the 20th century in Scotland are Tom Johnston and Bob Grieve. I worked for Bob Grieve at one stage. Both of them saw the necessity of uniting rural and urban Scotland and put substantial parts of their lives into achieving that aim. Bob Grieve memorably said that he would support an independent Scotland after the problems of Glasgow and the Highlands had been solved—a position similar to that taken by Edwin Muir in his Scottish journey in 1934.

We have to create unity in Scotland. The motion would achieve that. Tragically, that is not being done by the actions of this Government. Nor was it done by the actions of previous Governments. They are also guilty. The fuel price escalator is one example of policies that have deepened the

gulf and made it more difficult for people to earn a living in rural Scotland and to have sustainable communities there. The Parliament is failing Scotland unless we see it as one of our primary duties to increase the ability—

Alex Johnstone: Will Mr Russell give way?

Michael Russell: No, I have only four minutes and I want to finish this point.

It is vital that we bring together urban and rural Scotland to make a united whole. This motion seeks to do that; it is a tragedy that the actions of the Executive and the previous Tory Government failed to do that. Crucially, they have failed to make a united whole in the agricultural industries. The Tory amendment is quite bizarre. The Tories are the guilty people. One of them—

David McLetchie: Will the member give way?

Michael Russell: No, I am sorry—if Mr McLetchie is guilty, he will get the chance to make a plea in mitigation.

One of the Tories—I am very fond of him—was a minister in the Government that took those decisions.

Alex Johnstone: Will the gentleman give way?

Michael Russell: No. The Tories failed rural Scotland in the same way as this Administration is failing rural Scotland.

I am very fond of Mr Finnie, but there is something immensely perverse in putting such a charming accountant from Greenock in charge of the whole of rural Scotland and giving fisheries to a farmer from land-locked Berwickshire. Perhaps they are nervous that sitting behind them is a farmer from Bute whose ambition is to shepherd the Liberal Democrats and, in so doing, to make his way to the front bench.

Ian Jenkins (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD): Will the member give way?

Michael Russell: This Administration has to take rural Scotland seriously. It may speak a good game, but it is not playing a good game. The difference between urban and rural Scotland is deepening day by day. There must be action—not the smug satisfaction of the Executive amendment or the Tories' attempt to evade responsibility. Action is what the Parliament is for and what the motion is about. I ask members to support it.

10:36

Lewis Macdonald (Aberdeen Central) (Lab): All sides in this debate recognise the central place of agriculture in the rural economy and agree that, if farming is in trouble, that is bad news for the countryside. Most members have recognised that agricultural policy alone is not enough and that

policies in areas such as housing and transport must recognise the particular needs of rural Scotland.

I was pleased that Alasdair Morgan said in his introduction that the essential interests of the country and the town are fundamentally the same—I think that Mike Russell echoed that view. That view is not always held by those who engage in political debate in Scotland. There is sometimes an attempt to pretend that there is an unbridgeable gap between the interests of the town and the country.

The view that there are common interests across Scotland and that agriculture is a key policy, but not the only policy, for rural development is fundamental to the Scottish Executive's programme for government. The Executive's policy is based on the recognition that although farming relates to the market, the sector benefits from very large sums of public money and the direction in which that money is invested has to be for the widest possible economic and environmental benefit. In the long term those interests are served by the policy to which the Executive has signed up.

Alex Fergusson: Does Lewis Macdonald accept that the dairy and pig sectors do not receive any public funding?

Lewis Macdonald: I accept that and recognise the particular difficulties that are faced by those sectors. In the long term the solution to those problems is not simply to extend the scope of public subsidy willy-nilly. The emphasis must be shifted from production-based price support subsidies to a wider rural development focus. I believe that that is now happening.

It is inevitable that there will be changes in Scottish agriculture—the National Farmers Union and others recognise that. It is also true that, if farming is left entirely to the market, we will risk losing sectors such as the pig producer sector. We will also risk losing some small producers such as hill farmers, who in some ways are the most important custodians of the countryside. We must not rely simply on market mechanisms, but need active Government involvement in those areas.

I welcome what Ross Finnie said about the support the Executive provides for less favoured areas. I also applaud the commitment in the programme for government to increase spending on agricultural environmental measures and the commitment to introduce a long-term strategy to exploit Scotland's world-class research base in agricultural and biological sciences for the greater benefit of the rural economy.

Much good work is already done in those areas. For example, the Macaulay Land Use Research Institute in Aberdeen works closely with the

industry to put support for less favoured areas on a less intensive basis. I hope that our research strategy will continue to support such work, which is the way forward for many sectors of Scottish agriculture.

There are no easy or glib answers to the problems of Scottish agriculture. In the context of Agenda 2000, and working closely with the UK Government, the Executive's measures are the right steps to take. They will help us to meet present and future challenges to the agriculture sector in the context of rural development policy as a whole.

10:40

Mr Jamie McGrigor (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I support Alex Johnstone's amendment, but I am truly horrified by the Executive's amendment. How can we commend the steps that the Executive says that it has taken to help Scottish agriculture in rural Scotland? I suppose that it is referring to the so-called new money, the £40 million that it claims to have made available.

I want to show members part of that £40 million. I have in my hand what looks like a cheque book, but is in fact a British calf passport. Farmers use the passports to achieve traceability. The passport would cost our farmers £7, but as part of the new money package for agriculture, we are currently given it free. I am grateful for that until I look at the document that I have in my other hand, which is a Dutch cattle passport. The Dutch cattle passport costs the equivalent of £1.60. Either our system is far more expensive than that of the Dutch, or the value put on our cattle passports is exaggerated, to increase the size of the mythical compensation money.

Incidentally, the Dutch passport has a bar code and is extremely easy to use, whereas ours are bulky and old-fashioned in comparison. If members visit any beef suckler calf sale in the Highlands, they will see the extraordinary sight of farmers carrying huge shopping bags—even suitcases—containing the passports.

We have never had an agricultural crisis like this one. Since Labour came to power, the crisis has developed with incredible speed. Although farm prices have fallen all over the world, in Britain, we have had by far the worst experience. Sheep farmers have had to watch their ewes being sold for a few pence; their lambs have been sold for less than half what they were worth under the previous Administration. I would love to find a farmer who would not be happy to turn his clock back to 1996. Had farmers known what was going to happen to agriculture under the Labour-Liberal Democrat pact, most would have sold their farms and stock. However, there was no warning of the

speed of the collapse.

The Government has heaped masses of extremely costly red-tape rules and bureaucratic paper on to the bonfire that is consuming Scottish agriculture at an alarming rate. As I look at the Government benches, I wonder which guy will be on top of that bonfire tomorrow night. There will not be many fireworks in rural Scotland. To most of us who live there, it seems as if there is a plot to destroy rural life that is far more effective than anything conceived by Guy Fawkes.

Ross Finnie: Does Mr McGrigor accept that all the costs associated with cattle passports, the regulations and the shamble of paperwork arose from the Conservative Government's handling of the BSE crisis? If anyone is going to find himself at the top of that fire, it is the member.

Mr McGrigor: If Mr Finnie is referring to me, I have no intention of being on top of any fire.

We are looking to the future; surely we shall not spend today discussing the BSE crisis all over again. We want to do something positive for rural Scotland. All I suggested was that we might have a slightly cheaper method of traceability, as farmers in other countries seem to have.

Alex Johnstone: Does Mr McGrigor think that it would be appropriate for the minister to increase the price of cattle passports to £20 or £30, so that he could tell us that he was giving us a much higher level of support?

Mr McGrigor: That is an interesting point. It had not occurred to me, but it is quite true.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You will have to come to a close, Mr McGrigor.

Mr McGrigor: I would like to refer briefly to the agricultural business improvement scheme—something else that is being done to help hill-farming businesses. In February, Lord Sewel said in a statement that, whatever happened, there would be enough money to fulfil all the ABIS plans. He encouraged hill farmers to take up the scheme. One condition is that planning must be done and paid for before the application is accepted, the money being refunded later by the Government. I will tell members what has happened: the applications amount to some £13 million, but there is only £1.2 million in the kitty to pay farmers.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Will you wind up now, Mr McGrigor?

Mr McGrigor: That is not new money. That is old money which has disappeared. I sincerely hope that the Executive will honour Lord Sewel's pledge and its own commitment to the ABIS.

I would also like to ask the Executive about its plans for next year's hill livestock compensatory

allowances, now that the European Commission has agreed on a one-year transition period to an area-based scheme. The industry must know in advance, so that it can budget and plan.

Mr Stone: On a point of order.

Mr McGrigor: It appears that, although the price of lambs is even lower than last year—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Mr McGrigor, we have a point of order.

Mr Stone: On a point of order. With respect, much as I am enjoying what Mr McGrigor is saying, he is into his sixth minute.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Mr McGrigor, you have been asked twice already. Please come to a close on the sentence that you are on.

Mr McGrigor: Certainly. It appears that although the price of lambs is even lower than last year, the sheep annual premium, which is meant to be a safety valve for farmers, will be lower than last year. Can the Executive please explain that?

10:46

Fergus Ewing (Inverness East, Nairn and Lochaber) (SNP): The Highlands and Islands of Scotland cover a land mass that is larger than either Belgium or Denmark. Despite making Herculean efforts, some of us in that area are unable to forget Margaret Thatcher. She decided on one occasion to canvass in the Highlands and Islands during a political campaign. After the experience, she said that she had visited the whole of the Highlands, and had had a marvellous day. If I may be so bold, she did not have an acutely developed sense of irony. But the point is made that the problems of the Highlands and Islands were not appreciated during those wilderness years; nor are they appreciated in the years of her successor—and, indeed, her new hero—Mr Blair.

The gravest problem facing the Highlands and Islands today is, in my view, the fuel duty escalator. I was pleased to hear that that has been recognised by Ross Finnie. After having made numerous points about the damaging effect of the fuel duty escalator, which is having such a grievous effect on Scotland's economy and jobs, Ross Finnie said that he recognised the deep sense of feeling that exists. I agree with that. I was also pleased to note that Sarah Boyack stated recently that she recognises that public transport is not available in many parts of rural Scotland and that the car is the only way to travel. The car is, of course, a necessity, not a luxury, especially in the Highlands and Islands.

The effect of the fuel duty escalator covers virtually every walk of life, for individuals and

businesses alike. Earlier I mentioned Tom Buncle, who is the chief executive of the Scottish Tourist Board. He spoke out against the escalator. In Inverness, when the Enterprise and Lifelong Learning Committee visited, Iain Robertson of Highlands and Islands Enterprise said that the fuel duty escalator was prejudicing the economy of the Highlands and Islands.

I hope that John Home Robertson, from whom we might hear later, will say whether he accepts Iain Robertson's suggestion that the fuel duty tax that is raised in extreme rural areas in the Highlands and Islands could be paid back and invested in public transport provision. That was a specific proposal, which I am offering the Executive. I see George Lyon nodding, which is unusual for him, so presumably the Liberal Democrats agree, but does the Labour party agree that that idea should be taken forward? I hope that the minister will address that.

My constituent Donald Watt's business was sacrificed by Mr Blair's fuel duty policy, and we lost his jobs in Aviemore. I have spoken to many hauliers throughout the Highlands and Islands who have told me that, if the escalator is applied next spring, their businesses will fold.

I have spoken to many people, including a couple from the Cabrach who are both on low incomes and require two cars to travel to and from work. Those people told me that Mrs Thatcher imposed a poll tax on Scotland and that the poll tax was the same for millionaires and crofters; however, in the Highlands and Islands, we have to pay higher petrol prices than Tony Blair's chums, the Confederation of British Industry bosses. Furthermore, we have to pay higher petrol tax, which means that the fuel duty escalator is simply Labour's Highland poll tax.

Scotland does not want just quango bosses such as Tom Buncle and Iain Robertson, who are constrained from speaking out in public as they are not allowed to hold party political views, to object to the fuel duty escalator; the country wants the Labour party to vote against the policy. We are all fed up with the spectacle of Labour MSPs looking down at their desks when the SNP tells the truth about Scotland. The fuel duty escalator is a ligature that is strangling Scotland's economy, and the Highlands will be the first part of the country to die of asphyxiation.

10:51

Maureen Macmillan (Highlands and Islands) (Lab): Although the SNP motion calls for strategic plans for rural areas, no SNP member has offered a long-term vision for the rural economy. A strategy needs analysis and it must be realised that developments take time; they are built step by

step over a period of years.

The farming crisis cannot be minimised; it is profound. However, the beef-on-the-bone ban will be lifted relatively soon. Last Saturday, I spoke to a number of crofters who were wondering whether they could access funding and support for horticulture, organic farming and marketing and environmental initiatives. The Executive is addressing all those issues.

As for the tourism industry, I have both the text of Tom Buncle's speech and the SNP's press release about it, and I find that the two documents do not match. Members should quote accurately from speeches. Tom Buncle did not mention the phrase "seriously damaging", as Fergus Ewing alleges. The SNP should not over-egg the pudding as it tends to do.

Fergus Ewing: I have a copy of the speech here.

Maureen Macmillan: I am talking about the SNP's press release after the tourism conference.

Highlands fuel prices are a serious matter. Every Highlands MSP is campaigning to get something done about the differential. Furthermore, David Stewart, the MP for Inverness East, Nairn and Lochaber, has been in the forefront of that campaign. Fergus Ewing has come very late to the debate. When I asked him on the hustings in Inverness about SNP policy on the differential in fuel prices, he replied that he would monitor the situation. That is wonderful. However, we can all monitor things. The Executive is getting something done by, for example, asking the Office of Fair Trading to examine the matter.

Alasdair Morgan rose—

Maureen Macmillan: I am not taking any interventions.

The subject must be thoroughly examined, and we think we know what has caused the differential in fuel prices.

As for information and communications technology, it is a pity that Alasdair Morgan was not among the MSPs who attended the University of the Highlands and Islands presentation on Tuesday night. Through ICT and a partnership involving learning centres in all remote Highlands areas and various colleges, the university system is providing higher education in subjects such as tourism, business and environmental studies, which will benefit the Highlands and bring knowledge and confidence to remote rural areas. Those areas have never had people with such expertise and skills before.

Mary Scanlon (Highlands and Islands) (Con): Will the member give way?

Maureen Macmillan: No, thank you. I do not

have time, as I have only a few seconds left.

When one thinks of how much Sabhal Mòr Ostaig has done for the south of Skye, think how much a similar college could do for Islay. The way forward is education and training. The networks are there and the European structural funds and the special funds won by Tony Blair—who, yes, is a great hero of mine—are putting in place systems of education and training and infrastructure that will bring the Highlands into the 21st century.

10:55

Robin Harper (Lothians) (Green): There are threats and opportunities. I want to draw the Executive's attention to some developments in the crusade for organic farming in Britain, based, in part, on Austria's experience, where 30 per cent of farming has been converted to organic farming.

In Wales, a report has been produced and placed before the Welsh Assembly. At Westminster, there has been an early-day motion on setting organic targets in England and Wales. In Scotland, the Scottish Organic Producers Association and the Soil Association will meet during the coming months to discuss a proposition for a report similar to the Welsh one, to place before the Executive. I want to urge the Executive and the Parliament in advance to give that report their most serious consideration. We hope that it will contain a way for at least 30 per cent of Scotland's farmers to move forward into a growing market and economic prosperity and a way to improve Scotland's environment. Those are the opportunities, but there are also threats.

I draw the attention of the Executive and the Parliament to the fact that my motion on genetically modified crops has slipped off the end of the shelf yet again. I will resubmit it for the third and, I hope, the lucky time. The motion will be reworded to include field trials in the hope of attracting SNP signatures, as I read in yesterday's edition of *The Scotsman* that the SNP is committed to opposing any extension of field trials in Scotland. I hope that all SNP members will support the motion, at least in that respect.

Thank you, Presiding Officer, for allowing me to contribute; you will note that my speech took less than two minutes.

10:58

Mr Duncan Hamilton (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): I intend to speak for a lot longer than two minutes.

The Government has told us a great deal about its interest in rural Scotland. That interest does not appear to be backed up by the attendance of Labour members today, which, frankly, is

disgraceful. Mr Finnie is leading from the front, but there are not many of dad's army behind him today.

I would be interested to know how the long-term sustainability of the rural economy, which is mentioned in the Government's amendment, and Mr Finnie's comments about his desire to reward creativity sit with the issue of the agricultural business improvement scheme, which Mr McGrigor raised. Lord Sewel said in February that the costs of the ABIS would be met in full. Farmers, many of whom were down to their lowest reserves, decided to invest in that promise and to trust in what the Government said, even though they had been let down before. Many farmers have gone to great expense, putting in up to £2,000 or £3,000 of their hard-earned resources. Now, despite the Government's promise, we discover that the costs of the scheme are not to be met in full. It is a shambles. It is a crying shame that, on the one occasion that the farmers needed the Government to stand up for them, the Government has let them down again.

There has been a lack of action on the crisis in sheep farming. I understand the problems that the Government has in dealing with Europe, which seem to be endemic to the new Labour project. However, we must expect a more strategic vision than we have had thus far. I do not necessarily dispute that it is useful to have industrial input or think that assistance from an expert is a bad thing, but it raises a question in my mind. Why is Mr Finnie drawing £70,000 for a company car if he does not have the strategic vision to contribute to the debate? I have never heard the minister intervene to give such strategic vision.

Euan Robson (Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (LD): Will the member give way?

Mr Hamilton: No, thank you.

The other thing that the farmers want is a reduction in many of the additional costs that they currently face, costs that are not faced by their European counterparts for exactly the same product.

I suggest to the minister that if he really wants to stand up for Scottish farming, it is about levelling that playing field. He talks the talk but is not prepared to deliver when it comes down to it. I want to see issues addressed, such as the costs of veterinary inspections and of having spinal cord removed. They are vital to the farming industry, and I want to hear in the Executive's summation what specific proposals there are for reducing the red tape and for lifting the additional burden that it is imposing.

Because this is an SNP debate, it would be unfair if we did not give a few thoughts on our vision for the Highlands and Islands. There is

something to be positive about. Mr Morgan was right: e-commerce and the challenges of the internet can and should be adopted by the Highlands and Islands with the greatest speed. That is perhaps the one mechanism for overcoming the physical barriers to transport that the Highlands and Islands face.

None the less, although I welcome projects such as the electronic Islay project, on which British Telecommunications is working in partnership with the local community, that does not absolve the Government from all its responsibility. There are still major problems to be faced in the area.

For example, what will be the enterprise structure's reaction to the need for an increase in the scale of companies? If a company decides to enter the world of e-commerce, and needs rapidly to increase the scale and scope of its operation, what support will be given by the enterprise boards? Thus far, in my direct discussions with the enterprise companies, I have not been particularly enthused about the vision—or lack of vision—that they are showing. That support must be given, and should dovetail with the efforts of people in the communities.

The support does not remove some of the remaining additional costs, for example, high ferry prices, which cripple the Highlands and Islands economy, even though, in 1992, the Scottish Office produced its own research showing that a reduction in ferry fares would not only have a massively beneficial economic spin-off for both ends of the various routes, but would mean that more money was made on the specific ferry route.

That research has been done. The Executive does not need to do any more of the thinking, but would it please start to implement the reduction in ferry fares that all our island and rural communities want? While the ministers are at it, perhaps they could finally publish the Government's findings on the Campbelltown to Ballycastle route and on the Clyde ferries, an issue that is now becoming a running sore. They should end that saga and ensure that we can finally achieve the regeneration of the Highlands and Islands that is so badly needed.

11:02

Dr Sylvia Jackson (Stirling) (Lab): I do not think that there is any doubt that there are real issues concerning rural communities. The problems are worsened by remoteness, often from essential services. The Government recognises those problems, and is taking active measures to tackle them.

Many of the issues raised in the SNP motion are central to the needs of all Scotland. I took on board Ross Finnie's point that it is perhaps time

that we looked across urban and rural aspects and tried to look at need in a more integrated way.

Some of the issues raised in the SNP motion are dependable public transport, affordable housing and the regeneration of communities, right across rural and urban areas. The Executive is working to find realistic solutions to those problems in both rural and urban settings. Only last week, the public transport fund delivered a £26 million boost, with a substantial part of that going to rural areas. It includes the park-and-ride scheme in Aberdeenshire and the new, larger ferry for the Corran ferry service in the Highlands: both try to improve access in rural areas.

I take issue with the suggestion in the motion that the coalition is not working towards an effective rural strategy. The Scottish Executive is setting up plan teams to develop the new rural development programmes for 2000 to 2006. They involve the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, the National Farmers Union of Scotland, the Scottish Crofters Union, the Scottish Landowners Federation and others. It is an inclusive and co-ordinated approach to rural development.

Representing the Stirling constituency, I have a particular interest in rural development. I can tell Mr Hamilton that I am totally committed, as a Labour MSP, to my rural areas, and I attend every debate on rural issues that I can.

Along with West Dunbartonshire and Argyll and Bute, Stirling Council is involved in the interim committee charged with developing the park plan for the first national park in Loch Lomond and the Trossachs, a matter that I wish to deal with during the last few minutes of my speech.

The process of generating the park plan holds potential for developing a policy for effective rural development that will bring great benefit to our area. The development will provide us with the opportunity for integrating economic development with proper protection of natural heritage and it will have sustainability at its heart.

The Loch Lomond and Trossachs interim committee has been established along with four reporting groups, most of which have begun to meet, which are examining the following areas: recreation, access and visitor services; natural and cultural heritage; agriculture, forestry and field sports; and social and economic development. The groups are forums for debate and bring together individuals and organisations with common interests. It will be interesting to see how the groups might mesh across boundaries and how they might bring to the debate some of the issues on rural housing and so on.

Mr Brian Monteith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): Will the member give way?

Dr Jackson: No. I am sorry, but I have only a short time.

The association of community councils is represented as a fifth reporting group and is taking an active part in the discussions. The process should be welcomed, as it is trying to involve local communities in local decisions and is attempting to be transparent and inclusive. The resulting park plan must take account of the existing structure and local plans for Stirling and the other council areas. While that will not be easy, that is one of the aims of the process. The ambition and scale of the project is to be welcomed as it recognises local resources as a valuable investment for that rural community. Empowerment is a key issue.

My particular interest in telecommunications masts has been rewarded, as the interim committee has taken on board article 4 directives to stop permitted developments within the national park area.

However, not everything is running smoothly. An east of Scotland European consortium report says that there are several areas that we need to investigate and that

“further strategic co-ordination of development efforts is required to maintain and establish diversified rural economies”.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Wind up, please.

Dr Jackson: I am winding up.

The report also refers to the fact that flexibility is needed in rural development. As Ross Finnie said, there is a recognition of the need for a greater emphasis on the rural agenda, which is also recognised in the partnership document.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Please come to a close.

Dr Jackson: The Scottish Executive is making a concerted effort to tackle the problem. I urge members to support the Executive's amendment.

11:08

Mr Murray Tosh (South of Scotland) (Con): Out of no disrespect to the primacy of strictly agricultural issues in this debate, nevertheless I wish to address some of the other aspects of the motion that have not yet featured heavily.

Rural housing is one such issue. I was once the convener of the Kyle and Carrick District Council's housing committee, which had an important strategy of developing affordable housing in the area. I want to share my experience of a particular difficulty that I encountered in attempting to

facilitate a development in the village of Dunure through a housing association, of which I am now a member, and Scottish Homes.

Dunure was a rather difficult village in which to develop housing, but there was a high demand for affordable housing. It is in a scenic location where the National Trust would allow development only in restricted areas because of a conservation order. We found a site that had planning approval and a willing landlord. We did not experience difficulties in persuading landlords to provide sites for affordable housing. Our problem was with Scottish Homes. When it came to developing that particular site, we found that, given its location, the infrastructure costs were well in excess of the guidelines that Scottish Homes operates, even in rural areas.

The result was that that development, which otherwise stacked up, did not take place and the piece of ground lies undeveloped. One day, it will be economical and attractive for a private sector developer to develop on it and the only conceivable site for affordable housing in the village will be lost. How many instances are there in rural Scotland where that degree of financial inflexibility inhibits development and rules out the possibility, in planning terms, of acceptable expansions to rural settlements where affordable housing could be created to meet local need?

Devolution has provided the opportunity to focus on such difficulties and ministers have time to focus on the details. Given that, I like to think that the Executive might be willing to examine the role of Scottish Homes to determine how it allocates its funding and whether there are flexibilities in the Scottish Homes regime that might facilitate a more varied and constructive approach to providing rural housing.

My second point about Scottish Homes is that it is the key player. In almost all parts of Scotland, affordable housing cannot proceed unless a funding mechanism exists and, almost invariably, that funding mechanism means Scottish Homes. When the Government progresses its national housing partnership proposals, I hope that the funding priority for rural housing development that has existed for the past two or three years—indeed, it goes back further than that—is not lost. I do not minimise the importance of new strategies in built and urban areas and of tackling the problems of the major conurbations, but in adopting and embracing those new priorities, it is essential that we should not lose sight of the old priorities. Rural housing must remain an important part of the Executive's policy.

Not much has been said on rural transport, but I will mention it briefly. A report by the director of technical services in Scottish Borders Council crossed my desk recently. He had conducted an

extensive survey of the road network, in particular of minor roads, in his local authority area. In the chamber, we tend to debate only strategic and trunk roads, and members do not always remember that, until a couple of years ago, far more than 50 per cent of roads expenditure in Scotland was in the revenue accounts of local authorities. It was not capital or Government expenditure, but local authority expenditure.

In the past four years, local authority expenditure on road networks has dropped from £480 million in real terms to £340 million in real terms, which represents a 30 per cent decline. Many Scottish councils face a catastrophe whereby roads expenditure—not on new roads or developing the infrastructure, but simply on maintaining the asset safely and assisting local communities—is collapsing. In some cases, councils are close to a state of panic. The Executive, in its reviews of local authority expenditure and transport policy, must not lose sight of the importance to rural communities of maintaining that asset base.

I have overrun, Presiding Officer, for which I apologise; I will conclude on that note.

11:13

Irene McGugan (North-East Scotland) (SNP): According to the definition of deprivation in the 1991 census, there are some 46,000 multiply deprived and 2,500 severely deprived households in rural Scotland. Those households comprise elderly, sick and unemployed people, and single-parent, large and low-income families. Rural Scotland is suffering.

Access to services is often regarded as an indicator of disadvantage and there is a strong correlation between the size of a settlement and the provision of a variety of services. Members will not be surprised that agricultural communities generally have the fewest services. Although that has been long recognised, no effective strategy has been developed to deal with the problem. Instead, there has been an expectation that the creation of small, time-limited pots of money such as the rural challenge fund will enable local authorities and their partners to take on the burden of resolving those issues.

I well remember, in the formative years of my rural development work, a family outing to a theatre in Edinburgh which shall remain nameless. We travelled 70 miles from home to see a production and incurred all the attendant costs of travel, food and so on. We enjoyed the performance, but it was not the box office success that had been hoped and the theatre decided to make free tickets available to companies to allocate to their employees. I wrote to the manager

and congratulated him on making theatre more accessible, but was advised that the offer applied to firms in Edinburgh only. I tried to tell him that people who had to travel a considerable distance and bear other costs would appreciate the free tickets more, but he refused to make any available outside the city limits. That was a defining moment in my career; thereafter, I embraced rural development enthusiastically.

There has been a lot in the press this week about the threat to rural post offices. It is estimated that as many as 600 of the 1,800 sub-post offices in Scotland could be forced out of business by the Treasury's proposals, which are for a Government cost-cutting exercise that takes no account of the fact that post offices—often with village shops attached—act as the hubs of communities, and are worthy of preservation regardless of the financial costs. The alternatives will force people to travel considerable distances to access services and will put many sub-postmasters out of work.

No account is taken of the fact that more than 250,000 Scottish households have no bank account. The closure of post offices—along with bank branch closures and the disappearance from high streets of utility shops—makes life very difficult for many people from rural communities, whose preferred or only option is to pay bills by cash. Too many rural people are financially excluded and there is a need for free, independent, impartial and confidential money advice to be made available to the vast numbers of people who have multiple debts. Such services are lacking in rural areas and must be organised differently to guarantee confidentiality and access. That is another area in which e-technology can succeed, but it must be much better resourced.

No one admits with comfort that they are poor, and there is, after all, a perception that life in the country is ideal. Tell that to the families of the crofters, farmers and fishermen of Scotland. If central belt communities were to face devastation on this scale, it would be headline news every day and ministers would be falling over themselves to take action.

Housing is often seen as the most important issue related to sustainable development for rural Scotland, which relies heavily on the private rented sector. There is evidence that some landowners favour local need and that they support the local community through their policies of housing allocation. That must be encouraged. Rural Scotland needs more affordable housing for young people, as well as for the elderly. A lack of affordable accommodation leads to depopulation. Addressing that problem adequately is one of the most important factors in the regeneration of rural economies. Homelessness is hidden in rural areas, but it is a problem. The level of rural

homelessness is rising and that has not been addressed by such Government initiatives as the rough sleepers initiative, which is really only appropriate in urban areas.

The SNP calls on the Scottish Executive to devise effective rural strategies that address the issues that have been highlighted today. How the Scottish Executive looks after our most remote and most vulnerable communities will dictate how the people of rural Scotland judge the worth of the Scottish Parliament.

11:18

Euan Robson (Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (LD): The cereals sector has not been given much coverage in this chamber, so I would like to spend a moment or two talking about arable aid, which is the support mechanism for the cereals sector and which is based on agricultural census data. It is widely recognised that, historically, the census data that define the arable base area are defective in that the base area is understated. That leads to what are called production overshoots, which have, in turn, led to a scaling down of arable aid payments to Scottish farmers—by about 6 per cent this year, I believe. That 6 per cent would be welcome income for farmers.

I have constituents in Berwickshire who have fields over the border in Northumberland. Perhaps my constituent John Home Robertson is in that category. Those farmers receive 6 per cent less for the yields from their Scottish fields than they do for their English fields. I believe that there is a consultation coming soon on that, but I ask ministers to bear in mind that the issue is of considerable importance to some people in Scotland.

Berwickshire is five times more dependent on agriculture than the average Scottish county. Another interesting figure that I heard recently is that, a few years ago, 300 to 400 acres of cereals could sustain a family farm in Berwickshire and at that level the farmer could afford additional labour. The figure has now risen to about 700 acres before an employee can be taken on.

I want to spend a few minutes addressing the pig sector. Those of us who attended the presentation that was given by that industry could hardly fail to be impressed by the case that it made. As has been noted, that industry receives no direct support. I welcome the minister's efforts on currency compensation and I wish him well in his efforts.

Misleading labelling is a problem. I hope that I have heard today that, when a label says that a product is produced in Scotland or the UK, it does not refer to an imported carcass that is cut and packed in Scotland or the UK and then labelled in

that manner. We must get rid of that problem, and I am sure that the minister will make efforts to do so. That is important, not only for the consumer but for the producer. That point was firmly made to us by the industry. I was pleased to hear that, henceforth, Government departments will purchase quality Scottish and British pork.

We must try to cut costs for the industry. The minister will recall our recent visit to Allflex, in Hawick. I commend to him the electronic tagging scheme that has been developed in the Scottish Borders. He is studying a deep and bulky consultation document on that, but electronic tagging is a clear way of cutting costs for the farming community. It is also important that we revisit the issue of veterinary inspections. In many EU countries the cost of inspections is met by Governments, out of public health budgets. It is high time for us to revisit that issue. What is good for other European countries must surely be good for Scotland. We must cut the burdens on farmers.

My final point is that we must try to add value to products locally. In the Borders, for instance, much of the produce leaves the region without any value being added to it. If we could introduce a sawmill, in the forestry industry, or an abattoir with some additional form of finishing and processing, in the cattle sector, that would help considerably.

11:22

Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab): I welcome this opportunity to discuss issues of agriculture and rural affairs. Such issues are of great concern to my constituents, many of whom depend on farming, fishing and tourism to maintain their standard of living. However, although this motion presents the opportunity to raise those matters, it badly lets down the people whom we are trying to represent. The people of Scotland, and of the Highlands and Islands, have a right to expect answers from the Government, but part of political debate is the right to expect the Opposition to come up with alternatives. This motion is not a solution; it is an attack on what the Executive is trying to achieve for rural areas.

The motion mentions "affordable rural housing". In February, the Government announced that an additional £4 million was to be provided for rural areas. In that announcement, the Highlands and Islands were to receive an additional 11 per cent, as part of an additional rural funding. That money was used for excellent schemes such as the rural housing grant scheme, whereby people who are in need can apply for a grant of up to a third of the cost of building or buying a house. That is a real policy to assist rural areas.

Let me pre-empt the SNP, which will no doubt consider the additional funding insufficient. No

doubt it will issue a press release calling for more funding for rural housing. Someone will then call for more funding for the tourism industry, closely followed by someone else calling for money for—well, members can take their pick. Whatever the issue, whatever the area, the SNP will ask for more money, but it will never say where that money is to come from.

Fergus Ewing: Will Rhoda Grant give way? Will she engage in debate?

Rhoda Grant: No, I will not give way.

The Executive, by contrast, is offering practical solutions to some of the existing problems. In September, Sarah Boyack announced that nearly £500,000 was to be allocated to the rural community transport grant scheme, to support the provision of quality public transport in rural areas, in addition to the annual £3.5 million that subsidises bus routes, ferries and rail services. Significant help has also been available for rural petrol stations.

Another measure that was announced by the Government was the extension of financial assistance for the construction of croft houses for crofters who are tenants, who are single and living with their parents, or who need to live on the crofts for business reasons. That is an important aspect of the crofters building grants and loans scheme and will bring vital support to crofters in my constituency.

Last Thursday, it was announced that help would be given to the Highlands and Islands from the special programme. That should not be ignored when considering what is being done to help those who live in rural areas. A sum of €300 million has been committed to help the Highlands and Islands from 2000 to 2006.

The measures that I have outlined do not sound like the policies of an Executive that is failing to address the problems of rural areas. I cannot deny that there is more to be done and I am sure that the Executive would be the first to admit that. However, the tone of the SNP's motion completely ignores the positive measures that have been introduced. It is simply party political and does not encourage members to engage properly in the debate. The people whom I represent want politicians to address the issues properly, so I appeal to members to avoid repeating the yah-boo politics of Westminster and to work together to address the problems that concern the vast majority of people in rural Scotland.

Fergus Ewing *rose*—

Rhoda Grant: Members of the Executive are addressing the problems and we should congratulate rather than criticise them. If we are to criticise, we must propose good alternatives.

11:26

Colin Campbell (West of Scotland) (SNP): I am a West of Scotland MSP and people may be wondering why I am at this debate, but I am a human being and I eat, and farming is fundamental to that activity. Members may be interested to know that my practical experience of farming amounts to two days' work some time around 1952. My school pal and I were standing in a field scything thistles with a German prisoner of war who had not yet decided to go home. After that, I decided that farming was not for me.

I have lived for 29 years on the edges of mid-Renfrewshire with fields behind and in front of me, and have seen the changing seasons and the changing patterns of farming. I have not seen a plough laid to any of those fields for at least 10 years. The local farmer's herd went four or five years ago and the fields are now used only for silage or for occasional grazing. The farms about me have been rented out for middle-class horse raising and grazing. A farmer not far from where I live recently sold a third of his fields to pay his debts. The following week, he sold his herd. He will now concentrate on laying turf for gardens. That is not the way ahead. We have a crisis on our hands, and I rather resent the whingeing and moaning tone of the previous speaker.

I shall talk about the dairy industry in a little detail. The Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food's statistics show that, in 1995, the average farm-gate price for milk was 24.47p per litre. In August 1999, the price was 17.7p per litre. A couple of days ago, I spoke on the phone to an old school friend of mine who has farmed all his life not far from where I live. He put his prices at 24p in 1996 and 18p now. That farmer sells 900,000 litres of milk a year, so a penny off his farm-gate price is a considerable sum of money. When one considers the fact that his farm-gate price has gone down from 24p to 18p, one realises that that represents a huge amount of money.

What happens to that milk? The processor takes the milk, heats it, extracts the fat and cream from it, puts back a standardised amount of cream to meet the requirements on the label on the carton, packages it, sells it on to the consumer at about 46p and still has the cream to sell. The consumer does not do well out of that and the farmer certainly does not do well out of that.

Since the demise of the Scottish Milk Marketing Board in 1994, a small number of organisations have had a monopoly on milk processing. A recent investigation by the Competition Commission into Milk Marque's monopoly in England and Wales indicated that perhaps such monopolies should be broken up. However, the Labour UK Government refused to take the advice of the Competition Commission on board. The status quo persists in

England and, unless we do something radical here, I imagine that the status quo will persist in this nation too.

The dairy industry is in severe difficulties. Another factor is that the farming industry and dairy products are compensated by, and to a degree subsidised by, the common agricultural policy. Unfortunately, those payments are made in euros, and the high rate of the pound means that that has an adverse effect on the amount of compensation that is available to the farming industry in Scotland.

Farmers are in a no-win situation. The banks say that farmers' borrowing is no greater than it was last year. In reality, farmers are increasingly leaning on their suppliers and not paying up quickly enough. They cannot realise their assets, because no one wants to buy what they have to sell. A year or two ago a bull calf would fetch £150; now it fetches nothing. There is a good deal of consensus here which recognises that this is a dire crisis. Please, Scottish Executive, get a grip on it.

11:31

Mary Scanlon (Highlands and Islands) (Con):

I sympathise with much of what has been said. On Saturday I had surgeries in Acharacle and Strontian on the Ardnamurchan peninsula, and on Monday evening I had a community care meeting in Wick. I sympathise when people talk about rural issues and the time spent travelling to meetings.

I will briefly mention the agricultural business improvement scheme, which was also mentioned by Jamie McGrigor and Duncan Hamilton. The scheme began with £23 million to help farmers to invest in new buildings and to diversify. Although £6 million has been spent on farming, now, at this time of great crisis, there is £1.5 million left in the fund. A delegation of farmers came to see me and the NFU on Friday to ask where the £15 million that has been spent has gone. They asked that I make this point in the chamber.

George Lyon: Will the member give way so that I can clarify that point?

Mary Scanlon: Sorry, George. I have limited time. We have regularly debated homelessness in this chamber. The farmers came to me with a serious problem: this winter they have homeless cows, and no sheds for them.

I welcome the review of tourism. The latest figures show that tourism in the Highlands is 20 per cent down on last year, which is a serious problem. I positively await the new strategy.

A problem that is raised regularly in my surgeries, whether in Ardnamurchan or the Black Isle, is the amount of new build housing in the

Highlands. We all recognise that there is a need for rural housing, but there seems to be no control over the enormous amount of housing that is being built. In the Black Isle alone, 7,500 houses have been built.

I welcome the University of the Highlands and Islands, but it is important to mention that the majority of the colleges in the UHI network are facing serious financial deficits. Inverness College has a deficit of £4 million. Perth College, a leader in the UHI network, is instituting compulsory redundancies. If the UHI is to mean anything, we must support the 14 colleges that make up the network. Otherwise, there is no UHI.

I want to use this opportunity to raise an issue that has rarely been debated. This week we heard about the 1,200 job losses at Daks-Simpson in the central belt. I want to raise the profile of the BARMAC oil fabrication yards at Nigg and Ardersier. As a result of the downturn in the oil market they are to shed 4,000 jobs between now and the end of May next year. Those jobs are not all Highland jobs, but I spoke to BARMAC this morning and found that more than half the jobs are in the Highlands and Islands and many of the remaining 2,000 are based elsewhere in Scotland.

Highland organisations have got together—Highlands and Islands Enterprise, the local enterprise companies network, the job centre I spoke to on Monday, the Benefits Agency. They have experienced the problem before in the Highlands. Perhaps 150 does not seem a large number in the central belt, but 150 men going back to the Western Isles with rarely transferable skills is a serious problem.

I realise that time has run out, but I will quickly say that if social inclusion is to mean anything, it means giving people living on islands the opportunity to visit the mainland. It was brought to my attention last week that a child's fare from Shetland to the mainland was quoted as £56 plus an additional £28—a £10 tax and an £18 passenger handling fee from Aberdeen, or £11.40 from Inverness. I ask the Scottish Executive to look at passenger handling fees and taxes for islanders.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Mr George Reid): Unusually today, I will be relaxed if members want to go on a little longer.

Mary Scanlon: Can I come back then?

11:36

Christine Grahame (South of Scotland) (SNP): I quote from *The Herald's* "in brief" column today, headed "Finnie urges rural rethink".

"New ways of thinking and approaches to social, environmental and economic issues are needed to create a

sustainable future for rural Scotland.”

I am right with Mr Finnie on that, so I have three things I ask him to think about with reference to the Scottish Borders: trains, abattoirs and meat processing.

The Borders has a population of 106,000 and there are no railway stations. There are 208,000 people in the Highlands and there are 57 railway stations. That says it all. That has a big economic and social impact on communities. At the recent rail seminar it was clear that Railtrack is keen to get into the Borders. I want to know whether the Executive will let us have money for that. A rail link is needed to transport freight, which now travels by inadequate roads, and the topography of the Borders is not suitable for road expansion. We need the reinstatement of a rail link between Edinburgh, Galashiels and Hawick, to carry electronics, farm produce, forestry and people.

The Executive talks about social inclusion. Nearly 30 per cent of families in the Borders do not have motor vehicles and those that do face the rural petrol price hikes that Fergus Ewing referred to. The bus service is expensive and slow. It is essential that rail links are reinstated—Mr Finnie, I wish you were listening—

Ross Finnie: I am listening to every word.

Christine Grahame: —to allow social and economic contact between the Borders and the rest of Scotland, the UK and Europe. That would lead to a flow of entrepreneurs into the Borders. It is a beautiful location with committed people but at the moment it is commercially unattractive. It would also lead to an increase in tourism, an issue raised by Alasdair Morgan and others this morning.

I agree with what Euan Robson said earlier on the need for abattoirs and meat processing to add value to the farmers’ produce. There is an abattoir in Galashiels that with only a little upgrading would comply with even the tightest European regulations. Meat processing in the Borders would add value to farmers’ produce and increase local employment. That would assist the recovery in other ways because, when people are in jobs, they use local painters and decorators and plumbers and so on. It is also the best way to handle the beasts. The welfare of animals is improved by killing and processing them near to the point of production. Importantly, it would permit the labelling “Scottish lamb” or, better still, “Borders lamb”, because it would be produced and—this is the key issue—processed in the Borders. That would impact on the marketing and recognised quality of Scottish food.

The minister has used fine words. He has talked the good talk; let him walk the good walk. I will check his report card in a year’s time.

11:39

Mr Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): Members will be aware that I represent one of the most remote and sparsely populated constituencies in Britain. The population of Caithness and Sutherland has been dropping steadily for some years and the area is facing severe problems.

I will touch on two subjects, the first of which is the agricultural business improvement scheme. Rather than giving my own thoughts, I will quote from two letters from constituents of mine. The first is from people who live in Tongue, in the north-west:

“We submitted our application on 13th August. This application was complete with planning permission, extensive drawings, business plan, percolation tests and letters from Scottish Tourist Board (approx cost £1,200 plus other expenses). As my husband is 60 years old we were hoping that this development would enable him to retire from farming (which would allow a younger person to take over) and we could have gone to live on our croft and have some extra income from the chalets. We were led to believe that this is what the government are encouraging farmers to do.”

This is from a crofter from Oldshoremore, Kinlochbervie:

“With the lamb market so depressed, we saw the ABIS scheme as an ideal way of diversifying, by providing a building for holiday letting. We were encouraged by the Department and the local tourist board, who are very enthusiastic. We have spent nearly £7,000 on architects fees, planning permission and so on.”

Those quotations show the scale of the problem that some of my constituents face. They have gone into debt, encouraged, unfortunately, by the ABIS. Others have outlined funding problems as well.

It is only civil for me to thank the minister for his correspondence and the talks that we have had. I appreciate that he is boxed in by a lack of funds, but I appeal to him to try to help those disadvantaged cases that I have raised. The people affected live in a marginal part of the country and are facing problems that may be insuperable. Every job that is lost and every crofter who loses out is another threat to remote, special communities.

I will talk briefly about the fuel duty escalator.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You may talk at considerable length, if you wish.

Mr Stone: I heard what Fergus Ewing said. I welcome Ross Finnie’s remarks and those of Maureen Macmillan. Members will be aware that Tavish Scott, John Farquhar Munro and I took a petition on the subject to the Treasury—it was the first to be taken from the Scottish Parliament to Westminster. It contained 20,000 signatures.

A scheme to vary the rate of VAT would tackle the problem of the fuel duty escalator. There are schemes in other European Union countries—in parts of Italy and France, for example—because, by derogation, it is within the power of national Governments to have such schemes. Members from all parties should encourage the Treasury to examine them.

In terms of revenue, petrol sales in the Highlands represent a drop in the ocean, yet varying the rate of VAT would greatly help communities. I want to go further than Fergus Ewing did—we must try to reduce the tax burden. I heard what he said about using the money raised by the fuel duty escalator in the Highlands to fund public transport, but we should, if we can, reduce the effects of the escalator in other ways.

I have less than one minute left, so I shall educate Conservative members who exhibited their lack of knowledge, and Mr McLetchie, who exhibited some aggression. Randolph Churchill contested Ross and Cromarty in 1936 in a famous by-election. He spoke in Wester Ross about pig subsidies, but clearly did not know what he was talking about. A constituent shouted from the back of the hall, “Mr Churchill, can you tell me how many toes a pig has?” His reply was, “Take off your boot and count.”

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Mr Davidson.

11:44

Mr David Davidson (North-East Scotland) (Con): Thank you, Deputy Presiding Officer. I have got the title right—we have all read the missive that was sent out.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Sadly, you did not. The title is Presiding Officer.

Mr Davidson: I wish that you would accept the title of deputy speaker, which is much simpler.

I welcome the opportunity that the SNP has afforded us to continue to discuss important issues that relate to the rural economy. I was annoyed that our debate on the reform of the common agricultural policy lasted only for an hour. I appreciate the fact that the SNP has used its non-Executive time to enable us to discuss rural issues today. I am also grateful to Jamie Stone for the history lesson. Was that election in 1936 one that he fought?

Over the past few weeks, and again this morning, many members have described the rural economy as being under siege. In north-east Scotland, I hear that day in, day out. Members have mentioned various issues affecting different sectors of the agricultural community.

The rural economy is not just about farming; it is also about access to jobs, which can involve transport for commuting. How do we encourage industry and opportunity into the rural areas when one of the biggest problems that we face is the cost of transport, the costs of fuel and the cost of haulage? Almost everything that moves in the north-east of Scotland and in other rural areas is dependent on road transport and road haulage.

We have heard examples of transport companies going under in other parts of Scotland. Many are going under in the north-east of Scotland, too. Much common sense has been spoken in the chamber today. I was especially taken by parts of Euan Robson's speech as he took a practical, common-sense approach—we should support much of what he said.

I do not understand why, when Mike Rumbles has an opportunity to speak on behalf of his constituents, all that he talks about is some weird illusion that this issue is about absolution. Does he absolve himself from his pre-election promise to the electorate that the Liberals would fight to get rid of the ban on beef on the bone? Do Liberal Democrat members absolve themselves on that issue?

Mr Rumbles rose—

Mr Davidson: Mr Rumbles is trying to intervene again and Mr Lyon has the podium in front of him, so he is obviously preparing to launch into a tirade yet again. Absolution should perhaps start at home for the Liberal Democrat members.

When I was a councillor for a rural area, one of the issues that came out clearly was that in all sectors of society there were problems of isolation—I am also thinking of isolation from services, including from youth services. I am concerned that isolation can turn into loneliness, which can lead to various forms of substance abuse, including alcohol abuse.

Those problems are difficult to address because many rural people are private people. The problems exist, none the less. When I was a member of Stirling Council, I found it difficult to get across the message to the council that urban solutions could not be applied everywhere. Councils use urban poverty indicators, which do not properly address the issues in rural areas. I want a commitment from the Executive that it will review, with councils, the problem of a lack of distinct rural poverty indicators.

The fact that someone uses a car should not be held against them. It may be the only way in which they can take up a job opportunity, go for medical attention or get training. I used to have a trainee on the farm; the only way in which he could get further training to improve his lot was for me to put him in a motor car and drive him there.

We must examine all those issues. This is not just about farming; it is about opportunities, social inclusion and people's access to recreation. I ask the Executive to please consider setting up meaningful rural poverty indicators.

Last week, I received a phone call from a constituent who wanted to follow up on a matter that he and his colleagues had been pressing for some time. The call was from a member of the young farmers clubs of Scotland, who, with his colleagues, had made a plea in the press to be heard. In many ways, those young people are the future of our rural economy and I hope that the minister—I know that he has had meetings with them—will listen to what they say. They are being pragmatic and realistic about the future; they have a breadth of experience and seek opportunity within a thriving Scottish rural community.

11:50

Dr Winnie Ewing (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): As we have had an anecdote from Ross and Cromarty, I will cite a remark by the Liberal member who was my sponsor, the late Alasdair Mackenzie—a most endearing man, whom everybody loved. On the possibility that members from Scotland would continue to go down to London after the establishment of the Scottish Parliament, he once said: "What will they be doing down there? Just loafing about." I have always thought that that summed up what my party regards as the strangeness of having both a First Minister, in Mr Dewar, and a Secretary of State for Scotland, in Dr Reid, who has 120 new civil servants. In a letter, I asked Dr Reid to explain what they would all be doing, but I have not yet received an answer.

This debate has been most satisfactory, as many members have spoken with great experience of their own areas. I do not need to rehearse their well-argued cases. I am sorry that Jamie Stone has left the chamber, because I agreed with the points that he and Mary Scanlon made about the cost of fares and the failure of the ABIS. I would like to quote from a letter that Lord Sewel wrote to Jim Wallace on 18 February. He said:

"I can assure you and your constituents, however, that sufficient resources will remain applied to the ABIS to ensure that all outstanding commitments can be met, as well as accommodating any upsurge in applications which may emerge".

That is clear language. I do not think that anyone can argue that that is not the promise that was made. However, that promise is not being kept, with disastrous consequences. Like Jamie Stone, I could provide examples to illustrate that.

I would like to say something about crofting. I represented the Highlands and Islands for 24

years in the European Parliament and have been to every one of the islands that I represented, except Papa Stour; I was not able to get there because of the weather. I know the islands pretty intimately. When I recently visited Shetland, the head of the crofting association there expressed to me a serious view that the Shetland crofters were beginning to develop. They felt that there was a plot to do away with crofting and the privileges attached to it under the legislation that was introduced so long ago by the Liberals.

That is a real fear. Very often, European legislation is enforced with no attempt at reasonableness. I refer to the hot subject of sheep counts. The law was made for sheep that were nicely in a field, with a fence around them. The legislators did not seem to understand that our sheep heft to the hill. Generations of sheep insist on particular bits of hill, and it disturbs them a great deal if someone insists on bringing them away down slithery slopes to the count, which often takes place at a day's notice. If we on this bench were in the common grazing, I would have to bring my sheep slithering down the hill. Some of them might get killed on the way down, so that by the time I reached the bottom I might not have the number of sheep that I needed to qualify.

I could not get the Scottish Office to realise that it could have obtained a derogation. All the arguments about how well the UK looks after Scottish interests in negotiations with Europe fade into utter nonsense when we consider matters such as the sheep count. I could not persuade the Scottish Office to take any action in a case where seven sheep slithered down a hill and were lost. Do members know how I eventually managed to get someone to intervene? It was not by raising the issue of cruelty to crofters. The minute that I pointed out the cruelty to the animals, everyone became sympathetic. The problem has still to be addressed. I must say that the regulations are not enforced unfairly in many parts of the Highlands and Islands, but in Shetland there are serious grievances.

Ross Finnie: Dr Ewing makes a valid point. However, does she accept that now, under the Scottish Executive, and following a most unfortunate case in south Harris, which was drawn to my attention, the rural affairs department no longer requires the kind of practice to which she has drawn our attention? In remote crofting areas, we are calling for counts only at a time when the people involved—who include the postmaster and others—are available to conduct them? Does she accept that that is a substantial improvement on the previous situation?

Dr Ewing: It is an improvement, but the problem is that a lot of discretion is left to the enforcers in different parts of Scotland. I conducted a survey in

every common grazing in my area to get the measure of the situation. There are some hard cases.

The common-grazing system of crofting is remarkable. For hundreds of years, crofters have voluntarily adopted a system of having only a sensible number of animals on a piece of land. I told Mr Fischler from the Commission about it and he said that such a programme might have saved the hill farmers of Greece who were lost during the rule of the colonels. We have a system that could be an example to Europe, yet crofters feel that they are under pressure.

I do not know how I am doing for time.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I would be grateful if you came to a conclusion.

Dr Ewing: I have another point. There are two RAF bases in Morayshire, where I am happy to live. They get beef supplied from Argentina and—sometimes—Nigeria. No one would suggest that those countries' farmers are enforcing rules in the way that our farmers are. The RAF does not want to use Argentine beef; it wants to use Scottish beef. Surely this Parliament can do something about that.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call John Farquhar Munro, to be followed by George Lyon. I know that the selection of speakers is a bit unbalanced.

11:57

Mr John Munro (Ross, Skye and Inverness West) (LD): We have had an extensive debate on the issues that affect rural Scotland. Mr Davidson made a good point when he suggested that the rural economy has many facets. We hear about the problems in tourism, dairy farming, the pig industry and so on. Each problem is dependent on every other one. The failure of one section of the rural economy has an adverse affect on other sections.

Winnie Ewing made a point about crofting communities. In crofting communities, it is accepted that every croft is just a piece of land that is surrounded by legislation. When I go around my constituency, people bombard me with stories of how they have been inundated with forms to fill in. People are asked to fill in forms that use terminology such as "hectares", which is an alien word to them. They are asked to supply grid references, a concept that they do not understand. They put the forms behind the clock on the mantelpiece and leave them for another time. If they make even a simple mistake when they finally fill in the form, the inspectors come round to examine their records. Small mistakes have resulted in horrendous problems such as the loss

of subsidy, which is the only income that some crofters have and, until now, there has been no right of appeal. I am glad to hear from the minister that the issue will be examined.

Jamie McGrigor spoke about cattle passports and suggested that farmers and crofters might have to take their paperwork to the mart in a carrier bag or a case. One of my colleagues in the Highlands had a better solution: he was going to cross his cattle with a kangaroo so that they would all have pouches for keeping the paperwork in.

My main plea is for a right of appeal. We hear about the problems in the sheep industry. A farmer from Easter Ross told me on the phone last week that, in September last year, he had taken 26 cattle to the mart. The documentation and ear tags had been correct and everything was in order. Some months later, an inspector came to check the farmer's records. He found that one calf out of the 26 had been sold in the mart eight hours too soon—it would have qualified at midnight, but the farmer sold it at 4 o'clock in the afternoon. Because of that, he lost the subsidy on his 26 stock. That is quite ridiculous.

The rural affairs department should look at the situation and tell those people who have been penalised by the loss of their subsidies that a new system will be developed. Until that system is in place, there should be an amnesty for the people who have been penalised—in my view, inappropriately.

The fuel duty escalator—and the other problems that have been created for rural Scotland—has been mentioned. There is another anomaly in my constituency—the high cost of the Skye bridge tolls. The crofters and farmers, together with much of the local community—and with the support of many in the political parties—are campaigning strongly, asking the Scottish Executive and the Skye bridge toll company to reintroduce for agricultural movement across the bridge the concession that Caledonian MacBrayne had in the past.

12:02

George Lyon (Argyll and Bute) (LD): I welcome this debate; rural affairs is an important subject to which the Parliament should devote as much time as possible, as there is a real crisis out there. The crisis is deep and has been prolonged for the past two to three years.

I am not going to launch—as David Davidson suggested—into a tirade against the Conservative party, but I think—

Members: Oh, go on.

George Lyon: Okay, then.

Some of the statements that Alex Johnstone made were rather disingenuous to say the least. It is beyond belief: 18 years of Tory rule wiped from the face of history; gone for ever. Let us face it, it is a matter of record that a Tory Government introduced the unilateral ban on sow stalls and tethers for the pig industry and deregulated the milk industry, flinging producers to the vagaries of the market and the big companies such as Wiseman Milk Services and Unigate Dairies. It was the Tory Government that refused to access agrimonetary compensation in 1996-97 when the exchange rate moved against the industry and that introduced the massive burden of regulation that we face as a direct result of its failure to implement its own regulations over the period 1988 to 1996. It was caught out, the whistle was blown and Mr Dorrell was forced to stand up in the House of Commons and admit that there was a serious problem.

Mr Davidson: I trust that the Presiding Officer will be generous enough to allow Mr Lyon time to carry on the story through the lost years of Labour government in Scotland, before this Parliament, when Labour, too, refused to take up agrimoney. Will Mr Lyon tell the chamber how much money Scotland's farmers were denied by that? Will he attack Labour for it?

George Lyon: I thank Mr Davidson for that—he wants to write my speech for me now.

We all remember the short-lived beef war fought by John Major. What a successful campaign that was. I am sorry to say that those events did happen. It is as well that we record them in the Parliament today. I think that the Conservatives should accept that some responsibility belongs to the Tory Administration.

As David Davidson rightly says, in 1997 the Labour Government continued the same policies on agrimonetary compensation. We now have a quite different scenario. At long last—I have long experience of agriculture ministers—we have a minister who is part of the solution rather than the problem. We have a minister who is addressing fundamental issues such as help for co-ops, to try to rebuild the co-operative movement in Scotland so that it can stand up to the major milk processors.

I look forward to an announcement on Monday about the establishment of a Scottish marketing body that will build on the strength of the Scottish brand, which undoubtedly exists.

We have heard about the problems that affect timber, tourism and fishing as well as agriculture. The fuel duty escalator is causing some damage, but the fundamental problem is the exchange rate. There has been a revaluation of 30 per cent since 1996, which has resulted in a 30 per cent drop in

the prices that the industries receive.

The only fundamental long-term cure for many of our primary industries is for the three political parties to promote the positive arguments for joining the euro. We should not lose that debate by default by refusing to take on the narrow, English-based, Tory, Euro-sceptic view on the matter.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: This has been a difficult debate to time and balance for reasons that the business managers might like to address. Closing speeches will now have to be trimmed by one minute each to, respectively, seven, seven and nine minutes.

12:07

Alex Fergusson (South of Scotland) (Con): For that reason, I will not be able to take any interventions—unless I am in a good mood. I will see how I get on with time.

It is a crying shame that the SNP, which is so keen to embrace the ideal of the new politics when it suits it, has ruined a perfectly good motion by inserting a section that embodies the old nit-picking, negative, “let us have a go at every Government since the Act of Union” attitude for which we know and love that party so well.

Alasdair Morgan: Will the member give way?

Alex Fergusson: Oh, go on.

Alasdair Morgan: Surely Alex Fergusson does not describe the BSE crisis and responsibility for it as nit-picking?

Alex Fergusson: Certainly not. I am describing the SNP as nit-picking.

Conservative members would have supported the motion had it not contained the sadly vindictive and sniping section that our amendment would remove. That is not to excuse or absolve anyone, but to enter this debate in a forward-looking and positive fashion in the belief that the debate will benefit from moving forward.

I do not want to give the impression that the SNP has a monopoly on misuse of the phraseology of the new politics; the Executive parties are just as guilty. Who can ever forget John McAllion pointing at the Opposition parties and stating in no uncertain terms that, “Youse”—a term that is becoming rather common—“lot must shut up and listen”?

I have shut up and listened to the Executive amendment. Apart from its final sentiment—a determination

“to promote long-term sustainable development . . . throughout rural Scotland”,

with which I am sure we all heartily agree—it is made of nothing but fine words and flannel. It is expressed in a way that smacks of complacency and self-congratulation and it will be of little comfort to people in rural Scotland who are increasingly of the opinion that the Executive has little or nothing for them.

I am happy to sum up on the amendment that stands in my name. I should, perhaps, declare a vested interest to the chamber, as for the next three weeks at least I will still have an active interest in farming. At the end of this month, I will hand over the business to a tenant.

I will feel a great sadness severing an interest that has given me a reasonable living and a great deal of pleasure for some 28 years, although my primary sentiment is one of relief—relief that I have successfully escaped from an industry that does not allow the same luxury to many others.

Last week, I sold my last 21 ewes. At five years old, they were fit sheep, although—not unusually at that age—they were missing some teeth. Usually, they would have realised a price of £10 to £15 per head; I received a bid of £1.40 for each ewe. After deductions, I received a cheque for £4.20—with the haulage bill still to come. I was lucky—at least I got a bid. Many others are having to shoot and bury stock that they have nurtured and tended all their lives. Those are horrendous acts, which some members will have seen vividly portrayed on television last week.

Recently—as we have heard—the Parliament has had representations from the pig and dairy sectors. I commend the representatives of those sectors for their initiative in visiting the Parliament. As Euan Robson said, the members who took the trouble to attend the briefings could not but fail to be moved by the spectacle of grown men almost reduced to tears as they described the nightmare that their businesses have become.

Why should we bother about another industry in huge financial difficulties? I will explain. Four years ago, Scottish agriculture had a gross income of almost £600 million. Given the generally accepted multiplier of 2.5, that income was worth £2,100 million to the rural economy of Scotland. This year—although official figures have yet to be released—the gross income is generally expected to be well below £100 million and possibly as low as £75 million; that gives an input to the rural economy of a mere £350 million.

Given that agricultural borrowings now total much more than £1 billion, in business terms it is time for Scottish agriculture to call in the receivers. Scottish agriculture's input to the rural economy has been cut by one eighth of its input in 1995-96. That is why in rural areas such as Dumfries and Galloway, where in 1997-98 agriculture

contributed 23 per cent of the region's gross domestic product, words such as depression, despair and collapse are by no means too strong, as the minister suggested earlier.

My colleagues have touched on other issues, such as the fuel escalator, affordable housing, rural transport and tourism, so there is no need for me to elaborate; I commend their words to the chamber. We also share concerns about e-commerce, post offices, organic aid and other opportunities that have been mentioned in today's debate.

I would like to finish by repeating what I have said before. I mean this in the spirit of the new politics—if such a thing still exists. There was, and is, a deeply held scepticism in many sectors of rural Scotland that the Parliament will do nothing for them. Thus far, neither Executive policy nor Labour's attendance at today's debate—at times there have been as few as five members—has done anything to alleviate that scepticism.

I ask the Executive to think beyond fine phrases and to address the real issues facing rural Scotland. The Executive must consider how it can best encourage the use of the primary products of rural Scotland—meat, milk, timber and tourism—to create jobs in the areas where they are produced. Christine Grahame and Euan Robson also touched on that topic.

The Executive must consider how best to encourage the branding, labelling and marketing of Scottish products to enhance the end prices of those high-quality products. Furthermore, it must consider how to promote our country at home and abroad. I acknowledge that a start has been made, although there is an enormous amount still to be done. The Executive must also protect our producers by giving them a much called for level playing field to combat unfair competition and over-regulation.

If the Executive can see past the smokescreen of its own verbosity and begin to deliver on those fronts, it will be worthy of support and will receive it. Until then, I encourage the proposers of the motion to accept our positive, forward-looking and practical amendment, which I heartily commend to the whole chamber.

12:14

Ross Finnie: I will not go into the private grief of Mr Fergusson's broken-faced ewes.

Many of today's speeches have been very positive. I agree with many of Mike Russell's opening remarks: there is a case for trying to bring the rural and urban parts of Scotland together. Because there has been a lack of political focus for so long, one way of doing that has been,

paradoxically, to create a separate rural affairs department and ministry. The Executive has done that with the purpose of doing one thing and one thing alone: not to set rural Scotland apart, but to ensure that, at the heart of Government, this question is constantly asked—what is the rural dimension in all of the mainstream policies that we pursue?

In his helpful speech, I am not sure why Mike Russell wanted to question that a chartered accountant had any helpful contribution to make.

Richard Lochhead (North-East Scotland) (SNP) *rose—*

Ross Finnie: I will take Mr Lochhead's point in a moment.

I want to say to Mike that the sooner we recognise that the agriculture sector, the food sector and the tourism sector are all businesses, the better. If we are to inject more money back into the rural economy, as has been suggested, we have to do far more to deal with some of the problems.

I would like to pick up on some of Duncan Hamilton's points. One of the sad features of the agriculture business is that in far too many cases—though not in every case—the primary producer is in one place, the abattoir in another, the processor in another and the consumer somewhere else. Unless we can bring them together, the chances of bringing added value back into the rural economy are almost zero.

Richard Lochhead: The minister mentioned accountants. Does the recent financial statement allocate more or less money over the next three years to rural affairs in Scotland than was allocated in the last three years of the previous Tory Government?

Ross Finnie: As each policy that is presented to this Parliament has a rural dimension, the amount of spending on rural areas will be increased.

The Executive's vision is to bring the people I mentioned closer together. I was asked for a strategic view and why I needed to bring in Andrew Dewar-Durie. I will tell members. In an industry that produces four times as much sheepmeat as we consume, we have to have strategies that go way beyond those that currently exist. As we are taking a forward view, and not simply adopting the sticking-plaster approach of the past, it seemed valuable to bring into the debate someone with immense international experience in the industry who could give an overview of how to move forward.

Mr Hamilton *rose—*

Ross Finnie: I have made it clear that the Executive has members of the National Farmers

Union of Scotland on the committees that are examining red tape and trying to help the sector. I am in no doubt that the Executive is not at all complacent. We know that every sector of the industry faces problems. The solution is not to look only at the previous subsidy regimes. The new common agricultural policy regime does nothing more than provide a financial underbelly. I hope that that will help, but to make progress we must consider all the sectors as businesses. We must consider Scottish food as a business and promote it as a business. Agriculture comes into that.

Michael Russell: I am very happy to concur with the minister's view that they are businesses. How are any businesses in Scotland helped by the fuel duty escalator?

Ross Finnie: I will come on to that point, because it has been made often.

First, I want to pick up on Christine Grahame's point about abattoirs. The difficulty is that, at the moment, we have an excess of abattoir capacity in Scotland.

Christine Grahame *rose—*

Ross Finnie: Christine Grahame pointed out that, in parts of Scotland, we could do with other abattoirs to deal with particular processes. Her other point was that, by having an abattoir, we would automatically get value, but that is not the case. At the moment, even where we have abattoirs, far too much of livestock product is put into primary products and shipped elsewhere to be processed—the added value therefore ends up in Birmingham or further south. My plan is to do the reverse. We want not only abattoirs, but processing capacity, in Scotland so the value added can come back up the chain and our primary producers get the advantage of it.

The agricultural business improvement scheme has been mentioned. Even Mr Morgan was gracious enough to say that I did not have to take responsibility for the decisions of previous Administrations. Although £23 million was allocated to ABIS over the five-year programme, losses have been incurred because of the euro situation. We have spent more than £17 million and have £1.2 million left. We now find ourselves in an incredible position. Whereas the annual average uptake of applications was between 2 million and 3 million, in the past year we have received 15 million.

Mr Hamilton: Will the minister give way?

Ross Finnie: No, I am really running out of time.

To those people who have expended money on planning permissions as part of their applications, I can undertake only to consider applications as sympathetically as possible, but the sums simply do not add up.

The Executive wants to recognise the prime importance of our primary producers and make that part of a wider food strategy. We also want to recognise the crucial importance in rural areas of education, social inclusion, health and housing. Although I concur with Murray Tosh's important points about housing and agree that we need to examine the relevant regulations, we have committed a substantial amount of money to partnerships.

We have a new strategy for tourism, which is a major issue. I have made it clear that I share concerns about the threat to post offices because of new arrangements for benefit payments. However, if we can hold the Post Office to its written commitment to invest in technology for every post office, including rural post offices, we can prevent a potential disaster.

As for the fuel duty escalator, the Chancellor of the Exchequer has been made well aware of the Scottish Executive's concerns about fuel costs. Those representations have placed matters affecting rural communities firmly on the agenda.

The Executive has a rural affairs ministry and a rural development committee with powers to look across the spectrum of Government business and to take a positive view. On that basis, I commend the amendment in my name.

12:22

Richard Lochhead (North-East Scotland) (SNP): First, I congratulate the Procedures Committee and the Presiding Officer on agreeing to allow members who move non-Executive motions to wind up their own debates. That is a very positive and welcome development.

There have been some excellent speeches in this debate, and one or two reasonable contributions from the Labour party. We would have preferred more speeches from Labour MSPs, but of course they were not in the chamber to make them.

One of the reasons rural affairs and concerns have been quite high on the Scottish Parliament's agenda since its inception is the fact that the Parliament has so many regional members. Indeed, seven out of the eight regions represented have rural concerns.

As we have heard, rural Scotland is not homogeneous. Each area has different concerns that require different solutions. In one area, ferry prices might be the main issue; lack of amenities might be the main issue in another; and unemployment and housing, which Murray Tosh mentioned, might be the major problems in others. That is why it is important for solutions that tackle rural disadvantage to emerge from a bottom-up,

not a top-down, process. Each local community will know best how to tackle disadvantage. We need to speak to and to work in partnership with communities.

In Aberdeen yesterday, many delegates at a conference on rural development were concerned about access to policy making and to the Scottish Parliament. They were concerned that the Parliament would make policy without taking their concerns on board. The Parliament must reflect the whole of Scotland, including rural Scotland.

One useful signal that we could send out for starters would be for our committees to meet outside Edinburgh as often as possible. We must not allow that to be prevented by penny-pinching by the Executive. Proper resources should be made available so that our committees can take on board local concerns. The dispersal of civil service jobs would also send out an excellent signal from the Parliament and the Executive. Civil service jobs should be dispersed to our smaller communities. With advances in information technology, that should not be a problem and we look forward to it happening.

When we talk about local solutions to local problems, we must recognise the role of local authorities. There is no point in denying local authorities the cash to provide the front-line services that make many smaller rural communities viable. It is important that we work in partnership with local authorities to initiate joint action to develop infrastructure—roads, telecommunications and housing. Many members have mentioned the lack of infrastructure and the threat to the existing infrastructure in rural communities.

Local authorities are also responsible for the provision of services. The lack of rural policing in many areas of Scotland must be tackled, as must the issue of post offices. It is imperative that there is joint action to ensure that rural banking services are available too. The Executive and the Parliament have a role to play in working with local communities and local authorities to achieve those aims.

We must ensure a good quality of life in rural Scotland. That means providing amenities. Many towns in Scotland with a population of 13,000 or 14,000 do not have cinema or a sports centre. In a rich country such as Scotland, that is unacceptable.

We must not forget our young people. How on earth can our smaller communities be viable without young people living and working in them? If we do not provide amenities, is it any wonder that young people cannot wait to move to the larger towns and cities? We blame young people for hanging around street corners, but we do not

give them the facilities to allow them to go elsewhere. The Executive could, perhaps, start by initiating an audit of youth facilities in Scotland, particularly in rural communities where such facilities are a major issue. We must also have an audit of services to address issues such as the growing drugs problem.

Partnership is important not only to overcome the threats to rural Scotland that have been mentioned today, but to harness the many opportunities to develop our rural economy. We must work together to develop not only the traditional industries such as farming, fishing and forestry, but the many new industries, such as renewable energy, for which Scotland has huge potential.

Denmark, a country equivalent in size to Scotland, employs many thousands more people in renewable energy in rural communities than we do. Duncan Hamilton mentioned the advantages of information and communications technology and its potential for building the rural economy. We must exploit that potential to the full. New sectors are also developing in aquaculture, which offer tremendous opportunities. However, there are problems, such as the lack of a Government freshwater fisheries strategy. That is no use. The freshwater fisheries sector has tremendous potential for tourism, as well as other economic benefits. Organic farming, which Robin Harper mentioned, must also be developed for the benefit of our rural economy.

I have already said that it is important that the Parliament is seen to represent the whole of Scotland. At yesterday's conference, one senior council official expressed concern that every time there is a factory closure within a few miles of Edinburgh or the central belt, the Executive seems rather more motivated to do something about it—to pull out all the stops—than when there is a closure or a threat to jobs in the periphery of Scotland. That rang a bell with me.

Alex Johnstone: Many rural businesses employ only a handful of people and unemployment often affects only one or two people at a time. Does the member agree that it is a disgrace that those figures are not added up and that there is a failure to realise the size of the unemployment crisis in rural Scotland?

Richard Lochhead: The member's point is well made. I certainly agree with him.

There is currently a threat hanging over hundreds of jobs at RAF Buchan in Boddam outside Peterhead. The people there, the local council and others involved in the campaign, have no clue what the Executive is doing to help them. All there has been is one sentence in *The Press and Journal* from Jim Wallace, saying that the

Executive will make a case on their behalf.

To illustrate the problem, I asked the Executive a written question:

"To ask the Scottish Executive what action it has taken to make the case for the retention of RAF Buchan, to whom the case was put and when it was made."

The reply from the Executive was:

"The Scottish Executive is in regular contact with the Ministry of Defence on a wide range of issues including the consultation on the future of RAF Buchan."—[*Official Report, Written Answers*, 26 October 1999; Vol 3, p 12.]

So no one knows what is happening there.

Michael Russell: Will Richard Lochhead give way?

Lewis Macdonald: Will Richard Lochhead give way?

The Presiding Officer (Sir David Steel): No, he is in his last minute.

Richard Lochhead: I will give way very briefly if that is okay, Presiding Officer.

Michael Russell: I wondered whether Richard would, in his summing up, reflect the fact that, some moments ago, interest rates were raised by a quarter of a per cent. Surely that will be enormously damaging for rural Scotland and we should condemn it in this debate. [*Applause*.]

Richard Lochhead: Well, what can I say? I wholeheartedly agree.

Lewis Macdonald: Will Richard Lochhead give way?

Richard Lochhead: I am sorry; I have taken enough interventions and I do not have long left.

The title of yesterday's conference in Aberdeen was "The Scottish Parliament and Rural Policy: What Room for Manoeuvre?" We have just heard from London that interest rates have gone up. There is plenty of room for manoeuvre by the Scottish Executive here in the Scottish Parliament.

In the recent agriculture debate, Andrew Welsh asked what action the Executive was taking on the beef ban and whether any meetings were planned with the French Government. The Minister for Rural Affairs replied:

"Personally, I have had no such meetings. However, I have added the Scottish Executive's needs to the memos that are currently being circulated through our UK representative and through our ambassadorial team".—[*Official Report*, 7 October 1999; Vol 2, c 1194.]

Penning a name to the bottom of a memo is not exactly the representation that our rural industries are looking for from the first Minister for Rural Affairs in the first Scottish Parliament for 300 years.

The Scottish Executive should be leading

European negotiations in appropriate circumstances as a matter of course—as opposed to as and when it gets permission from the UK Government in London. There are plenty of things that we should be doing. The Minister for Rural Affairs should be flying down to London and making representations about the impact of the interest rate rise and fuel duty on our rural economy.

The SNP does not underestimate the task before the Scottish Parliament. It is enormous, and it will require fresh thinking. We have to take on board the concerns of local communities and of the experts in the Arkleton Centre for Rural Development Research, the Macaulay Land Use Research Institute and the rest. We need fresh thinking to take rural Scotland forwards.

In the annual report of the Macaulay institute, Jeff Maxwell says:

“National and local government, their agencies, voluntary bodies, land owners and local communities will all have to find new ways of interacting and finding a common purpose. This is no mean challenge and one that, in Scotland, is likely to continue for some time to exercise the minds of those who have been recently elected to the new Parliament”.

The SNP's choice of motion for today illustrates that those challenges are exercising the minds of SNP members. We invite the other parties in the Parliament to join us in finding the long-term solutions by supporting our motion, so that we can make the phrase “rural disadvantage” redundant.

Business Motion

The Presiding Officer (Sir David Steel): We turn now to the business motion, S1M-247. The text of the motion is in the business bulletin and we have already agreed that it is therefore not necessary for it to be read out again.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees:

(a) the following programme of business -

Wednesday 10 November 1999

2.30 pm Time for Reflection

followed by Ministerial Statement

followed by Debate on an Executive motion on Working Together in Europe

followed by Parliamentary Bureau motions

5.00 pm Decision Time

followed by Members' Business Debate on the subject of S1M-237 Christine Grahame: Borders Rail-Link

Thursday 11 November 1999

9.30 am Ministerial Statement and Debate on the Millennium Date Change Problem: A Report on the Readiness of the Scottish Infrastructure

followed by Business Motion

followed by Parliamentary Bureau motions

2.30 pm Question Time

3.00 pm Open Question Time

followed by, no later than 3.15 pm Debate on The Maximum Number of Judges (Scotland) Order 1999

5.00 pm Decision Time

followed by Members' Business Debate on the subject of S1M-223 Dr Elaine Murray: Pardon for Executed Soldiers

Wednesday 17 November 1999

2.30 pm Time for Reflection

followed by Debate on an Executive motion on Child Care Strategy

followed by Parliamentary Bureau motions

5.00 pm Decision Time

followed by Members' Business

Thursday 18 November 1999

9.30 am Debate on an Executive motion on the Modernisation of the Scottish Economy

followed by Business Motion

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

2.30 pm Question Time

3.00 pm Open Question Time

followed by, no

later than 3.15 pm Executive Business

5.00 pm Decision Time

followed by Members' Business

(b), the following dates by which committees should make any recommendations on instruments or draft instruments:

the European Committee to report to the Rural Affairs Committee by 22 November 1999 on The Organic Aid (Scotland) Amendment Regulations 1999, (SSI 1999/107)

the Subordinate Legislation Committee to report by 9 November 1999 on The Draft Maximum Number of Judges (Scotland) Order 1999.

The Presiding Officer: I have no indication of members wishing to speak against the motion, so I will put the question to the chamber. The question is, that business motion S1M-247 be agreed to.

Motion agreed to.

Question, That the meeting be now adjourned until 2.30 pm today, *put and agreed to.*—[Mr McCabe.]

Meeting adjourned at 12:33.

14:30

On resuming—

Question Time

SCOTTISH EXECUTIVE

Deeds of Conditions

1. Bill Aitken (Glasgow) (Con): To ask the Scottish Executive what consideration it has given to restricting the terms of deeds of conditions whereby the appointment of a named property manager cannot be made mandatory. (S1O-527)

The Deputy First Minister and Minister for Justice (Mr Jim Wallace): Such matters are being considered by the Scottish Law Commission as part of its work on non-feudal real burdens and title conditions. The commission will submit its final report to Scottish ministers by the end of this year.

Bill Aitken: I am obliged to the minister for his response, but does he agree that it is iniquitous that co-proprietors of a complex for elderly persons should be required to commit themselves to a named factor whose service might be deficient and expensive? Those co-proprietors might be unable to change to a more acceptable property agent.

Mr Wallace: The Executive is well aware of such concerns, which have been expressed by a number of people. A working group that includes representatives of developers, managers, owners, owner-occupied sheltered housing and other interested parties is preparing a voluntary code of management. We hope that adoption of that will be made a condition of membership by associations that represent managers and developers. That is being consulted on and we await the proposals that will be made by the Scottish Law Commission, which will be in the report that it will submit later this year.

Trident

2. Dorothy-Grace Elder (Glasgow) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Executive whether it has made or will make representations to Her Majesty's Government regarding the immediate removal of the Trident installation in Scotland. (S1O-495)

The Minister for Enterprise and Lifelong Learning (Henry McLeish): The Executive has made no such representations and has no plans to do so.

Dorothy-Grace Elder: Will the minister explain why he does not consider such representations to be necessary, in view of the fact that he is defying the wishes of 85 per cent of the Scottish people, the Scottish Trades Union Congress and all the

major parties—including the Scottish Labour party, which has voted against Trident? Why is he so obedient to the wishes of Mr Blair?

Henry McLeish: Views on the nuclear deterrent and its presence are well known, especially the views of the Scottish National party. I have already made it clear that I do not intend to comment on the merits of the sheriff's judgment. Law officers have confirmed that they will refer the matter to the High Court for its consideration. It would be wholly inappropriate for me to comment at this stage.

Landfill Sites

3. Elaine Thomson (Aberdeen North) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive whether it plans to review the current planning regulations with respect to landfill sites and their proximity to residential accommodation. (S1O-543)

The Minister for Transport and the Environment (Sarah Boyack): There are no plans at present to review the guidance.

Elaine Thomson: Does the minister intend to have major control over landfill sites that have planning permission, to allay the fears of residents living close to sites such as Tarbothill in my constituency? Residents there are having their homes tested frequently for dangerous landfill gases.

Sarah Boyack: I acknowledge that there are concerns, particularly in areas where there are landfill sites. It is crucial that we ensure that those sites are managed effectively and that the appropriate licences are attached. That is an issue for the Scottish Environment Protection Agency.

Scottish Prison Service

4. Phil Gallie (South of Scotland) (Con): To ask the Scottish Executive how many time-off-in-lieu hours were due to Scottish Prison Service officers as at 1 September 1999, or the latest date for which figures are available. (S1O-511)

The Deputy Minister for Justice (Angus MacKay): At 1 October 1999, 101,643 hours were owed to staff, and 27,579 hours were owed by them.

Phil Gallie: Can the minister say whether he knew those figures at the time of the announcement that £13 million was being splashed—[*Laughter.*]—sorry, slashed from the prisons budget?

Angus MacKay: The splashing and slashing is in Mr Gallie's question. The position regarding time-off-in-lieu hours in the Scottish Prison Service is that the number of hours owed has fallen by 20 per cent in the past year. Those figures are

entirely reasonable and are in keeping with those of any other national public institution.

Phil Gallie: Can the minister assure me that time-off-in-lieu hours that are due to prison officers will be given as time off in lieu and will not have to be paid over the next 12 months?

Angus MacKay: The average time off in lieu that is owed is 19.6 hours per head, which is a little more than two shifts per member of staff. That is entirely in keeping with standard practice. An action group has been set up by the Scottish Prison Service to examine the re-provisioning of the Scottish Prison Service's budget, over the coming weeks and months. It will be for that group to make recommendations about the way in which time off in lieu is dealt with.

Breast Cancer

5. Mr Michael McMahon (Hamilton North and Bellshill) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive whether it will identify the factors that have resulted in the improvements in survival of breast cancer patients in Scotland. (S1O-522)

The Minister for Health and Community Care (Susan Deacon): The latest figures show that 74.9 per cent of women who are diagnosed as having breast cancer will still be alive five years after diagnosis. That compares with 66.3 per cent of such women in 1986-88. The improving prospects for breast cancer patients in Scotland are likely to be due to a number of factors, which include the effects of screening, early diagnosis and advances in treatment.

Mr McMahon: I thank the minister for that answer. Is the minister aware of the current review of Tamoxifen, the modern cancer-combating drug? It is known to have a number of side effects in some cases, including thrombosis, cardiac problems, cancer of the womb and liver cancer. Does she know when that review is expected to report? Has she any further information on the safety of that drug?

Susan Deacon: Tamoxifen is one of several drugs and treatments that are offered to cancer patients. The Scottish Executive is committed to ensuring that all drugs and therapies that are offered are as safe and effective as possible. With regard to the specific study that Mr McMahon asked about, I am happy to look into the matter. I shall give him further details in writing.

Pigmeat

6. Lewis Macdonald (Aberdeen Central) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive what discussions it has had with pigmeat retailers about the labelling of pigmeat products. (S1O-541)

The Minister for Rural Affairs (Ross Finnie):

As I indicated last week, my department is in consultation with retail and other interests on how best to enforce labelling requirements for foodstuffs, including pigmeat products. Given the high quality and welfare standards that are adhered to by the Scottish pig industry, I hope that that will help the consumer to identify home-produced pigmeat.

Lewis Macdonald: As the minister clearly agrees with me that Scottish pig producers are to be commended for the quality of their produce, does he further agree that our partners in the European Union could learn much from the standards that have been set by the Scottish industry? When he has the opportunity to do so, will he seek to persuade our partners to raise their standards to Scottish levels?

Ross Finnie: I am happy to give that undertaking. As Mr Macdonald will know, EC directive 91630 sets out the minimum standards for the welfare of pigs. That was voted for by a majority, in 1991. Unfortunately, it allows until 2005 for those standards to be made uniform throughout Europe. At every opportunity, we point out that those standards should be advanced.

Ambulance Service

7. Mr Andrew Welsh (Angus) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Executive how many ambulances are provided in Angus between the hours of 6 pm and 8 am. (S10-513)

The Minister for Health and Community Care (Susan Deacon): It is for local health boards and national health service trusts to determine the health needs of local areas and the appropriate level of services that is required to meet those needs. I can, however, advise Mr Welsh that four emergency vehicles are provided in Angus between the hours of 6 pm and 8 am. Tayside Health Board and the Scottish Ambulance Service would be happy to provide any further information that Mr Welsh may require.

Mr Welsh: If under-resourcing is causing problems for the ambulance service in meeting existing needs, what extra resources will the minister provide for an acute services review that will centralise services and increase the number of journeys outwith Angus?

For major planning changes, we require an environmental impact study. Will the minister introduce a system of ambulance service impact studies for major NHS changes?

Susan Deacon: I am pleased that there are now record levels of investment in the health service in Scotland. Over the next few years, that investment will be put to good use when we consider how we can redesign and modernise NHS services

throughout Scotland, including those in Tayside. The local acute services review that is taking place there is an important part of that process, and I look forward to its outcome.

Mr Welsh: That acute services review does not take into account the impact on ambulances. Will the minister look into that, to avoid an obvious future problem?

Susan Deacon: I am always happy to examine the future provision of any aspect of services, to ensure that those services are of the highest quality for people throughout Scotland. I stress, however, that where there are questions to be raised about provision in local areas, it is important that that dialogue takes place locally. I urge the local member, if he has concerns, to raise those questions with the local health board.

Public Service Job Relocation

8. Mr Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): To ask the Scottish Executive what further consideration it is giving to the relocation of public service jobs, particularly in relation to departments or agencies with rural responsibilities, to the Scottish Highlands. (S10-519)

The First Minister (Donald Dewar): Our policy on the location and relocation of public service jobs was set out in my statement of 15 September in response to a question from Mr Duncan McNeil. We will seek opportunities to locate the work of the Executive and related bodies as close as possible to the communities that they serve. That is consistent with our objectives of efficiency and effectiveness.

Mr Stone: Does the First Minister agree that moving the aquaculture division of the Scottish Executive rural affairs department to Kinlochbervie or to Lerwick, or encouraging the Highlands and Islands partnership programme or its successor organisation to move out of Inverness, would provide vital jobs and would also strengthen the government of Scotland?

The First Minister: We should always look for opportunities where the criteria are properly met. A considerable number of public bodies in the Highlands and Islands are creating jobs in the region, and the partnership programme in Inverness is just one example. Jobs are also created through the local enterprise company network all over the Highlands and Islands. Whether it is possible to have further devolution and relocation is a matter for Highlands and Islands Enterprise to consider. The Executive is anxious to encourage it, although one must always remember the importance of lines of communication and the interests of the staff, who may be well settled where they are and may have

family responsibilities.

Stobhill Hospital

9. Paul Martin (Glasgow Springburn) (Lab):

To ask the Scottish Executive whether it will call for an independent consultant to carry out a design survey regarding the proposal to reduce the size of the ambulatory care and diagnostic unit at Stobhill hospital. (S10-521)

The Minister for Health and Community Care (Susan Deacon): The Scottish Executive does not intend to call for an independent consultant. It is a matter for Greater Glasgow Health Board and North Glasgow University Hospitals NHS Trust to decide on and to commission such design surveys as they deem necessary to assist in the development of the proposed ambulatory care and diagnostic unit at Stobhill hospital.

Paul Martin: Does the minister share my concern that Mr Andy Black, the so-called independent adviser who carried out a design briefing in December, was not in fact independent and that he had tendered for the work to carry out the ACAD proposal at Stobhill hospital?

Susan Deacon: I am assured that the local health authorities are employing effective processes to take forward that important aspect of service development. In due course, they will put proposals to the Scottish Executive and we will consider them carefully.

Police Funding

10. Mr Kenneth Gibson (Glasgow) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Executive what plans it has to increase expenditure on policing in financial year 2000-01. (S10-529)

The Deputy First Minister and Minister for Justice (Mr Jim Wallace): As announced in the comprehensive spending review, the total revenue funding available for the police in 2000-01 is £741.9 million, which is an increase of 3.8 per cent on this year's figure.

Mr Gibson: Does the minister agree that inadequate police resources lead to increased crime, especially public order offences and street crime? Does he still agree with the assertion that he made in response to a written question from me, that the substantial increase in violent crime in Strathclyde last year is entirely unrelated to the fact that Strathclyde police are 350 officers short of their operational complement? If he considers that assertion misjudged, will he take this opportunity to outline precisely what measures he intends to take to ensure that all Scottish police forces are restored to their full complement?

Mr Wallace: Many studies conducted over many years have shown that there is no clear correlation

between levels of crime and increases or decreases in the size of police forces. Mr Gibson will be aware that, in addition to the sum for the forthcoming year to which I referred, a sum of £4.7 million has been allocated to the police for millennium funding. That will free up budgets for other areas of policing. The Executive continues to pursue a policy of civilianisation and of improving information technology, allowing more police to be freed up for front-line duties.

Pig Industry

11. Dr Elaine Murray (Dumfries) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive what it considers to be the contribution of the pig industry to the economy. (S10-542)

The Minister for Rural Affairs (Ross Finnie): In 1998, the output of the pig industry in Scotland was worth £72 million at the farm gate, which equates to just under 4 per cent of the total Scottish agricultural output. To put that into perspective, in recent years Scottish agricultural gross domestic product has declined to somewhere between 1½ and 2 per cent of the total GDP of the Scottish economy.

Dr Murray: I am grateful to the minister for his reply, and to the drawer for eventually picking out one of my questions. Last week, the minister was able to announce a £5 million UK-wide aid package to promote the marketing of pigmeat. Could he provide more detail of how that will operate and, in particular, whether it will promote Scottish and UK pork in home markets, using animal welfare considerations in addition to quality considerations?

Ross Finnie: I can confirm that the £5 million pig package—if that is the right phrase—will be applicable across the UK. It is important, however, in the light of the launch earlier this year of the Scottish pork quality mark, which differentiates home products and Scottish products from imports, that our proportionate share of that £5 million will be devoted exclusively to promoting Scottish products. I hope that that will greatly assist the industry.

New Opportunities Fund

12. Brian Adam (North-East Scotland) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Executive whether it will make representations to Her Majesty's Government to encourage the national lottery board to expedite the release of the £17.25 million cancer initiative funding for Scotland from the new opportunities fund. (S10-516)

The Minister for Health and Community Care (Susan Deacon): The New Opportunities Fund Board, which is responsible for that new initiative, has set up a robust bidding and assessment

process, which is expected to be completed by summer 2001. We believe that that will ensure that applications are soundly based and that resources are used effectively to provide the greatest benefit for people with cancer.

Brian Adam: Is the minister aware of the concern of the charities involved about the delay in funding? These are three-year programmes, and the robust procedure that she describes could lead to a delay of up to 20 months. Is she not concerned that that funding delay might lead to delays in treatments such as those that have been referred to by other members today?

Susan Deacon: We all share the view and are keen that this important new investment—which, I stress, is in addition to existing NHS investment—be put to use as soon as practically possible, to tackle cancer prevention and detection and to give care to cancer patients. A balance must be struck, however, to ensure that the process of allocating the sum is fair and effective, alongside getting the money where we want it to be. Such a balance has been struck in this case.

Ninewells Hospital

13. Mr John Swinney (North Tayside) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Executive whether it will make a statement on the future of the neurosurgical unit at Ninewells hospital, Dundee. (S1O-528)

The Minister for Health and Community Care (Susan Deacon): A short-life working group has been set up under the chairmanship of the chief medical officer, to review the overall provision of neurosurgical services in Scotland. It will consider the needs of Dundee.

Mr Swinney: I thank the minister for her reply. When she considers the issues that underpin the acute services review that Sir David Carter is conducting, and the primacy that is attached to the principle of equality of access to services—that all our constituents should enjoy equality of access, no matter in which part of the country they happen to live—does she believe that the concerns in the Tayside area about the possible threat to the neurosurgical unit at Ninewells hospital are in any way justified?

Susan Deacon: I am determined to ensure that people in Tayside, as elsewhere in Scotland, have high-quality, accessible services. It is important, however, that we recognise that there are ways of taking those processes forward. I believe that the exercise in which the chief medical officer is currently involved will take account of the needs of each part of Scotland, to ensure that we have the highest standard of service for all areas.

Glasgow Council Housing

14. Fiona Hyslop (Lothians) (SNP): To ask the

Scottish Executive whether it will outline the role, remit and objectives of the new steering group set up to oversee the next phases of work on stock transfer of Glasgow council housing. (S1O-547)

The Minister for Communities (Ms Wendy Alexander): The group has been established with the following remit:

“to progress the development of a new housing partnership for Glasgow which will have at its core the transfer of Glasgow’s council housing into community ownership, will create sustainable communities, assist the regeneration of the City and create a more inclusive Glasgow for the new millennium. Final decisions will be subject to extensive tenant consultation. A majority of tenants (voting in a ballot) will be required before the proposal can proceed.”

Fiona Hyslop: Now that the minister has taken personal charge of the Glasgow stock transfer proposal, does she see a conflict of interest in her role as the person who is chairing the implementation of the stock transfer while she is chairing the allocation of the bidding process? Will she explain how she will deal with that conflict of interest, and is such busybody behaviour to become the norm in her pursuit of public policy?

Ms Alexander: Fiona! [*Laughter.*] The view of the Scottish Executive is that as a Scottish housing minister I would be failing in my duty were I not to work with the City of Glasgow to develop proposals—I stress “work with”, because I am the joint chair of the steering group. Fiona raises a legitimate point, and I have taken steps to ensure that I will not be the minister making final decisions on the new housing partnership bids that come forward.

Blood Donation

15. Miss Annabel Goldie (West of Scotland) (Con): To ask the Scottish Executive whether it has any plans to launch an initiative to raise the profile of blood donation in Scotland given that only 5 per cent of the Scottish population currently donates blood. (S1O-509)

The Minister for Health and Community Care (Susan Deacon): The Scottish National Blood Transfusion Service constantly works to increase blood collection through an on-going programme of initiatives. Specific initiatives are already being planned for the run-up to Christmas and the millennium, designed to highlight the importance of blood donation and encourage more people to give blood. I welcome any suggestions that Mrs Goldie or any other members may have for future initiatives that we may wish to consider.

The Presiding Officer (Sir David Steel): She cannot make suggestions now—she can ask another question.

Miss Goldie: I thank the minister for that full

reply and for getting me married as well. [Laughter.]

Members: Congratulations.

The Presiding Officer: Order.

Miss Goldie: Given that since the inception of the Parliament many sections of the public have been baying for the blood of MSPs, does the minister agree that there is now a laudable and, indeed, novel opportunity for MSPs to give the public what they want, by going to the conveniently located centre at Laurieston Place as soon as possible, and giving as many pints as we can?

The Presiding Officer: Susan Deacon.

Dorothy-Grace Elder (Glasgow) (SNP) rose—

Members: Sit down.

The Presiding Officer: Order.

Susan Deacon: I congratulate Miss Goldie on her nuptials and on her creative line in questioning, and whole-heartedly endorse her plea to members.

Marine Protection

16. Tavish Scott (Shetland) (LD): To ask the Scottish Executive, further to the answer to question S1W-385 by the Minister for Transport and the Environment on 9 August 1999, whether it has yet received advice from its nature conservation advisers and whether Scottish Natural Heritage has any plans to designate the seas around Fair Isle as a marine special protection area under the birds directive. (S10-523)

The Minister for Transport and the Environment (Sarah Boyack): No. The Scottish Executive has not yet received advice from its nature conservation advisers on the identification of marine special protection areas under the birds directive, so there are no plans at present to classify the seas around Fair Isle as a marine SPA.

Tavish Scott: Does the minister accept that the local community and fishing and environmental organisations are working towards the designation of Fair Isle as a marine SPA? Will she support the island's application to be awarded a European diploma by the Council of Europe on the basis of the island being declared a special marine area?

Sarah Boyack: It would be helpful if I explained, as I said in my answer to Robin Harper last week, that the moderation process on special marine areas and special areas of conservation is still in progress. Until that process has finished, which is looking at land-based SPAs and SACs, we will not move on to look at marine-based areas. However,

I would be happy to talk to Tavish Scott about the other matters that he raised.

Waste Recycling

17. Mr Murray Tosh (South of Scotland) (Con): To ask the Scottish Executive what proposals it has to encourage householders to minimise their output of domestic waste and to encourage waste recycling. (S10-498)

The Minister for Transport and the Environment (Sarah Boyack): We are committed to adopting a national strategy for waste by the end of this year. The Scottish Environment Protection Agency is working on a strategy that will cover waste minimisation and recycling.

Mr Tosh: Will the minister assure me that she has no proposals to levy charges on householders for the collection and disposal of domestic refuse, and that no officers in her department are working on any such scheme?

Sarah Boyack: The scheme that we are working on at the moment is the national waste strategy that SEPA will publish before the end of the year. It will look primarily at the range of disposal and recycling options that will be available to the people of Scotland.

Pig Industry

18. Richard Lochhead (North-East Scotland) (SNP): This is the final pig question of the day.

To ask the Scottish Executive whether it intends to write to local authorities and other public authorities highlighting the quality of pigmeat produced in Scotland and urging them to support the industry by sourcing their orders from local producers. (S10-510)

The Minister for Rural Affairs (Ross Finnie): I have already written to local authorities in that vein. In addition, I wrote to my ministerial colleagues with responsibilities for the national health service, the police, the fire service, prisons and education, highlighting the desirability of sourcing local produce. However, Mr Lochhead will understand that while I can make that point and promote it, I cannot interfere with the competitive tendering process.

The Presiding Officer: There does not have to be a supplementary, but if there is one, we will take it.

Richard Lochhead: I welcome the minister's answer. Many people will have noticed that many members are wearing badges that say, "Save the Scottish Pig Industry". In addition, I urge all members to sign the all-party motion that was lodged today. I urge the minister to use every measure possible to encourage people to buy

Scottish pigmeat.

Ross Finnie: I am not sure that that supplementary requires any reply, other than to endorse what was said.

The Presiding Officer: The word amen would have done.

Youth Services

19. Dr Sylvia Jackson (Stirling) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive how it envisages the work of organisations offering a holistic advice service to young people, such as Off the Record in Stirling and The Corner in Dundee, being supported in their pioneering work to provide a confidential, accessible and multi-agency approach to help young people deal with increasing drug-related problems. (S1O-502)

The Deputy Minister for Justice (Angus MacKay): I announced a new drug prevention and effectiveness unit on 21 September. It will help locally based drug action teams to target the most effective ways of tackling long-running drug misuse problems. I believe that it will be of great help to organisations such as Off the Record and The Corner.

Dr Jackson: Would the minister be willing to visit Off the Record and The Corner, to hear at first hand of some of the financial difficulties that those organisations are having?

Angus MacKay: I am always happy to accept offers to visit projects, providing that my diary permits it.

School Closures

20. Andrew Wilson (Central Scotland) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Executive whether it regards recent school closures to be as a result of the current local government spending allocation. (S1O-546)

The Deputy Minister for Children and Education (Peter Peacock): No.

Andrew Wilson: Will the minister accept no responsibility, in spite of the fact that in the first three years of the Scottish Parliament the Government will be giving £2.5 billion less to Scottish local authorities than under the last three years of the Conservative Government?

Peter Peacock: The reality is that an increasing amount of money is flowing towards local authorities for educational purposes. That is why we are seeing the expansion of education provision across most of Scotland.

Council of the Isles

21. Trish Godman (West Renfrewshire) (Lab):

To ask the Scottish Executive what preliminary discussions have been held with the designated assemblies and Her Majesty's Government concerning the structure, functions and membership of the proposed council of the isles. (S1O-533)

The Minister for Finance (Mr Jack McConnell): Strand 3 of the Belfast agreement envisages the establishment of a British-Irish council and makes various provisions for its working arrangements. A treaty providing for the council's establishment was signed in Dublin on 8 March. The council will come into operation when powers are devolved to the Northern Ireland Assembly. In the interim, some preparatory discussions have been taking place at official level.

Trish Godman: The minister said that the council depends on the setting up of the Northern Ireland Assembly. Nevertheless, no doubt the London and Dublin Governments have an agenda for the council of the isles. Does the minister agree that it would be helpful if we had a position paper on the council relating to its structures, agenda and membership?

Mr McConnell: We will examine that matter at the appropriate time.

Scotland House

22. Bristow Muldoon (Livingston) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive what role it envisages the establishment of Scotland House playing in promoting the interests of Scotland within Europe. (S1O-526)

The Minister for Finance (Mr Jack McConnell): Scotland House acts as the focal point in Brussels for a mix of Scottish organisations, including the Executive, and many others from the public, private and voluntary sectors. We in the Executive see its establishment as playing an important role in promoting the interests of Scotland within Europe. A good example of its role was Scotland Week, from 11 to 15 October, which was hosted at Scotland House and was a week of business, cultural and social events to promote a positive awareness and understanding of Scotland.

Bristow Muldoon: Does the minister agree that the approach taken by the Scottish Executive of co-operation with our partners in Europe is the best way forward for the interests of Scotland, as opposed to the isolationist approach increasingly adopted—[*Interruption.*—]not by the SNP, but by the Conservatives?

Mr McConnell: I would not want to interfere with our colleagues in the SNP agreeing with the Conservatives' isolationist approach. The approach taken by the Executive is a good one for

Scotland. It allows us to have both the benefits of direct involvement in Europe and the clout that comes with being part of one of the bigger member states. That is in stark contrast to the way that Scotland would be isolated by the policy of the nationalist party and the way that Britain would be isolated by the policy of the Tories.

Open Question Time

SCOTTISH EXECUTIVE

Secretary of State for Scotland (Meetings)

1. Mr Alex Salmond (Banff and Buchan) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Executive when the First Minister last met with the Secretary of State for Scotland and what issues they discussed. (S10-517)

The First Minister (Donald Dewar): Yesterday, and, as always, matters of concern.

Mr Salmond: Yesterday, by coincidence, not just the First Minister but all four Labour MPs who are ministers in the coalition went down to London to vote through cuts in incapacity benefit. Were those four ministers voting under ministerial or collective responsibility, or were they, in London, free to exercise their individual consciences as back benchers?

The First Minister: There were a large number of members of this Parliament down in London voting yesterday. I am sure that none of them was ashamed of that. I suspect that they all approached their task with the same measure of seriousness and in exactly the same way.

Mr Salmond: The difference is that some of us went down to London to vote for the disabled—the First Minister went down to vote against the rights of disabled people. I heard it said that it was not a cut in incapacity benefit, so does the First Minister consider it to be right that someone on £85 a week will face the withdrawal of incapacity benefit at a rate of 50p in the pound? That is a higher marginal rate of tax than that faced by the richest person in the country.

The Presiding Officer (Sir David Steel): I must be clear that we are stepping over the boundary of what is a reserved matter. The first question was in order but the second is asking about the merits of a subject that is reserved for another place. If Mr Salmond would like to ask a different question, he should carry on.

Mr Salmond: Does the First Minister regard it as an effective use of the ministerial time of those four members to go down to London to vote for the cuts in incapacity benefit that I have described, instead of attending to their duties in Scotland?

The First Minister: I think that I recognised one or two members of the Scottish National party in the corridors of Westminster yesterday. Who voted the right way is a matter of judgment. I remind Mr Salmond and his colleagues that I supported Alistair Darling, when I was a member of the United Kingdom Cabinet, on the need to have an effective and adequate social security system,

which ensured that resources went to those who had most need. I voted, consistently, in that way last night. Consistency is sometimes a virtue in politics. I give Mr Salmond that as an original thought.

The Presiding Officer: The First Minister is now in danger of being out of order.

Mr Salmond: The First Minister has a wider responsibility to this Parliament, where a majority of members certainly oppose the cuts in incapacity benefit. The First Minister was feted as a head of state last Friday in Dublin. Last night he was lobby fodder in London. Should the First Minister of Scotland go down to London and act like Tony Blair's poodle in cutting incapacity benefit?

The First Minister: I think that, not for the first time, Alex Salmond is wrong on both points. I was not in Dublin as a head of state; I was there for some extremely constructive and productive talks with the Taoiseach and the President of the Irish Republic. I was glad to be there, and Alex Salmond ought to welcome the fact that I was there.

On the second matter, there is an enormous number of improvements in that bill. I believe that, on the whole, it is a good bill, but I do not want to go into the reasons for it because I see that the basilisk eye of the Presiding Officer is upon me. I must counsel Alex Salmond against the arrogant assumption that people who do not vote the same way as he does are definitely, and by definition, wrong.

Law and Order

2. David McLetchie (Lothians) (Con): To ask the Scottish Executive—I beg your pardon. [*Laughter.*] Today there are so many questions that the Executive deserves to answer.

To ask the Scottish Executive whether it will outline its law and order policy priorities. (S10-512)

The Deputy First Minister and Minister for Justice (Mr Jim Wallace): Our priorities for law and order are set out in our programme for government. We are committed to combating crime and drugs in our communities and to supporting the victims of crime.

David McLetchie: If the Scottish Executive is committed to being tough on crime and tough on the causes of crime—to use a particularly discredited soundbite—can the Deputy First Minister explain why it is robbing Peter, in the form of the Scottish Prison Service, to pay Paul, in the form of the drugs enforcement agency? Does that not show that, far from the joined-up government—a favourite Liberal Democrat soundbite, as I recall—that we were promised, the

right hand of this Executive does not know what the left hand is doing?

Mr Wallace: I can tell Mr McLetchie that we are, in fact, reallocating £13 million that the Prison Service had not spent in previous years. We are doing so because we are predicting fewer prisoners than were previously estimated. As Mr McLetchie rightly points out, we are redirecting some of that money to other aspects of the justice budget, including the setting up of a drugs enforcement agency, which I hope that he will welcome.

I should point out to the member that this year some £215 million is being spent on the Prison Service, compared with an average of £158 million in the five years of the previous Conservative Government.

David McLetchie: The Deputy First Minister is predicting fewer prisoners in our prisons because this Executive is soft when it comes to sentencing policy. Against a backdrop of increases in every category of crime that was recorded during the last year for which figures are available, this Executive is cutting funding for prisons, is cutting funding in real terms for victims and victim support, and has cut the number of police officers on the beat. Is that a record of which Mr Wallace is proud, and does it not compare ill with falling crime rates over the last seven years of Conservative government, to which the 2,000 extra police officers whom we put on the beat made a major contribution?

Mr Wallace: I am tempted to say, "Wrong, wrong, wrong, wrong." If Mr McLetchie concentrated more on the facts and the issues, rather than on soundbites, he might get a better understanding of the circumstances.

David McLetchie: Those are the facts.

Mr Wallace: The fact is that more money, an increase of 3.8 per cent, will be spent next year on the police in grant-aided expenditure. I have also announced £4.7 million in additional funding for the police to cover their millennium expenses. My colleague Angus MacKay has already announced the drugs enforcement agency, which will lead to 200 extra policemen—100 at national level and 100 at local level. When Mr McLetchie describes some of the alternatives to custody as soft options, he shows that he has been reading too many of Mr Phil Gallie's comments, instead of addressing himself to the fact that non-custodial sentences are usually very tough options. They are also far more effective at promoting rehabilitation, which reduces crime numbers in years to come.

Mr Keith Raffan (Mid Scotland and Fife) (LD): Will the Deputy First Minister give serious consideration to remarks made earlier today by the governor of Cornton Vale prison, who questioned whether imprisonment was the best

way in which to deal with people with addiction problems who commit minor offences? Does he agree that it would be far more sensible and humane—never mind cost-effective—to place those people in treatment centres? Will the Executive consider that alternative seriously?

Mr Wallace: Mr Raffan may know that a pilot study in drug treatment and testing orders, which are an alternative to custody, has been set up in Glasgow. Our cross-cutting approach to tackling drugs includes not only a drugs enforcement agency, but an emphasis on rehabilitation, education and health. It is important to see the issue in the round, rather than simply to pick out comments for headlines. These are far more complex issues than cheap addresses to the headlines indicate.

Dr Elaine Murray (Dumfries) (Lab): In the light of recent announcements on the reallocation of the underspend in the Prison Service and on possible new approaches to youth crime, will the Deputy First Minister say what effects, if any, there will be on Scotland's young offenders institutes?

Mr Wallace: Clearly, young offenders institutes continue to play an important part in the overall Prison Service. It is also fair to mention that the Cabinet held a strategy session on youth crime earlier this week, in which a range of issues was presented to us. Clearly, while custodial sentences will be necessary in some cases, there is a lot of evidence that non-custodial sentences that involve the community are often far more effective in tackling youth crime and reducing the amount of reoffending.

Phil Gallie (South of Scotland) (Con): Will the setting up of the new drugs enforcement agency result in more of those who are involved in the drugs trade being imprisoned? If so, will there be enough prison places for them, given the £13 million cut in Prison Service funding?

Mr Wallace: The establishment of the new drugs enforcement agency does not mean that there will be more imprisonment. We are trying to cut off the supply of drugs at a high level, which would mean that fewer drugs will get into the community. As I said to Mr Raffan, that is an important part of the strategy. It is also part of a strategy that tries to eliminate drug abuse through health and education.

Joint Working

3. Johann Lamont (Glasgow Pollok) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive how it is promoting joint working by local government, the national health service and Scottish Homes. (S10-534)

The Deputy Minister for Communities (Jackie Baillie): Working together is a key element in achieving better government. In the Executive, the

new ministerial committees handling cross-cutting issues are having a significant impact on key priorities.

At a local level, community planning is an example of councils working in partnership with other agencies to develop a common vision and improve the lives of the people they serve. The Scottish Executive will be working closely with local government to develop guidance and support for councils across the country.

Johann Lamont: I am sure that the minister is aware that there is a great deal of important joint working across the agencies at a local level to deliver a coherent service to the most vulnerable groups in a community through, for example, community care, primary health care and mental health care.

Is the minister aware, however, that professionals and voluntary groups report that attempts to work in partnership can be hampered by the separation of budget cycles, accountability lines and priorities at a Scottish level? Through the minister, I ask the Scottish Executive to give high priority to the organisational change that is required at a Scottish level to ensure support for crucial joint working at a local level.

Jackie Baillie: "Modernising Community Care" sets out ways in which local authorities, health boards, national health service trusts and Scottish Homes can work together more effectively on projects such as joint commissioning and pooling of resources. If organisational or administrative barriers such as those that Johann Lamont has described are present at a local level, health ministers will be interested in the details of the situation. I understand that the health ministers are meeting with local authorities tomorrow to discuss how to take forward that shared agenda.

Donald Gorrie (Central Scotland) (LD): Will the minister provide money to help with the important things that Johann Lamont highlighted? Money should be provided to voluntary organisations and local authorities for the promotion of youth work, sport and other activities that improve health and the quality of life in the community and which will, in the long term, reduce health expenditure.

Jackie Baillie: The compact that the Parliament endorsed yesterday sets out a new way of working between the Executive and the voluntary sector and between other agencies and the voluntary sector. The Convention of Scottish Local Authorities is producing guidance on the matter, and I hope that the related discussions will take place at a local level.

Malcolm Chisholm (Edinburgh North and Leith) (Lab): I welcome the minister's announcement last week of the £2 million that

Scottish Homes is to spend on women's refuges. As the minister responsible for that area of policy, will she ensure that Scottish Homes, health boards and local authorities work together on the strategy on violence against women and make that strategy a priority?

Jackie Baillie: I give the member that assurance and take his suggestion further. We also want to engage with the many voluntary organisations that work with women.

Bruce Crawford (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP): Will the minister help to clear up the mystery of what has happened to the community planning initiative? Prior to the election in May, many authorities were asked to take forward community planning as pathfinder authorities, recognising the democratic authority of those local authorities.

Jackie Baillie: That initiative is still on-going. The five pathfinder councils shared their experience of community planning with other local authorities in March 1999, and we are in the process of asking other councils to submit their proposals to the Executive.

Mary Scanlon (Highlands and Islands) (Con): Does the minister agree that an excellent example of joint working relationships would be to have one budget for the national health service and social work, to ensure that the 1,700 patients who are medically fit for discharge receive the appropriate level of residential care or care in the community?

Jackie Baillie: As I said in my original answer to Johann Lamont, "Modernising Community Care" is about looking at pooled budgets and joint commissioning. The health ministers will be taking that agenda forward.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes question time. I apologise to those members who are still waiting to ask questions.

The next item of business is a ministerial statement—

Tommy Sheridan (Glasgow) (SSP): On a point of order. In the light of the statement that is about to be given by the Minister for Transport and the Environment, would you rule that each of the departments in the Scottish Executive should be prepared to issue such statements to all the political parties represented in the Parliament?

Since early yesterday, I have tried to get a copy of the statement. I was told that I would get it two hours before the debate; I never got it. I went to the chamber desk at the back of the hall before coming in, to be told that they were not available and that they had been given out only to the transport spokespersons of each of the parties.

The Presiding Officer: I will not answer that

immediately, but I will look into it.

Michael Russell (South of Scotland) (SNP): On a point of order. When the Minister for Communities wound up yesterday afternoon's debate, she made the major announcement of the debate essentially in the last two minutes of her speech. That was contrary to procedure and to the way in which debates should be conducted. Would you rule that that is unacceptable and should not happen again?

Alex Neil (Central Scotland) (SNP) rose—

The Presiding Officer: Is it the same point?

Alex Neil: No, it is a related matter. Further to the point of order that was raised by my colleague Mr MacAskill and me yesterday about ministerial statements appearing in the press before they are announced to the Parliament, in the interests of openness and accountability, will you rule that ministers should first make their statements to Parliament and then to the press?

The Presiding Officer: Is that the end of the points of order? I received notice of those issues yesterday and, as I have mentioned, in writing from the Conservative party. I have given the matter careful thought and would like to make a considered statement on it.

It is not possible for every Executive decision to be announced in Parliament; otherwise, we would do nothing but listen to ministerial statements. It has to be a matter for judgment by the Executive which statements are of sufficient policy significance to be made in Parliament. In the case of the two matters raised yesterday as points of order, and in the letters to me from different members, I have to say that both the policy on road tolls and the creation of the Scottish community investment fund are, in my view, substantial policy questions which should have been announced to Parliament first.

I would further add that Executive policy announcements should not in any case be made during closing speeches and debate in the chamber, which are intended to be replies to the actual debates.

We are all on a learning curve and I do not wish to sound unduly censorious. Indeed, I have no powers at the moment, under standing orders, to prevent recurrences of what has happened. It is more a question of courtesy, good practice and the observing of the founding principles of the Parliament: openness and accountability. I hope that we will pursue that in future.

Strategic Roads Review

The Presiding Officer (Sir David Steel): We turn to the statement. I remind members that this is a two-stage process. The statement will be with questions for clarification only, followed by a debate on the statement.

15:18

The Minister for Transport and the Environment (Sarah Boyack): I welcome the opportunity today to report on the occasion of the publication of the reports on the strategic roads review.

Trunk roads make an important contribution to our integrated and sustainable transport strategy. They are a vital part of our transport network, but our integrated transport strategy is about much more than roads. Thirty-two projects are benefiting from the Executive's public transport fund, at a cost of £55 million. Those include bus priority and park-and-ride schemes, rail improvements combined with park-and-ride, improved rail and bus stations, better provision for cyclists and pedestrians and airfield and ferry improvements. Rail could make a substantially greater contribution in both the passenger and freight markets. We are supporting that development through our freight facilities grants. Four recent awards, totalling almost £14 million, will result in more than 100,000 lorry journeys a year being taken off our roads, with the goods being transported by rail.

The trunk road network is a major national asset, built up on the basis of decades of public investment. The former Conservative Government was failing to protect that asset through its decisions on budgets and priorities. It irresponsibly built up major expectations of new schemes, but at the same time raided the maintenance programme. Apart from being wholly irresponsible, that could only lead to bigger bills in the longer term.

We have begun to tackle that inheritance, and have increased spending on repair and maintenance substantially. This year such spending is a third more than the figure inherited from the former Conservative Government, and further increases are planned for the next two years. We can already see an impact on the condition of the network, for example, on the Edinburgh city bypass, and on the A90.

A key task is to increase effective capacity by making better use of the existing network, rather than carrying out widespread new building. That means better driver information; improving flows at key pressure points; promoting integrated approaches such as park-and-ride initiatives; and

considering systems to give priority on the network to particular types of vehicles such as buses and heavy goods vehicles.

Route action plans allow us to introduce measures to address congestion problems or accident black spots. Increasingly, route action plans will be used to determine investment priorities across the network and will examine the extent to which public transport as well as road improvements can meet transport needs. To illustrate that approach, I am pleased to confirm today additional junctions at Inchmichael and Inchture on the A90 between Perth and Dundee and two new junctions at Forfar. Those grade-separated junctions will proceed to construction as soon as is practicable, and will bring real safety benefits to local people.

Road safety is one of our key priorities. We will continue to place emphasis on accident investigation and prevention and on route accident reduction plans, as major safety benefits can often be secured through relatively inexpensive, commonsense improvements.

We are working with the UK Government on a review of speed policy and expect to publish later this year new targets for the reduction of road casualties in the period to 2010.

We are committed to protecting the environment through sustainable transport policies. That is why we need traffic management to protect communities from the effects of heavy through traffic and the pollution that is caused by stop-go driving conditions. It is why we need to improve the appearances of roads and bridges and to minimise or avoid altogether any harmful impacts of maintenance activity.

That is also why we must ensure that environmental considerations are at the heart of the design process and take mitigating measures to minimise or avoid altogether any harmful impacts arising from construction. Environmental considerations are why I am ruling out the Kelvin valley for any replacement of the A80. That was a difficult decision, but on the grounds of cost and environmental damage, I believe that it is right.

Our integrated transport strategy is about much more than building new roads. However, in certain circumstances, major new road construction is necessary. That is why we have built the A75 the Glen and the A828 Creagan bridge, and why we will progress further schemes.

The roads review took as its starting point the 15 inherited major trunk road proposals and two non-trunk road schemes: the A8000 and M74 northern extension. Those 17 schemes have a total capital cost in excess of £800 million.

We have scrutinised those schemes rigorously

against the criteria of economy, safety, environmental impact, accessibility and integration. We did that through the appraisal method that was developed for the review. Work began under the Scottish Office and the method was the subject of public consultation last year. A number of significant changes have been introduced as a result of the many useful responses that were received.

The report that I am publishing today contains full details of the appraisal method and of the results for each scheme that was reviewed. The analysis is comprehensive and thorough but stops short of addressing fully a major criticism that was levelled at the appraisal method during consultation. There was criticism that the method did not take a wider approach to allow trunk road proposals to be compared with other potential solutions such as public transport. The Scottish Executive is developing a new appraisal framework and, although some further effort is required to complete that work, I have concluded that we must apply that wider approach before building substantial new roads.

The review included the M8 completion, the M80 from Stepps to Haggs and the M74 northern extension to the Kingston bridge. Those substantial proposals have a combined cost of well over £400 million. Our analysis shows that they would carry very considerable volumes of commuting traffic, which is a sector of the travel market in which public transport should be able to make a much more significant contribution. I am therefore commissioning a multi-modal study of the transport corridors that are covered by the M8 and M80. I will ensure that relevant local authorities, transport operators, the business community and others with an interest are given a full opportunity to participate. I shall appoint an independent panel of academics to oversee that work.

Consistent with the approach that I announced on 23 June, the proposed M74 northern extension will be promoted by Glasgow City Council and South Lanarkshire Council and justified on the basis of the contribution it can make to the local transport strategies of those authorities.

I will be urging the councils to address environmental concerns about the proposal and to undertake a multi-modal study to identify whether there are options to reduce the scale of the road. I would also wish them to involve neighbouring authorities and those with an interest in this scheme in the work.

Tommy Sheridan (Glasgow) (SSP): Will the minister give way?

Sarah Boyack: No, thank you.

Tommy Sheridan: I thought that the minister

would take questions on points of information.

The Presiding Officer: No. The minister will take questions after the statement, not during it.

Sarah Boyack: I will take questions after I have finished my statement.

On the same basis, the replacement for the local road, the A8000, which provides a connection from the Forth road bridge to the central Scotland motorway network, will be promoted by the City of Edinburgh Council working closely with Fife Council and West Lothian Council.

Last November, the UK Government announced the preferred line for a new crossing of the Forth at Kincardine and plans to refurbish the existing bridge. Today, I can announce that we are appointing the Baptie Group to study engineering of the existing bridge, design of remedial works and the new structure and ecological surveys. We will also carry out transport surveys and modelling, including the potential to increase the use of public transport over the crossings. Both studies will consider whether early progress can be made on the proposed eastern link road to relieve some of the congestion that is currently experienced in Kincardine village.

As the operation of the Forth bridge crossing affects the Kincardine bridge and vice versa, I will also be meeting the relevant local authorities and the Forth road bridge joint board to discuss those interlinked issues.

In reaching my conclusions about the remaining schemes I have considered affordability—a notable change from the Conservative approach—as well as the outcome of our appraisal.

We believe there are more appropriate alternative measures that can be pursued in five schemes. Those are the A92 from Preston to Balfarg; the A9 from Helmsdale to Ord of Caithness; the A96 Keith bypass; the M80 Kelvin valley option; and the A1 draft order scheme. We have also concluded that there is no valid case for retaining the M8/M6 fastlink.

Three schemes will be held in abeyance and considered alongside other emerging priorities for a future trunk road programme. Potential schemes for that programme will be appraised using a multi-modal approach. The schemes are the A68 Dalkeith northern bypass, the A90 Balmedie to Tippetty route and the A985 Rosyth bypass.

Five schemes will proceed, including the A96 Fochabers and Mosstodloch bypass, to continue the upgrading of the A96 and to remove through traffic from these towns; the A78 Ardrossan to Saltcoats bypass, to relieve congestion in the towns of Ardrossan, Saltcoats and Stevenston; and the A830 from Arisaig to Kinsadel to replace a single-track section of the main road to Mallaig.

That is the last piece of single-track trunk road in Britain and, as Minister for Transport and the Environment, I am delighted to announce the scheme. Work will begin next year. We will also proceed with the A77 Fenwick to Mallettsheugh scheme to provide a dual, two-lane motorway. I know that colleagues have been campaigning for action on that dangerous stretch of road for years. Finally, we will continue the dualling of the A1 Haddington to Dunbar expressway, an important, all-weather route to England. The route has been long awaited and the Executive has now delivered. I am sure each of the projects will be warmly welcomed in their localities.

The A830, A96, A78 and A1 schemes will be funded in the conventional way from the motorway and trunk road programme, funding of which we have recently increased by £35 million. We are, however, prepared to use private funding when it clearly represents value for money and we will be investigating that approach for the A77 scheme. I emphasise that that will not involve the introduction of tolls on this new road.

We will be having early discussions about co-operation and joint working with East Renfrewshire Council and South Lanarkshire Council, which are promoting the Glasgow southern orbital route. That scheme will relieve congestion and end environmental damage in Eaglesham village. It will also provide a modern alternative to the heavily trafficked B764 from East Kilbride to the A77.

The extensive road building programme promised by the Conservatives was an unfunded wish list. It was also based on building new roads to meet the future rising tide of projected traffic increases. Current estimates are for a 38 per cent increase in traffic growth over the next 20 years and a 52 per cent increase over the next 30 years.

We need a new approach, especially in our cities and in the more congested central belt. We must make public transport more attractive and seek ways of shifting freight off our roads. We must also recognise the important role that walking and cycling can play in an integrated strategy. We must ensure that they are safe options.

Roads have an important role and we will maintain and restore the motorway and trunk road network after years of Tory neglect. We look to local authorities to do likewise in regard to the roads for which they are responsible. I have announced today a package of costed new roads that we can afford from the resources available—resources that were enhanced last year in the comprehensive spending review and that have been further increased in the Executive's first financial statement. Those have been tough choices, but this is a realistic programme. I believe it is the right way forward for Scotland. I commend

this statement to Parliament.

The Presiding Officer: I ask for members' help. I have asked the clerk to clear the screens completely of names, because a very large number of members had pressed their buttons. I want to make it clear again that members who are waiting to speak in the debate should not press their buttons just now. The only members who should do so are those who wish to ask brief questions for clarification. I will insist on that; I will not allow a debate to start during question time. I repeat: brief questions for clarification only. Please stick by the rule. I will stop anybody who does not.

My screen is filling with names—it will be impossible to accommodate everyone. The names have now gone right off the bottom of the screen. We will have no debate if we have endless questions.

Mrs Margaret Smith (Edinburgh West) (LD): Although I welcome the minister's statement, I am obviously disappointed that the A8000 has not found its way completely into the plans. I note that she said that it should be promoted by the councils and that she will be meeting council representatives. What does the minister believe are the options? How will the councils go about promoting the replacement? How might the Executive assist the councils in going for a more multi-modal approach to the road? The link is vital.

Sarah Boyack: Fife Council, the City of Edinburgh Council, West Lothian Council and the other authorities in the area have already done a great deal of work. They have been considering options for improving public transport and traffic flow across the Forth estuary crossings. That work has included extensive surveys, which have been supported by the Scottish Executive. I am looking forward to taking forward the options that the local authorities and the Executive have been working on.

The Presiding Officer: I am sorry—I should have taken the front-bench questions first.

Mr Kenny MacAskill (Lothians) (SNP): Does the minister rule out tolls on new or existing roads in Scotland?

Sarah Boyack: I am happy to answer that, and I note the points that the Presiding Officer made at the start of these questions.

We have carried out extensive consultation with our paper on tackling congestion. The question that Mr MacAskill asked related to existing trunk roads and motorways.

Mr MacAskill: New and existing.

Sarah Boyack: Yes. It would not be my intention to include, in the legislation that I will bring to this Parliament for further discussion and

consultation, the issue of trunk road and motorway tolls as a power for this Parliament.

Mr Murray Tosh (South of Scotland) (Con): How will the projects that are under review be implemented? What is the time scale? How will they be funded?

Sarah Boyack: Clearly, the local authorities involved could pursue a number of options. Part of my intention in the programme that we will bring forward in our integrated transport bill will be to provide a number of powers for local authorities to consider, covering such options as workplace parking levies and local road user charging. There is a variety of funding options, which I will be looking to the local authorities to explore. It would be prescriptive of me, at this stage, to tell them how I think they should take those options forward. That has to be the product of future debate.

Alex Neil (Central Scotland) (SNP): I welcome the inclusion of the upgrading of the A77 in the list of projects. Can the minister clarify the time scale for the A77 10-mile dualling and whether that time scale will be adhered to the private finance initiative is not a viable financial option? Furthermore, will she confirm that this project will precede the Glasgow southern orbital project?

Sarah Boyack: The Executive intends to begin consideration of the A77 project after today's debate. As for the Glasgow southern orbital route, I had initial talks when I visited Fenwick with Mr Neil and several other MSPs. I am very aware of the issues involved in the timing of the two routes and I intend to ensure that the co-ordination and progress of the projects will be undertaken with those concerns in mind.

Cathie Craigie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (Lab): The minister will be aware that congestion on the A80 trunk road causes difficulties for my constituents in Cumbernauld and Kilsyth. Although I welcome the strategic roads review and the Executive's intention to implement an integrated transport system, I am concerned about the people in the Cumbernauld area. Will the minister agree to meet me urgently to discuss issues that affect my constituency?

The Presiding Officer: With respect, that is not really a question of clarification. We will move on.

Donald Gorrie (Central Scotland) (LD): I am still not clear where the statement says that projects should be promoted by councils. In any case, what does that mean and is there any money to finance them?

Sarah Boyack: I have already said that we have had to make difficult choices. As we do not have sufficient funds to implement every scheme, we have had to prioritise. Councils could take advantage of very realistic options for developing

schemes. I am confident that that would lead to full consideration of other road projects and the development of options.

Tricia Marwick (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP): The minister has ditched the long-promised improvements to the Preston roundabout in Glenrothes on the A92 to Balfarg. She claims that there are more appropriate alternative measures. Has she spoken to Tullis Russell and Company Ltd, the town's largest employer, whose factory gates open out on to the A92? Has she spoken to the local MP, Henry McLeish, or to anyone in Glenrothes? Will she outline the appropriate alternatives and the time scale for their implementation? When will something be done about this death-trap road?

Sarah Boyack: The strategic roads review has covered the key issues of route action plans and measures to tackle safety problems. All the schemes that have not been approved today will go into the pot for consideration under the appropriate local mechanisms. There are options to improve route safety without implementing the initial schemes proposed in the strategic roads review.

Brian Adam (North-East Scotland) (SNP): Will the minister confirm that she has U-turned on the much-predicted detrunking of routes in the same way as she U-turned on the issue of road tolls?

The Presiding Officer: I do not think that that is a question of clarification either.

Phil Gallie (South of Scotland) (Con): Will the minister accept my congratulations on at last committing herself to Tory plans for the upgrading of the A77? The road will complement the M77/M8 route that the Tories provided.

The Presiding Officer: Order. That is certainly not a question of clarification.

Phil Gallie: It was a question of clarification.

The Presiding Officer: I could not hear the end of your sentence, but the beginning was certainly not clarification. What was the question?

Phil Gallie: The question was: can the minister give an estimate of the completion date for the road?

The Presiding Officer: Why did you not just ask that right away?

Ms Margaret Curran (Glasgow Baillieston) (Lab): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. Although you refused Cathie Craigie's question without giving her a chance to rephrase it, you gave Phil Gallie that chance. I do not think that that is fair.

The Presiding Officer: Cathie Craigie's question was whether the minister would agree to

meet her, which is not a clarification of the statement.

Ms Curran: That is not fair.

Cathie Craigie: On a point of order, Presiding Officer. You must have missed the start of my question if you thought that I was asking only for the minister to meet me.

The Presiding Officer: I thought that that was the point of your question.

Cathie Craigie: No.

The Presiding Officer: Anyway, let us proceed. I call Mr John Swinney.

Phil Gallie: On a point of order, Presiding Officer. *[Laughter.]* You accepted my question and the minister was about to reply.

The Presiding Officer: If we do without the preliminaries and get to the point of a brief question each time, we will all get on a lot better and faster.

Sarah Boyack: As I announced today, we are taking further the proposal to develop the route. I will have to report back with a detailed time scale, which will depend on considering the options for funding the route. That will progress from today.

Mr John Swinney (North Tayside) (SNP): May I compliment the minister on the decision on road improvements?

The Presiding Officer: No, you may not.

Mr Swinney: I ask her, then: what is the time scale for the approval of the construction of the two junctions on the A90 at Forfar, which she approved in her announcement today?

Sarah Boyack: We are taking the project forward in the next financial year and will consider the best options for progress.

Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab): Does the minister remain open to the possibility of progress on the A9 north of Helmsdale, the A82 from Glencoe to Inverness and the A96 Inverness to Aberdeen road, all of which are in need of repair? Is she prepared to hear representations from me and from councils in the Highlands on the priorities among those schemes?

The Presiding Officer: I have just stopped somebody else asking that kind of question. The minister may answer the first part of the question.

Sarah Boyack: The scheme analysis includes alternative ways in which to analyse and deal with safety issues. The key point is that we seek to repair and maintain the roads. That is why the strategic roads review is significant—it is about maintaining as well as extending the network.

Fergus Ewing (Inverness East, Nairn and

Lochaber) (SNP): Does the minister agree that her statement that the Arisaig to Kinsadel section of the Mallaig road is

“the last piece of single trunk road in Britain”

is incorrect? The last piece will be the section from Arisaig to Loch Nan Uamh. What is the cost of the Arisaig to Kinsadel section? When is the estimated completion date for that section?

Sarah Boyack: That section will cost around £12 million. I cannot say when it will be completed, but it will be started next year. We intend to make early progress on that route.

Dr Richard Simpson (Ochil) (Lab): I welcome the appointment of consultants on the Kincardine-Clackmannanshire bridge. Will the minister publish a timetable to indicate when the consultation process will be completed?

Sarah Boyack: The timetable will follow later.

Mr Kenneth Gibson (Glasgow) (SNP): When will the multi-modal study of the transport corridors covered by the M8 and M80 report? What criteria will be used to select the independent panel of academics to oversee the work?

Sarah Boyack: I will report further on that matter later.

Tommy Sheridan: Will the minister insist that Scottish Enterprise publish all the details of the report that allegedly claims that thousands of jobs and an economic bonanza will be created by the building of the M74 extension?

Sarah Boyack: One of the points that I made was that the local authorities involved in the scheme would have to give sufficient justification for it in their local transport strategies. I would expect them to include relevant information to that end.

Tommy Sheridan: With the greatest respect, I asked whether the minister would insist that all the details of the report were published.

The Presiding Officer: I am sorry, but I cannot allow another supplementary.

Tommy Sheridan: What is the point of asking questions if we do not get an answer?

The Presiding Officer: I cannot take your question, Mr Sheridan.

Linda Fabiani (Central Scotland) (SNP): Will the minister give a time scale for the reviews that she has announced?

Sarah Boyack: The reviews will be started from today. I do not have dates for completion, but I am happy to report them to the member later.

Mrs Margaret Ewing (Moray) (SNP): I welcome the announcement on the Fochabers and

Mosstodloch bypass. Exactly how much money is being allocated to the project and when will the orders be laid to ensure progress on the bypass, which has been delayed for far too long?

Sarah Boyack: Progress will commence as soon as possible. The expenditure is included in our costed programmes, so the scheme will go ahead.

Mr Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): Clearly, I am disappointed about the announcement on the A9 from Helmsdale to Ord of Caithness. Will the minister give me some comfort by saying that the criteria used, based on the number of the vehicles using the road, will be reviewed to allow the road to be improved?

Sarah Boyack: A range of criteria was used. It is important to note that some improvement work has been carried out on that stretch of road, and that, as I understand it, other options may lead to improvements, such as alignment of the route and the possibility of crossings. Today's announcement does not mean that no work will take place in the future, only that the specific scheme will not be carried forward.

Lord James Douglas-Hamilton (Lothians) (Con): Can the minister confirm that detailed planning of the A1 dualling between Haddington and Dunbar will now take place, so that construction can go ahead as soon as resources are available?

Sarah Boyack: That is correct. The scheme that we have selected has to be given further consideration and approval through the planning process. We will commence that process swiftly.

Euan Robson (Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (LD): Will the minister consider at least planning ahead purchases of land to allow the dualling scheme for the A68 Dalkeith northern bypass?

Sarah Boyack: I understand that some work on that has already been carried out. I am concerned that we examine the full range of options. Our priority will be consideration of the choices for the optimum improvement of transport in that area.

Mr Kenneth Macintosh (Eastwood) (Lab): I thank the minister for the good news on the M77 and the Glasgow southern orbital. The Glasgow southern orbital is not a trunk road, but will it have to satisfy the criteria that are applied to the trunk roads in the review?

Sarah Boyack: It will have to satisfy the relevant planning criteria.

Robin Harper (Lothians) (Green): Can the minister briefly explain the absence of any reference in the plan to road tolling, which was previously forecast?

Sarah Boyack: Yes. The review is about the strategic roads programme and the use of our road network. I intend to take forward the issue of road user charging through legislation—that will be a different piece of work. The debate has been on-going for the past four months, and I have discussed with many people a number of issues, including additionality, hypothecation and transparency. I intend that debate to continue. My statement today was on the strategic roads review.

Mr Keith Raffan (Mid Scotland and Fife) (LD): Can the minister clarify the position on the availability of extra resources for road maintenance, bearing in mind the widespread concern among all local authorities in the Mid Scotland and Fife constituency? For example, roads in Fife will now be renewed every 276 years when they should be renewed every 40 years.

Sarah Boyack: There is a long backlog of maintenance. The significance of the comprehensive spending review programme money is demonstrated by the additional £58 million over the next three years. That will enable us to catch up with some of that maintenance. We have to prioritise on the grounds of the efficiency of the road network and its safety. That catching up is what we are doing now.

The Presiding Officer: Thank you all very much. We now come to the debate on the minister's statement.

Donald Gorrie: On a point of order. It seems absurd that we are about to debate a document that some of us received about 10 minutes ago and that many of us have not seen at all. Would it not be better in future if serious documents such as the "Strategic Review of the Trunk Road Programme in Scotland" were discussed in a debate several days after the statement and the questions? We could then all read the document and the debate could be informed with knowledge rather than with speculation.

The Presiding Officer: That is indeed a difficult issue. The Executive is caught either way. If it publishes a document before a debate, it will be criticised because members have not had the document first, whereas even if members have had the document first, they may say that they have not had time to look at it properly.

We have to accept that this is not a perfect system. I have tried to keep the questions on the statement short to allow a full debate, but I do not know whether copies of the document are available now—[MEMBERS: "They are available."] They are available at the back of the chamber—members can thumb through the documents as the debate proceeds. I am sure that Mr MacAskill will give them plenty time to do that—but not

longer than 10 minutes.

Mr Raffan: Further to Mr Gorrie's point of order, Presiding Officer. Would it not be far more sensible to have a statement one week, followed by far less restrictive questioning than we are having now, and a debate the following week? Can we not refer this to the Procedures Committee?

The Presiding Officer: It is not a question for the Procedures Committee. The Parliamentary Bureau will certainly consider that suggestion in the light of today's experience and of the dissatisfaction expressed by some clerking colleagues about my strict rationing of questions. I am trying to follow the instructions that we have been given, in which we have a two-stage process. If the Parliament feels that that system is not working, we will simply try to avoid it in future. We will perhaps have statements one week and debates the next but, at the moment, our procedures include the one that we have followed this afternoon. Let us proceed with the debate and see how we go.

15:49

Mr Kenny MacAskill (Lothians) (SNP): I wish to preface comments on the substantive matters before us by thanking you for your earlier ruling, Presiding Officer. As a courtesy, I was provided with a copy of the strategic review at 12:30. However, substantive matters seem to have been made available to individual press representatives days ago. The purpose of the media, I believe, is to report matters in this chamber. The purpose of this Parliament is to challenge and to scrutinise. There will be a substantial democratic deficit if actions or leaks result in matters being reported unchallenged and unscrutinised.

I was going to say that I was delighted to see that the minister had not been hung out to dry and that the Labour front bench had come, team handed, so to speak, to ensure that it was seen that a collective decision had been taken. It appears that I got that wrong. The minister has been hung out to dry on the issue of tolls.

Looking back, we were led to believe that the Executive wanted tolls, but that the minister did not. We were then told that both the Executive and the minister wanted tolls. Now we understand that neither the Executive nor the minister wants tolls. To further complicate the matter and perplex the average MSP—and me—we are told that the Executive and the minister want tolls, but the Secretary of State for Scotland does not. What a shambles—perhaps they could sort it out peacefully, constructively and in a dignified fashion over a drink at the bar at the next Labour conference.

The Labour party's policy on tolls seems to have been formulated in the nursery. Like the grand old Duke of York, the Labour party has marched us up to the top of the hill and it has marched us down again. Now it is thinking of taking us halfway up, so we are neither up nor down. It is not going to toll old roads, but reserves the right to toll new roads. Leadership, vision, strategy? Come on down. What a shambles.

What of the strategic roads review? Was it worth the lengthy wait? It has taken two and a half years to deliver a patchwork quilt of a road system and now there will be further investigations and further delay. Will it be the same time scale of two and a half years or more?

This announcement falls between two anniversaries. Tomorrow is Guy Fawkes day. The announcement has produced not fireworks, but a damp squib. Tuesday past was the 40th anniversary of the opening of the M1, which links London to Birmingham. Forty years on, through the failure of the Executive and its Conservative predecessors, we still do not have a motorway that links our two major cities, Edinburgh and Glasgow—nor, indeed, do we have one that links the lowlands to the Highlands. What a disgrace.

There has been a volte-face and a humiliating U-turn on the toll tax. Are we supposed to be grateful for small mercies? That would not be surprising, given the cap-in-hand attitude of the Executive.

If the Executive thought that it could hide paucity of effort behind the smokescreen of saving us from the toll tax, which was and remains a nonsense, it is mistaken. That is not a sign of a listening Executive but of a fumbling, panicking Executive.

We need to consider what we want transport to do in society. That takes us back to philosophy and purpose. We view transport as an economic fundamental in a global economy and as a social necessity for a better community, underpinned always by the requirement to take cognisance of our duty as custodians of the environment and habitat in which we live.

This is piecemeal policy—there is no consideration of the bigger picture nor of the strategic importance to the Scottish economy of the transport infrastructure. The review is a sop. By being so geographically disparate, it tries to convince all parts of the country that something is being done.

What strategic overview has been taken, when the entire county of Clackmannanshire, which has already been stuffed in terms of the public transport fund allocation, is stitched up in the trunk roads review and left isolated without even a connection to the trunk road network? Clackmannanshire is not a community on the

periphery of our nation; it is located at its heart. Is Labour taking economic sanctions against a nationalist administration?

The sum of the parts counts and the total, in terms of tasks and expenditure, is inadequate. This is not a trunk roads review; it is a continuation of a B-class road system in Scotland.

Failure to implement the policy in full over a defined and reasonable time scale is not environmentally sound or ecologically friendly. Clearly, road building has environmental and ecological effects—it would be absurd to pretend otherwise. However, we must consider matters in a utilitarian light. The failure to construct new roads also has environmental and ecological effects. Moreover, the Executive's inadequate proposal gives rise to serious economic and social costs.

Tavish Scott (Shetland) (LD): Will Mr MacAskill give way?

Mr MacAskill: I will give way in a minute.

Why do some people suggest that new roads are bad? Does that make an old road good? Alternatively, if all roads are bad, should we be digging them up and grassing them over? The proposition that an inanimate object that lacks any consciousness—moral or otherwise—can be good or bad is absurd. Surely what matters is how a new or improved road meets the criteria on which it will be judged. That takes us back to the economic, social and environmental criteria.

Let us be quite clear about the nature of the roads under review. Only one new build—the M74 northern extension—is included. The other roads are upgrades and improvements where substantial difficulties and dangers have been identified over the years. They were chosen neither arbitrarily, nor as the result of a call to a road review hotline—Ralph or Clarence; they were selected under a fundamental roads review as part of a strategic and integrated transport policy.

Malcolm Chisholm (Edinburgh North and Leith) (Lab): Is the SNP prepared to make any choices whatever about the Parliament's budget or its own roads budget? Does Mr MacAskill support every road in the review? If so, where on earth will he find the £900 million to pay for them?

Mr MacAskill: Malcolm should sit down and listen—I will get to that in a minute.

The failure to deal with all the roads over a defined time scale undermines the strategy and destroys the integration of our road network. On the M74, the emphasis has been on the cost of building, but I want to consider the cost of not building it. The M74 is vital to the west central economy and, arguably, to the whole of the Scottish economy. Six thousand jobs are

jeopardised and, unless the matter is addressed, the Executive will be writing the P45s. The calls to build the M74 north extension come from a wide and disparate section of the business and civic community. The people making those calls do so from a desire not to pave the west of Scotland in concrete, but to build an industrial community capable of providing jobs and income into the 21st century.

The minister will have to answer the question of how to square the circle and pay for the M74 and the other requirements. The SNP will not become involved—I am about to address Malcolm Chisholm's point, so he may want to take note—in horse-trading over what should or should not be done. As far as we are concerned, all the roads are of equal priority and the debate should be about timing, not construction. Some of my colleagues will address in greater detail the finances available to carry out this urgent task. Let me make it quite clear: the SNP's priority is to build our nation and its infrastructure, not to promulgate a policy of tax cuts to satisfy middle England.

The Executive is keen to trumpet the fact that Scotland's economy is growing. No one here today would not say that that growth needs all the nourishment and assistance that it can get. Why, then, has there been a massive cut in the proportion of the nation's wealth that the Executive is prepared to invest in transport?

Tavish Scott: On "Good Morning Scotland" today, Mr MacAskill said that he wanted to implement the strategic roads review in full. Is that the SNP's position? What is its time scale for implementation?

Mr MacAskill: We are not in the Executive, so how can I possibly answer that question? As far as we are concerned, there should be a strategic, integrated policy. The strategic roads review came about because the roads were regarded as necessities in their areas. We believe that they are all necessities; if Mr Scott does not agree, he should tell us which ones he thinks are unnecessary. At least the minister had the guts and the gumption to do that.

Tommy Sheridan: Will the member give way?

Mr MacAskill: Not at the moment. Well, as it is you, Tommy, on you go.

Tommy Sheridan: Thank you. When Mr MacAskill mentioned the M74, he referred to 6,000 jobs that were under threat. What report did he base that figure on?

Mr MacAskill: The figure comes from information provided by the campaign and action groups; it is based on what could happen to British Airports Authority plc, IBM (UK) Ltd and other

companies located west of Glasgow, whose future would be threatened by the failure to build this much-needed road.

In the last year of the Tory Government, 1.03 per cent of gross domestic product was spent on transport and the environment. Over the next three years, less than 0.7 per cent of our national wealth will be reinvested in transport and the environment. In money terms, that means that some £739 million extra would have to be reinvested in Scotland just to keep spending apace with growth. Meanwhile, in London, the chancellor is happy to draw money from Scotland's account to line a £12 billion war chest, rather than to reinvest the money in the nation to nurture the economic growth that we badly need.

When the south of England needed the M25 orbital, it was built. When Newbury blocked access to English channel ports, it was bypassed. When areas in the south and west were isolated, that was solved by road construction. Not one of those schemes was privately financed, and certainly none of them was subject to tolls.

What an absurdity—some nations discover oil and make their deserts bloom, but we discover oil and the Executive attempts to create an industrial desert. In this country, many of our citizens face absolute poverty. The problem in the Parliament is not absolute poverty, but the Labour leadership's poverty of aspiration. Things do not need to be this way. Let us aspire to what is seen as normal and as a matter of right in comparable small European nations such as Denmark and Finland.

This is not the statement of a minister for transport—it is the statement of a convener of a committee for filling in potholes. It is a B-road scheme from a second-rate Executive.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Patricia Ferguson): I call Murray Tosh to open the debate for the Conservative party. You have 10 minutes, Mr Tosh.

16:00

Mr Murray Tosh (South of Scotland) (Con): It was a pity that in the transport minister's attempt at statesmanship, she felt obliged to have ritual backwards kicks at the previous Conservative Government. They fell wide of the target. We heard that that Government had ignored its responsibilities and that it had built up expectations that were not fulfilled.

I will say this for the previous Government—at least it had a document that defined the routes in the trunk road network in terms of trans-European networks. The document defined a forward programme, and the previous Conservative Government implemented a substantial proportion

of that programme and left some schemes to run almost until the election got in its way.

The present Government has laboured for more than two years and has not come up with a convincing alternative or followed through on that programme. I am afraid that it has produced something of a mouse today.

Far from injecting further resources and breathing life into Scotland's transport system, this Administration—and its immediate predecessor in London—has presided over a massive reduction in resources. It has presided over the loss of £140 million a year in local authority revenue expenditure on roads. Professor David Begg has said that there has been a reduction of about £80 million in capital expenditure by local authorities.

In its last two years, the previous Conservative Government spent more than £280 million—Ms Boyack is here today to boast that in her next two years she will have £66 million and that that is somehow much better. I fail to see the logic in that.

Malcolm Chisholm: Is it not the case that in the last three years of the previous Conservative Government, expenditure on roads fell by 37 per cent? Is it not also the case that—contrary to what Mr Tosh said—expenditure and maintenance will double between 1997 and 2002?

Mr Tosh: Mr Chisholm knows that global expenditure by the Government and by local councils has been substantially reduced. We could trace a path through the years of the previous Government and we would find ups and downs in transport expenditure. The unalterable fact is that today's transport proposals are insignificant in comparison to the budgets that were administered and implemented at that time.

That Government built miles and miles of motorway and trunk road, on which our economy depends. Our economy needs that work to be completed—it needs that vision to be fulfilled. This Administration has not done that.

Business interests will treat today's announcements with utter dismay. When will those projects take place? Will they happen? Who will implement them? The M74 has been the subject of a massive lobby from every conceivable area of Scottish business. Will Glasgow City Council be responsible for deciding whether that project goes ahead, or will the Scottish Executive decide? Who knows? Ms Boyack did not tell us. If business interests came forward to say that they would like to build it, or if the enterprise agencies were willing to fund it through their budgets, would the Executive allow that? Who knows?

The plans for completion of the road network round Glasgow were left in a state of limbo this

afternoon. The minister is shaking her head, but I will gladly give way to her if she will give any information about time scales and implementation details and, crucially, on whether completion will happen and whether that is a decision for the local authority.

Sarah Boyack: I made it clear in my statement that it would be a matter for the local authorities in the area to progress. The issues that Mr Tosh has raised concern potential funding routes that would be available—and there are several potential funding routes. I am asking the authorities to consider them, to identify the right stretch of road and to develop that road. That is a realistic proposition.

Mr Tosh: The basis of a strategic approach is that it is planned as a whole—there is an overriding goal and a process that is defined and carried out, subject to the proper democratic, legal and planning procedures. It is not to say to 32 local authorities, “You might have a part to play and, if you are willing to play it, this might happen—some time, somehow—through funding mechanisms that have yet to be defined.” That is not strategic. That is the abdication of all responsibility. That is the collapse of a programme.

Let us consider the case of the A8000. What if the City of Edinburgh Council and Fife Council do not agree? What if they cannot agree whether or how it should happen, or who should fund it? Will the Scottish Executive be able to find a way through that, or will the project founder because no one can agree? There is to be a study on the Forth road bridge crossings—fine. What happens next, and when? Who can tell us? Who will tell us? Who will accept responsibility? Surely that is the minister’s responsibility, not the responsibility of the councils, however important and valuable their role will be.

For areas that have lost out today, there must be some regret. Jamie Stone referred to that. In areas that have benefited, local delight will follow today’s announcement. I notice that Allan Wilson is already away to celebrate. What about the three deferred schemes? Euan Robson is a man who is devastated by the fact that the Executive that he supports has given him nothing. It has taken away the Dalkeith bypass, which is the access route to the Borders, and it will not say that it will give that region the Borders railway. The Borders have been left with nothing from the review.

Euan Robson: Obviously, in his previous career Mr Tosh was not a geography teacher. He has failed to recognise that, for the eastern Borders and east Berwickshire, the announcement on the Haddington to Dunbar section is of major significance. Is he not aware of the efforts that have been made by the A1 safelink campaign to

ensure that there will be a major safety upgrading on the A1? Does he not understand that the A68 northern bypass is still in a programme and might be developed in the future?

Helen Eadie (Dunfermline East) (Lab): Will Mr Tosh answer another question at the same time?

Mr Tosh: That is unfair. I have accepted a long intervention. I should not have to accept another.

Helen Eadie: I am asking for clarification. Will Mr Tosh give way?

Mr Tosh: No, no, no—to quote my leader.

My point specifically for Euan Robson is that, however worth while the A1 project is, it does nothing for the access routes down the A7 and the A68. That project was ready to implement at the election, but Mr Robson’s cronies ditched it, deferred it and now will not tell members when it will happen or when it will be completed. I heard Mr Robson’s earlier intervention. He is as worried about that situation as I am, but he does not want to admit it. Nevertheless, this is a black day for the Scottish Borders, which have been given nothing in the strategic roads review, and nothing either by way of compensation through the railway option.

Mr Alex Salmond (Banff and Buchan) (SNP): Will Mr Tosh give way?

Mr Tosh: I shall give way if Mr Salmond’s question is short.

Mr Salmond: I want to take the debate away from that confrontation.

Given the experience of the Skye road bridge, does the Conservative party in Scotland still support privatised road or bridge schemes that are subsequently tolled, or has that policy changed?

Helen Eadie: On a point of order. Is Mr Tosh prepared to speak only to men in this debate?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That was not a point of order, Mrs Eadie. Carry on please, Mr Tosh.

Mr Tosh: At the close of her statement, the minister talked about a package of roads that could be afforded from the resources that were available. To Mr Salmond, I say that the Conservative Government did not fund from tolling any strategic road that was part of a programme, and did not build a motorway and subsequently toll it. The one example that he is trying to angle for was not in the programme, but was put in the programme on the basis of tolling. The strategic programme was to be funded—and was funded—wholly by conventional methods. That is our approach.

The question of resources is critical. The Executive has made out that resources are

somehow God-given. The resources that are available for roads are the ones that the Executive has made available. Just as it is possible to wind the roads budget down by £100 million, it is also possible, if the Executive really wanted to, to wind it back up by £100 million. I suggest that there might be scope in the enterprise budget to find some leverage to increase the programme.

I notice that time is marching on, Presiding Officer, but I hope that I will get some compensation for the interruptions. I conclude by saying that what we heard this afternoon was a classic example of new Labour newspeak. We have heard that less is somehow more, that bad is somehow good, that uncertainty is somehow decision, and that the abdication of strategic decisions to local authorities somehow represents policy decisiveness and direction.

The sad and sorry truth is that, in the tenure of her office so far, the minister has been a disaster. She has failed to bring to completion, to fruition, to decision and to announcement something that Scotland has been desperately awaiting for the past two and a half years. She has left all the strategic and critical routes in limbo. She has left them subject to the decision-making processes and resources—which she controls—of local authorities, and to the funding mechanism that she has yet to define and for which she has yet to legislate.

The final implication is that the motorist will pay for the whole thing and that the programmes that ran before and could run again will not be allowed to run. She has ignored the economic case that has been made for many of the routes. She has ignored the interests of the remoter rural areas such as Dumfries and Galloway and she has cancelled a route in the north-east. She has done nothing for those areas and she has come to the chamber with a policy that does not link in with an economic policy that promotes social inclusion. By the Government's own standards, her statement is a non-event, a contradiction and a disaster.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I shall now open up the debate, which will end just before 5 o'clock. I ask members to keep their contributions strictly to four minutes. I call Tavish Scott.

16:12

Tavish Scott (Shetland) (LD): Murray Tosh's speech was entertaining, but I think that someone must have slipped something into his water before he started because he was much more animated than he usually is.

It is clear that the Tories care about roads, but it is also clear that they care about nothing else to do with transport. Scotland needs a strategic and sustainable transport infrastructure and that

involves roads. Roads are not the be-all and end-all of a strategic and sustainable infrastructure, but it is right to consider roads as part of an integrated network.

Today's announcement of further investment in Scotland's strategic road network, although limited, is welcome. I particularly welcome the investment in the Mallaig road in the light of the members' business debate that was held recently on that subject. I am sure that all who have campaigned on that issue will also welcome the announcement.

Choices in government are about priorities. When the Conservatives were in government, the UK and Scotland had a roads policy and nothing else. We have moved away from that and on to the new politics, which involves considering all forms of transport as part of an integrated structure. In my view, and in the view of the Liberal Democrats, that is the right way to approach the problem of moving people and businesses around the country. It is unfortunate that Murray Tosh does not share that view. The far right has an ideological obsession with the market, the market and nothing but the market. When buses and trains were deregulated and privatised, we saw the results of that obsession.

Last night, to remind myself of previous debates, I re-read the *Official Report* for 16 September 1999—a Conservative Opposition day on which there was a debate on transport—just before I watched "Newsnight Scotland". Mr Tosh is, apparently, a politician to watch—but not on television, to judge by last night's performance.

Mr Tosh rose—

Tavish Scott: Mr Tosh may feel rather contrite about what he said about Railtrack. Given subsequent events, he may want to revisit the comments that he made at that earlier debate.

The coalition's approach is clear: we seek to build an integrated transport strategy for Scotland, and strategic roads investment has a vital role to play in that. The Tories do not want that, as has been explained again today, and it appears that the nationalists do not want it either. The Scottish National party wants to complete the strategic network in full, and Mr MacAskill confirmed that in *The Scotsman* this morning and on "Good Morning Scotland". Yet what did the SNP manifesto say? It said:

"we will undertake a full review of all planned existing road development schemes to ensure that road developments are prioritised to deliver the maximum safety, social and environmental benefits."

Quite. Absolutely. That is exactly the right approach and that is what the roads review is all about. However, the SNP's position has now changed and another chunk of the manifesto has

gone up in smoke.

Given that the SNP is now committed to the full strategic roads network, Mr MacAskill has committed his party to the M74 extension, too. What did the SNP's Glasgow local government manifesto say in the 1999 election?

"SNP councillors will oppose granting of planning permission for this motorway. Nationally, the SNP will oppose wasting Holyrood's too little money on what would be the most expensive motorway in Europe".

I wonder when Kenny MacAskill plans to next meet his colleagues on Glasgow City Council. How would the SNP fund the entire programme? Mr MacAskill would not say. How will the SNP pay for the extra spending? Where will it find £800 million? Will Mr MacAskill cut other programmes or raise taxes? What time scale is envisaged for that £800 million spending commitment? There were no answers to any of those questions, and I do not see why members in this chamber should not hear those answers.

Mr MacAskill rose—

Tavish Scott: If Mr MacAskill answers the questions, I will be delighted to give way.

Mr MacAskill: Does not Mr Scott accept that the Scottish motorist, the Scottish consumer and Scottish society are paying backdoor taxation through the level of excise duty put on them by this Government? That is taxation.

Tavish Scott: It is taxation, but the point about the fuel tax escalator is that the money that comes from it goes into the general taxation pot at Westminster and is then apportioned to priority areas as the Government sees fit. The priority area that has been identified in Scotland—as set out in the partnership document—is an integrated transport system. The SNP does not want that, the Tories do not want that, but this partnership Government does. That is the right approach for the future of Scotland.

This is a devolved Parliament in the context of the money that is available to us. The people voted for it and rejected independence. Let us deal constructively with what we have: a transport policy with a significant roads element, not the fantasy fairyland that we have heard about from the Opposition.

16:16

Margaret Jamieson (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (Lab): As an Ayrshire native, I welcome the minister's statement, particularly on the A77.

Mr Tosh: So do I.

Margaret Jamieson: Murray never said so. We are still waiting.

Mr Tosh: Take it as read. I applauded when the minister announced it.

Margaret Jamieson: The doomsayers have tried to talk down today's announcement, but I welcome the fact that the whole distance from Malletsheugh to the Kilmarnock bypass will be completed. Sarah Boyack is the latest in a long line of ministers who have been lobbied about that appalling and dangerous road. Some of them are members of this Parliament: Malcolm Chisholm, Henry McLeish and Lord James Douglas-Hamilton. No doubt many will want to take credit for the good news for Ayrshire today. In recent days, many leaders of the campaign have claimed their pre-eminence in the press, although their leadership was so far ahead of the real workers that they were out of sight.

The real architects of the now to be upgraded A77 have been the people who live alongside the road. They have lived with the daily tragedies of the road and each accident has redoubled their efforts to make the road safe. Alongside them, I credit East Ayrshire Council, and before it, Kilmarnock and Loudoun District Council. I also credit local parliamentarians Willy McKelvey and Des Browne, who have given their voices to the rightful demands that the carnage must stop. I also give great credit to the *Kilmarnock Standard* and its editor, Alan Woodison, who is here today. The paper has continued to promote its killer road campaign and must also share in the plaudits.

Today we should stop and give thought to all those whose lives have been blighted by the A77: the dead, the injured and their families who have received the feared phone call or visit from the police. Their pain can never be repaired. The minister's statement does much to ensure that fewer people will join that list.

There is another side to the welcome news to upgrade the A77. Ayrshire remains an unemployment black spot. The Ayrshire local authorities have been fighting the great problem of inadequate infrastructure in one of the last major centres of population that is not directly connected to a motorway network. The economic development teams can now go out and sell the county to business and to manufacturing.

My constituency of Kilmarnock and Loudoun can be marketed as the safe gateway to the new Ayrshire. There are great skills in Ayrshire and quality education facilities. There is wonderful tourist potential in our Burns country. There is a marvellous quality of life. All are positive selling points to market the area to potential investors. Now the final piece is in place and we can look forward to a positive future and to the provision of quality, sustainable jobs for my constituents. Now we have a future.

16:20

Mr Gil Paterson (Central Scotland) (SNP): I declare an interest as, if the M74 extension goes ahead, it will have an impact on a business that I own on the south side of Glasgow.

I have heard promises today—promises to look into, promises to examine and promises to continue studies. Promises to do anything constructive, however, have been thinly scattered. The review took two and a half years: that is 30 months in which roads projects in Scotland have been on ice—two and a half years of straining to produce a vehicle with no wheels. It is still on the drawing board and the best that the minister can come up with is to announce that she will be commissioning so-called multi-modal studies or urging councils to do so.

Surely all the studying and considering should have been done as part of the review. If not, what have we been waiting for? What has the Executive been doing? The so-called motorway, the M8, should connect Scotland's two major cities—the hubs of the Scottish economy, which contain more than half the nation's population. We should be able to drive quickly and easily from one city to another. That is not to say that we should not be encouraging better public transport links between the cities, but doing so does not always assist those who live or work along the M8 corridor or provide an infrastructure foundation on which to develop the economy. The motorway network in Britain was born 40 years ago yet the Scottish network is still in labour. The whole nation is suffering the pains.

This thinking suggests that someone is desperate for an MOT. Forty years later, we do not need another study, multi-modal or otherwise, to tell us what is obvious. A small, progressive nation entering the 21st century should have its main arteries clear. It should have a motorway linking its two major cities.

The other missing link in Scotland's motorway network is the A80 between Stepps and Haggs. Is that the revolutionary new concept for which London is waiting—a "motorway" with two sets of traffic lights? The route from all points north to all points south via Glasgow should be something more than a main road through several towns. That was the intention when the motorway network was proposed, but still we wait for yet another study.

Why are these links missing? They are not new roads but upgrades of current routes to an acceptable standard. Could it be that the minister is afraid to tell us that she cannot get enough petrol money from the chancellor because he needs it to fill his own tank? We have already paid enough to merit a motorway system of our own,

even if it is 40 years overdue.

Since Labour took the driving seat at the Treasury, pump prices have increased by 25 per cent. Every time we buy a gallon of fuel, £3 goes to the Treasury. Looking at the state of the roads and public transport, we are entitled to ask if that money ever returns to Scotland.

Contrast that to the situation in Alaska. When I visited there last year, fuel cost 99 cents—60p—a gallon. Every man, woman and child in Alaska gets an oil premium of \$1,500 a year to use in whatever way they want. Alaska discovered oil and its people got richer. Scotland discovered oil and we get fleeced. Do not tell me that Scotland cannot afford a motorway network—we have already paid for it through the nose. Do not hide behind another review. Do not talk Scotland's aspirations down—we should be on the fast track, not in the slow lane.

16:25

Des McNulty (Clydebank and Milngavie) (Lab): I welcome the minister's statement, particularly the announcement of the five schemes that will now proceed. I welcome also those elements in the statement that highlighted integration between the strategic roads policy and the broader policies on environmental protection, on tackling congestion and on dealing with some of the difficult issues raised by increased levels of traffic for people in Scotland.

We deserve an honest debate on those issues, but I am not sure that we have had one so far from the Opposition parties. Murray Tosh generated a great deal of heat and noise. I compliment him primarily on his capacity to invent the new Conservatives, who are naturally not responsible for the deficiencies of the past. The Tories cut investment in roads from £247 million in 1994-95 to £156 million in their final year in office, yet Murray Tosh presents himself as the spokesperson for the pro-roads lobby. As Malcolm Chisholm pointed out, the forward programme was cut by 70 per cent in 1996—70 per cent, Murray.

Mr Tosh rose—

Des McNulty: The Executive is increasing expenditure on roads generally and, in funding the five schemes that I referred to, it is tackling some of the most serious problems of the roads infrastructure in Scotland. The Executive is not dealing with all the problems of Scotland's roads, because it is working within a given budget, but roads are a priority, as are other transport matters. Murray recognises that there are priorities and hard choices in politics. He wants all the money to be spent on roads, but he is wrong.

Mr Tosh: Will Des McNulty give way?

Des McNulty: No.

Murray's party reduced expenditure on public transport to zero. It did little or nothing to tackle congestion during its 18 years in office; indeed, those 18 years generated the serious transport problems that we have today.

At least Murray indicated that hard choices have to be made. Kenny MacAskill's view is the classic SNP position: a road for every town and village in Scotland. If someone wants a road, Kenny will provide it. Wherever people are, every priority can be met. He does not even need Andrew Wilson's calculator—£1 billion can be found to meet everyone's needs. Is not that easy politics—something for everyone? The money can just be handed over, because the SNP simply ignores budgetary constraints.

Mr Tosh: The minister has announced a reduction in the roads programme. Were she to invest £700 million over seven years, at a cost of £100 million a year, that would equal the budget increases that were achieved under the Conservative Government. Indeed, the increase was often greater than £100 million. Why is that impossible now?

Des McNulty: A balance exists between public expenditure, roads expenditure and other forms of expenditure, such as expenditure on health and education. We are in government to make choices, and I applaud the choices that have been made today. Murray at least recognises that choices have to be made, even if he disagrees with them. Kenny MacAskill does not want to make a choice at all; he wants to spend money that this Government and Scotland do not have.

In reality, we must take the issue of transport expenditure forward. The issue is not just one of roads; it is about public transport, the environment and the kind of Scotland in which we want to live. We have to consider economic benefits, road safety, the environmental impact of road building, issues of access and the range of integrated policies on which we must make progress. We must make decisions according to those considerations. The decisions will not please everyone, but we have to recognise that the decisions that we make must be realistic—choices must be made and resources must be allocated.

The minister has made good choices in the face of a difficult set of competing claims. I hope that some issues, such as the way in which the A74 can be taken forward, will make progress following further discussions with the relevant local authorities.

16:30

Mr Nick Johnston (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I draw members' attention to the fact that I am a member of the Institute of the Motor Industry. This comprehensive spending review on roads takes place against the background of taxation of £2 billion per annum on Scotland's motorists.

In 1997-98, spending on transport—roads and public transport—was only £244 million. That is only 14 per cent of the tax revenues. Today, we keep hearing about available funds. When I had my first member's debate on 9 September—it was on economic conditions in Clackmannanshire—I asked Henry McLeish to take steps to initiate a co-ordinated approach to the problems of Clackmannanshire and west Fife.

The Scottish economy is reliant on good transport links, as it is on the fringe of the UK and the European single market. It is vital that the Scottish Executive campaigns for a fairer deal for Scotland's transport system. I said in that debate that the Executive needed to make a concentrated effort to improve the transport infrastructure of the area, specifically to expedite the Clackmannan bridge and the completion of the upgrading of the A907. We need a new link from Rosyth to Stirling to improve east-west road links and Government support for the push to reopen the railway between Stirling and Alloa.

Local businesses, councils, local enterprise companies and the trade unions are unanimous in their claim that one of the biggest drawbacks to inward investment in the western part of Fife and Clackmannanshire is communications. I pay tribute to Kenny MacAskill for making that point in his opening speech. There is only one crossing point over the River Forth between Stirling and North Queensferry—the Kincardine bridge, which was opened in 1939. That bridge has been under threat of closure for many years and it is only in the past five years that major works have been done to extend its life. I welcome the movement towards planning for the refurbishment of the existing bridge but, in the limited time that I have had to look at the document, I can find no commitment to the new river crossing.

In a reply to a recent parliamentary question from me, Sarah Boyack stated that, provided that everything went to plan and there were no delays, work on a replacement for the Kincardine bridge could start in 2003. The bridge will take approximately four years to build, but it will be built only if the Executive releases the money. In the current economic climate, there is no guarantee that the Government will allocate spending on the new bridge.

No business can make plans for inward investment under such conditions. The policy also

puts in doubt the long-term future of Longannet power station, which depends heavily on road-delivered opencast coal. The announcement today will deliver a body blow to the hopes of this fragile area and put back the economic redevelopment of Clackmannanshire and west Fife.

The recent closing of Downie's bridge on the Alloa-Stirling road shows how isolated Clackmannanshire is. Industry needs road transport to bring raw materials in and to take finished goods out. Alloa is the only town of any size in Scotland not to be served by rail transport. Unless the rail review, to be announced in the near future, addresses the problems of Clackmannanshire, how will the Executive meet the objective of moving goods from road to rail?

On the A8000, action is needed now to complete this vital link. Money must be found to redesign that inadequate road, on which I travel every morning and night.

On the radio this morning, the Confederation of British Industry said that the economic well-being of Scotland relied on a vibrant road network. Do not rely on the Executive. Nobody wants to see diversions from health and education, but we must invest in our transport infrastructure to allow the economy of Scotland to flourish and to grow.

Taxes from the vibrant business sector pay to educate our children, to care for our elderly and to look after the health of our citizens. Taxes from the business sector will pay for the road improvements announced today. I ask Sarah Boyack to bring forward schemes, such as the new Kincardine crossing, to ensure that that area of Scotland, which I happen to represent, shares in the economic benefits of the future.

16:34

Malcolm Chisholm (Edinburgh North and Leith) (Lab): I congratulate our superb Minister for Transport and the Environment on a superb statement, which is better than anything that I have imagined in the two years since I announced the strategic roads review.

I commend the vision, which has balanced safety with environmental and other factors and which also sees the need for further multi-modal studies in the main transport corridors. I also commend the choices that she has made. Unfortunately, that word is not in Mr MacAskill's vocabulary.

Mr MacAskill: Is it a good thing that the A8000 is not being progressed?

Malcolm Chisholm: Choice is the essence of what we have before us. That road is being progressed.

I commend the proposal to go ahead with work on the A1, which is essential for safety reasons. I also welcome the announcements on the A77, the bypass at Fochabers and the Mallaig road. Two years ago, I was pleased to travel along that road on a fish lorry, so that I could understand the problems at first hand.

Alasdair Morgan (Galloway and Upper Nithsdale) (SNP): Will the member give way?

Malcolm Chisholm: I have only three minutes, and half of them are up.

All three of the Ewings who represent the Highlands should be pleased. Unfortunately, Mr MacAskill is never pleased unless everything is delivered immediately. What we have had today from the SNP is not serious politics. I am not particularly surprised by that—as I said in my intervention, the SNP is unwilling to make choices, either on the general budget of this Parliament or on the roads budget.

The Tories are not much better. They want most of the roads, but will not tell us how they would pay for them. The problem started because of the wish list that we inherited from them. They went round every part of Scotland saying, "The road is in the programme." The road was in the programme, but the money was not. That was one reason why we had to have a strategic roads review.

The second reason was our new approach to transport policy, which is based on integration and which has a new emphasis on public transport. Public transport is important for everybody, but especially for the third of the Scottish population that does not have a car. The new emphasis has been demonstrated in many ways, not least by the £26 million announced last week for further public transport developments. It is in that area that the new multi-modal studies will be important. We already have a sophisticated methodology—it has been applied to this review—but it will now become even more sophisticated and will examine the comparative advantages of road and public transport developments. That is a tremendous step forward for transport policy in the United Kingdom and, indeed, throughout the world. As we know, public transport investment boosts the economy. That will be taken into account in the further studies.

As my three minutes are up, I will end by saying well done to the Minister for Transport and the Environment.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Mr George Reid): I will take a very brief contribution, without interruptions if possible, from Nora Radcliffe. You have only two minutes.

16:37

Nora Radcliffe (Gordon) (LD): I will be as quick as I can. I want to make two general points. First, the strength of this Parliament is that we can consider matters in an objective, strategic, pan-Scotland way. Secondly, we have a finite budget, and, as any housewife will tell you, "You cannot spend money that you haven't got." I would like to endorse what Malcolm said and congratulate the minister on what was, given the two factors that I have mentioned, an excellent piece of work. She has tackled this issue extremely well, and I am delighted that transport and the environment are being linked in a positive way.

I want to comment briefly on two issues that relate to my area. I am disappointed that Keith is not included, but not altogether surprised. Anyone who knows the main A96 through Fochabers will understand why that is in the programme. I will be pursuing measures to make life easier for the citizens of Keith, whose community is bisected by a major trunk road.

I am glad that it has been recognised that the A90 Tippetty to Balmedie road must be given priority. It is a dangerous accident black spot, with people living either side of a single-carriageway section of a dual carriageway of considerable strategic importance, in that it is the main route in and out of Banff and Buchan.

Richard Lochhead (North-East Scotland) (SNP): Will the member give way?

Nora Radcliffe: I do not have time.

The A90 is also the main route to and from the biggest whitefish port in Europe and a major oil and gas terminal. I am glad that it will be next in the queue, and I commend the minister on the way in which she has tackled some very different choices. She has gone about it in exactly the right way.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call John Young to wind up for the Scottish Conservatives.

16:39

John Young (West of Scotland) (Con): I am really sorry for Sarah Boyack. She is sitting there in a bunker, almost completely isolated. Where are all the ministers? They have disappeared, like snow off a dike. That may tell her something.

An hour or two ago, we were presented with three documents, totalling 144 pages and approximately 43,000 words. How is anyone, even a genius, supposed to assimilate all that in such a short time? I happened to open this heavy tome on page 33, where the following paragraph caught my eye:

"In practice, it is not possible, at least on the basis of

current methodology, to assign monetary values to all of the potential impacts of schemes which are relevant to the 5 criteria."

Even that short statement would be difficult to assimilate.

I must admit that I suspect that some of the hold-ups on road policy are due to an ideological division between the lords and masters of Labour in London and the Labour party in Scotland. As Murray Tosh rightly said, at least the previous Conservative Government had a fine trunk road network.

The previous document, "Making it work together"—the one that would hardly fit in a briefcase—says, on page 15:

"We will build an integrated transport system, which meets our economic and social needs"

That is praiseworthy and perhaps the minister will tell us how it will be done.

Page 16 of the document says that, early next year, a bill will be introduced that will

"allow road user charging and charges on parking at the workplace, where it is sensible to do so."

Who will decide what is sensible?

The document continues:

"We will use the money raised to invest in transport improvements."

However, all sorts of doubts have been raised about whether that would happen.

The best part of the document was the promise to move freight off the roads by March 2002. Is all the freight to be moved off the roads? At present, 80 per cent of this country's freight is carried by road, but the document promises that the Executive will change that within 28 months, presumably by putting the road haulage freight on to the rail system, which will cause a complete collapse of the rail system and the end of the road haulage system. That is what the document proposes. The words are there in black and white. All that raises questions for the ladies—and gentlemen—who shop at Asda, Tesco, Sainsbury's and Safeway, because if all freight is taken off the roads, the shelves of those supermarkets will be empty.

Sarah Boyack is, in some ways, like a doctor in "Heartbeat" or "Casualty". Her patient is called transport and is suffering from artery blockage, congestion problems and other deficiencies. Sooner or later, she will have to identify solutions to specific problems: how to raise sufficient money, which she touched on earlier; how to create an integrated transport system that will attract customers; and how to disperse traffic as a result of whatever form of charging is levied.

Does she accept that the car is here to stay? That the rail system cannot handle the freight that roads handle? That cycle tracks—I believe that the minister is a cyclist—will continue to be 95 per cent underutilised in most places? That the proposed congestion charges are highly unlikely to reduce congestion in the cities? On that last question, I should point out that experiments in Leicester suggest that rates would have to be set at £8 a day before people would leave their cars at home, and a recent survey in London suggested that cars should be charged £5 and trucks should have to cough up £15.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Would you wind up, please.

John Young: I understand that Aberdeen and Edinburgh would levy local authority charges but that Glasgow is not keen to do so. I would love to see how the minister is going to tackle Glasgow—my old colleagues in the local authority are a tough load of cookies. Will the minister force Labour councillors in Glasgow, including Charlie Gordon, to impose those charges if they do not want to?

Road space needs to be better used. Taking away existing road space on main routes and removing it from all vehicle use by narrowing the highway or removing it from most vehicle use by restricting it to certain categories of vehicle is bound to make congestion worse. I wonder if there is a devious plot afoot. Is the Executive trying to create congestion so that it can levy congestion charges? More congestion means more pollution.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Would you draw to a close, please.

John Young: The minister has a difficult task and I welcome one or two things that she has said today.

I will quickly quote some words from members of the business community, who hit the nail on the head.

Lex Gold, the director of the Scottish Chambers of Commerce, suggested that the Executive's policy was:

"A narrow approach at naked revenue raising in a haphazard, bottom up manner with no strategic focus; no national guidance, and no aim of enhancing competitiveness"

Ian Duff, who leads on transport issues for the influential Scottish Council Development and Industry, believes that

"confused thinking is holding up essential work on key transport arteries".

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Not too many more quotations, please.

John Young: I am just finishing.

Vernon Murphy, the former head of Scottish Airports, who now sits on the British Airports Authority's main board, is quoted as saying that the rulers of the Scottish Parliament

"keep saying it's coming, its coming. But nothing happens".

Finally, I attended a meeting of the Royal Scottish Automobile Club motor policy committee, at its invitation. Its members were concerned about certain aspects of the 40-page consultation document, particularly the distinct feeling that no firm assurances had been given on 100 per cent ring-fencing—that moneys would be used for road and transport improvements. That was not acceptable to them.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That was a full minute over, Mr Young.

16:45

Linda Fabiani (Central Scotland) (SNP): Of all the debates in the chamber to date, few can have been as highly anticipated. While we thought that we were gathering today to discuss the strategic roads review, as evidenced by today's contributors to the debate, the events of the past few days have clearly illustrated the wider problem of an absence of any real transport strategy for Scotland within which this review should have taken place. Selective further research may be welcome. I will return to that point.

I will not dwell on the plans outlined in the Minister for Transport and the Environment's statement. Kenny MacAskill and other colleagues have demonstrated the inadequacy of the programme to deal with Scotland's current and future transport needs. On behalf of the Executive, the minister has put a brave public face on a poor announcement. Clearly, Gordon Brown's determination to prioritise Labour's ever-growing war chest has condemned Scottish drivers to paying the highest fuel prices in Europe, while driving on a crumbling road network.

The Government's own figures show that almost a third of the current trunk road network has a residual life of less than 10 years. Like our public transport system, the country's roads require investment. Indeed, an effective public transport system requires effective roads.

The background to today's announcement is the white paper "Travel Choices for Scotland." That paper promised an integrated transport policy to help make a more inclusive society, and a policy that is appropriate to support Scotland's economy. Recent weeks have demonstrated that the Executive does not have enough understanding of Scotland's transport needs to develop such a policy.

In 1997, the Scottish Office central research unit

published a review of Scottish travel data sources. I would like to place the conclusion on record:

"Transport policy in Scotland clearly requires a resource, which has the potential for sub-regional analysis in order to address differences between the more densely populated areas of the central belt and the more sparsely populated rural areas . . . At present, policy and surveys conducted in Scotland are not addressing the context within which the travel decision occurs. This is a serious flaw, given the desirability in current policy terms to understand the relationship between social, fiscal and transport aspects of the behaviour of individuals and households."

The white paper was premature and the Executive was not properly informed. I suspect that the minister, due to her respected experience in the field, has always been aware of that deficit of current, relevant information. I hope that she will take steps to properly inform the Executive and the Parliament by appropriate further research carried out timeously.

I have with me a sheaf of parliamentary questions that have not yet been answered—questions lodged up to five weeks ago, which request basic information to enable my party's own response to a transport bill. That basic information is noted in the aforementioned Scottish Office central research unit report as being required. It seems that we have not moved on since then. The information that we do have is revealing. The more cynical members among us may see the Executive's policy direction as merely following the latest Westminster diktat.

I hope that the minister has won her battle and that the announced further research will be appropriate. We can then return to discussing Scottish answers to Scottish questions. While London may be in gridlock, Scotland clearly is not. According to the Executive's own figures, between 1985 and 1997, the average number of commuting and business trips made by Scots dropped from 207 to 203. The length of time taken for Scots to commute to their main place of work barely altered, increasing from 22 minutes to 23 minutes.

The Scottish Executive, with some assistance from other parties, has tried to present the transport debate as a simple choice between its politically correct anti-car policies and the views of the rest of us, who, it alleges, are hell-bent on wrecking the environment. I reject such a simplistic approach and will continue to press the minister to address the wider impact of her policies. For example, we need to understand why progress in reducing injuries and fatalities from road traffic accidents is now being reversed.

The roads programme should be only part of a wider transport policy. I urge the minister to accept that a holistic approach is best for what we are all trying to achieve. Sensible road infrastructure, through improvement or new commitment, has a place in the overall objective of ensuring effective

public transport and addressing environmental and safety issues, both nationally and locally.

The Presiding Officer (Sir David Steel): Sarah Boyack will now wind up.

16:51

Sarah Boyack: Are the Tories not winding up?

The Presiding Officer: They have done so.

Sarah Boyack: I see—John Young was the official wind-up. [*Laughter.*] I had not realised that.

We have had a rather curious set of Opposition speakers. On the one hand, Mr MacAskill would construct all the roads everywhere; he would add a few that are not even on the list. On the other, the Tories have said that they would have built all the roads, if we had not voted them out of office a couple of years ago. The truth is that the Tories did not have the money to build all those roads in their budget, and neither would the SNP have the money to build those roads in its budget.

We know that from the SNP's budget in the run-up to the election. We also know that some of the money in the SNP's budget would have come from the fuel duty escalator. In its budget for independence, which was produced reluctantly in the last stages of the general election campaign, the SNP allocated fuel duty without any reduction. On the SNP's budget figures as recently as April 1999, it would have kept the fuel duty at its current level. Given the SNP's budget policy, we are rather fed up with the SNP complaints.

We now find out that roads will not be paid for from the fuel duty escalator. I heard Mr Salmond saying on the radio the other morning that the SNP would pay for it from income-based taxation. That is an interesting development. Just over a year ago, Alasdair Morgan said that the SNP would use the penny for Scotland to invest in roads. Within 24 hours that policy was abolished, but now the SNP has returned to income tax as a way of raising investment for roads.

Let us look at the budget and the amount of money that we need to spend on roads. Mr MacAskill's programme aspires to spend £800 million on road construction. Where will that money come from? We will need not just one penny for Scotland, but rather a lot of pennies. SNP members' comments today completely miss the point.

Alex Neil: Will the minister give way?

Sarah Boyack: No.

Today's strategic review is about choices. We have had to make difficult choices.

Alasdair Morgan: Will the minister give way?

Sarah Boyack: No, I will not.

We have used criteria of accessibility, integration, safety and environment. It is critical to take all those things together. We have a costed roads programme, which means that the roads that are listed today will go ahead.

We expect a start date in a couple of years' time for the M77, Fenwick to Malletsheugh, with a completion date three years later. That route will cost £60 million.

Construction on the A1, Haddington to Dunbar, could begin in the next two years. We need to go through the planning process for that. The cost will be £32 million.

Construction on the A78, the three towns bypass, could begin within the next couple of years. The work will cost £26 million.

Construction on the A830 should begin next year and will cost £10 million.

Construction on the A96 should begin within the next three years and will cost £12 million.

Mr Tosh: Will the minister give way?

Sarah Boyack: No, I will not, Mr Tosh.

The programme is costed. It will be implemented using the money that is currently in our budget and the money that we have programmed over the next three years.

The comments that members have made acknowledge the importance of integration. It was even acknowledged by the SNP members, which came as a surprise, because they have said that they would spend £800 million on roads and on a whole wish list of other transport issues. We have to prioritise; we are a Government with a budget.

Mr Nick Johnston said:

"Nobody wants to see diversions from health and education".

That is absolutely true. We need to work within the existing budget and our challenge is to prioritise effectively. That is what we have done.

We also want to make the most effective use of our existing infrastructure. That is why we think that it is important to take an appropriate amount of freight off the roads. To answer Mr Young's question, it is not about getting all freight off roads. Last week, I spoke to the Road Haulage Association, to say how important we see its work as part of an integrated transport strategy. The whole purpose of the strategic roads review is to achieve the right balance.

Mr Tosh: When might the M80, M8 and M74 start and be completed? Those are the critical questions that businesses in Scotland want answered.

Sarah Boyack: Absolutely. The M80 and the M8—

Dr Winnie Ewing (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): Will the minister give way?

Sarah Boyack: No, thank you. I am trying to answer the question that I have just been asked.

We will commission a multi-modal study. The challenge is not just to think about huge investment in roads; it is about the existing use of our road network, to work out better ways to get people off roads and to give them high-quality choices. As Ms Fabiani suggested, we need a holistic approach. We must make the best use of our infrastructure.

We have no ideological objection to roads. Roads are a fundamental part of our transport investment and a key part of our transport infrastructure. The Executive wants to ensure that our roads are used effectively and that we invest in them. That means maintenance—a responsible approach. It is not just about investing in new roads; it is also about ensuring that we have sufficient investment in the existing infrastructure.

Brian Adam: Will the minister give way?

Sarah Boyack: No, thank you.

The last point that I want to make—

Richard Lochhead: Will the minister give way?

Sarah Boyack: No, I am about to wind up.

I want to talk about the issue of road user charging, which has been mentioned by many members. There has been an extensive consultation process. I have toured the length and breadth of the country, talking to a variety of interest groups, from the business community, to local authorities, to individuals. We have discussed the opportunities and I have made it clear that we will not introduce trunk road tolling or motorway tolling as part of our transport legislation. I will come back to the Parliament with our proposals for local road user charging—that will be taken forward by the local authorities—and on the issue of workplace parking levies.

We have an approach that will give us new revenue to invest in transport. We will consider the issues of additionality, transparency and hypothecation, to ensure that people can see where the money is going. It will go back into our transport investment.

A question was asked about the M74. We have taken a responsible approach. It is a key link and it is important that we get it right. In asking Glasgow City Council and South Lanarkshire Council to work with the neighbouring authorities, we are recognising the importance of the route. There are several options available to the councils. We have

not discussed existing roads legislation—the New Roads and Streetworks Act 1991, which enables tolling on new roads. There are a variety of options. The key thing is that the councils involved take the approach that they find to be the most relevant. We are committed to ensuring that the investment and the roads that are identified in the strategic roads review will take place.

I commend the roads programme to Parliament. It is a credible programme, which will improve economic investment in Scotland. The points that have been made have been helpful and interesting and it has been a constructive debate.

The business community has expressed concerns. We want to ensure that those concerns are fully reflected in what we do; hence the roads programme that we have announced today. It is a coherent programme that links into our integrated transport strategy. It is about getting the best out of our roads network, and it is about promoting public transport. Buses need motorways as much as cars need motorways.

Our integrated approach must ensure that we look at all those options for transport. That is why we will take that programme forward over the next few years, with the money that we have identified in our budget.

Mr Salmond: On a point of order. Presiding Officer, I listened very carefully to your rulings earlier today, and you specifically addressed the question of introducing new information in closing speeches. The minister has just uttered the words “tolling new roads”, which certainly were not in the initial statement. That is the first time that those words have appeared in this debate.

The Presiding Officer: No, I seem to recall that they occurred during the statement and answers earlier this afternoon.

Sarah Boyack: May I respond to Mr Salmond’s point?

The Presiding Officer: This afternoon I ruled that new policy announcements should not be made during closing ministerial statements, and I do not think that that has happened.

The debate has ended, but I should say that a record number of members—17—were not called to speak, in spite of my earlier efforts to curtail questions. In view of that, and in view of Mr Gorrie’s point of order, I will ask the Parliamentary Bureau to look at this double-headed procedure again, because I am not sure that it is working.

Tommy Sheridan: On a point of order. To record the people who are not being called in these debates, could their names appear in the business bulletin? In that way, if any pattern emerges of people not being called, it will be visible.

The Presiding Officer: I can assure members that the clerks take a careful note of those who are not called in debate, so that the person in the chair is conscious of members who have been overlooked on previous occasions. Some may feel that they are more overlooked than others, but I assure members that we do our best to ensure that that does not happen.

Lead Committees

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees the following designations of committees:

the Justice and Home Affairs Committee to be the lead committee in the consideration of the Abolition of Feudal Tenure etc. (Scotland) Bill;

the Justice and Home Affairs Committee to be the lead committee in the consideration of the Adults with Incapacity (Scotland) Bill and that the Bill should also be considered by the Health and Community Care Committee;

the Social and Inclusion, Housing and Voluntary Sector Committee and the Local Government Committee to report to the Justice and Home Affairs Committee on the Abolition of Poindings and Warrant Sales Bill; and

the Rural Affairs Committee to be the lead committee in the consideration of the Plant Health (Scotland) Amendment (No. 2) Order 1999 (SSI 1999/129) and that the Order should also be considered by the European Committee.—[Mr McCabe.]

Amnesic Shellfish Poisoning

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees that the Food Protection (Emergency Prohibitions) (Amnesic Shellfish Poisoning) (East Coast) (Scotland) Order 1999 (SSI 1999/110) be approved.—[Mr McCabe.]

Bruce Crawford (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP): On a point of order. I am sorry, but we cannot hear a word back here.

The Presiding Officer (Sir David Steel): There was a bit of noise, members. I asked Mr McCabe to move motions S1M-243 and S1M-245. He has done so.

Decision Time

17:00

The Presiding Officer (Sir David Steel): The first question in decision time is, that amendment S1M-242.1, in the name of Alex Fergusson, which seeks to amend motion S1M-242, in the name of Alex Salmond, on agriculture and rural affairs, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: We will have a division. Those who wish to support Mr Fergusson's amendment should press yes now.

FOR

Aitken, Bill (Glasgow) (Con)
Davidson, Mr David (North-East Scotland) (Con)
Douglas-Hamilton, Lord James (Lothians) (Con)
Fergusson, Alex (South of Scotland) (Con)
Gallie, Phil (South of Scotland) (Con)
Harding, Mr Keith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
Johnston, Mr Nick (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
Johnstone, Alex (North-East Scotland) (Con)
McGrigor, Mr Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
McIntosh, Mrs Lyndsay (Central Scotland) (Con)
McLetchie, David (Lothians) (Con)
Monteith, Mr Brian (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
Munro, Mr John (Ross, Skye and Inverness West) (LD)
Scanlon, Mary (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
Tosh, Mr Murray (South of Scotland) (Con)
Wallace, Ben (North-East Scotland) (Con)
Young, John (West of Scotland) (Con)

AGAINST

Adam, Brian (North-East Scotland) (SNP)
Alexander, Ms Wendy (Paisley North) (Lab)
Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
Barrie, Scott (Dunfermline West) (Lab)
Boyack, Sarah (Edinburgh Central) (Lab)
Brankin, Rhona (Midlothian) (Lab)
Brown, Robert (Glasgow) (LD)
Campbell, Colin (West of Scotland) (SNP)
Canavan, Dennis (Falkirk West)
Chisholm, Malcolm (Edinburgh North and Leith) (Lab)
Craigie, Cathie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (Lab)
Crawford, Bruce (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP)
Cunningham, Roseanna (Perth) (SNP)
Curran, Ms Margaret (Glasgow Baillieston) (Lab)
Deacon, Susan (Edinburgh East and Musselburgh) (Lab)
Dewar, Donald (Glasgow Anniesland) (Lab)
Eadie, Helen (Dunfermline East) (Lab)
Elder, Dorothy-Grace (Glasgow) (SNP)
Ewing, Dr Winnie (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
Ewing, Fergus (Inverness East, Nairn and Lochaber) (SNP)
Ewing, Mrs Margaret (Moray) (SNP)
Fabiani, Linda (Central Scotland) (SNP)
Ferguson, Patricia (Glasgow Maryhill) (Lab)
Finnie, Ross (West of Scotland) (LD)
Galbraith, Mr Sam (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (Lab)
Gibson, Mr Kenneth (Glasgow) (SNP)
Gillon, Karen (Clydesdale) (Lab)
Godman, Trish (West Renfrewshire) (Lab)
Gorrie, Donald (Central Scotland) (LD)

Grahame, Christine (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Hamilton, Mr Duncan (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Harper, Robin (Lothians) (Green)
 Henry, Hugh (Paisley South) (Lab)
 Home Robertson, Mr John (East Lothian) (Lab)
 Hughes, Janis (Glasgow Rutherglen) (Lab)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Lothians) (SNP)
 Ingram, Mr Adam (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Jackson, Dr Sylvia (Stirling) (Lab)
 Jackson, Gordon (Glasgow Govan) (Lab)
 Jamieson, Cathy (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (Lab)
 Jamieson, Margaret (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (Lab)
 Jenkins, Ian (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD)
 Kerr, Mr Andy (East Kilbride) (Lab)
 Lamont, Johann (Glasgow Pollok) (Lab)
 Livingstone, Marilyn (Kirkcaldy) (Lab)
 Lochhead, Richard (North-East Scotland) (SNP)
 Lyon, George (Argyll and Bute) (LD)
 MacAskill, Mr Kenny (Lothians) (SNP)
 MacDonald, Ms Margo (Lothians) (SNP)
 Macintosh, Mr Kenneth (Eastwood) (Lab)
 MacKay, Angus (Edinburgh South) (Lab)
 MacLean, Kate (Dundee West) (Lab)
 Macmillan, Maureen (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Martin, Paul (Glasgow Springburn) (Lab)
 Marwick, Tricia (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP)
 Matheson, Michael (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 McAllion, Mr John (Dundee East) (Lab)
 McAveety, Mr Frank (Glasgow Shettleston) (Lab)
 McCabe, Mr Tom (Hamilton South) (Lab)
 McConnell, Mr Jack (Motherwell and Wishaw) (Lab)
 McGugan, Irene (North-East Scotland) (SNP)
 McLeish, Henry (Central Fife) (Lab)
 McMahon, Mr Michael (Hamilton North and Bellshill) (Lab)
 McNeil, Mr Duncan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (Lab)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow Kelvin) (Lab)
 McNulty, Des (Clydebank and Milngavie) (Lab)
 Morgan, Alasdair (Galloway and Upper Nithsdale) (SNP)
 Morrison, Mr Alasdair (Western Isles) (Lab)
 Muldoon, Bristow (Livingston) (Lab)
 Mulligan, Mrs Mary (Linlithgow) (Lab)
 Murray, Dr Elaine (Dumfries) (Lab)
 Neil, Alex (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Oldfather, Ms Irene (Cunninghame South) (Lab)
 Paterson, Mr Gil (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Peacock, Peter (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Peattie, Cathy (Falkirk East) (Lab)
 Quinan, Mr Lloyd (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 Radcliffe, Nora (Gordon) (LD)
 Raffan, Mr Keith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (LD)
 Reid, Mr George (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP)
 Robison, Shona (North-East Scotland) (SNP)
 Robson, Euan (Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (LD)
 Rumbles, Mr Mike (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (LD)
 Russell, Michael (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Salmond, Mr Alex (Banff and Buchan) (SNP)
 Scott, Tavish (Shetland) (LD)
 Sheridan, Tommy (Glasgow) (SSP)
 Simpson, Dr Richard (Ochil) (Lab)
 Smith, Elaine (Coatbridge and Chryston) (Lab)
 Smith, Iain (North-East Fife) (LD)
 Smith, Margaret (Edinburgh West) (LD)
 Stephen, Nicol (Aberdeen South) (LD)
 Stone, Mr Jamie (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Swinney, Mr John (North Tayside) (SNP)
 Ullrich, Kay (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 Wallace, Mr Jim (Orkney) (LD)

Watson, Mike (Glasgow Cathcart) (Lab)
 Welsh, Ian (Ayr) (Lab)
 Welsh, Mr Andrew (Angus) (SNP)
 White, Ms Sandra (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Whitefield, Karen (Airdrie and Shotts) (Lab)
 Wilson, Allan (Cunninghame North) (Lab)
 Wilson, Andrew (Central Scotland) (SNP)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division is as follows: For 17, Against 105, Abstentions 0.

Amendment disagreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The second question is, that amendment S1M-242.2, in the name of Ross Finnie, also seeking to amend motion S1M-242, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division. Those who wish to support Mr Finnie's amendment should press yes.

FOR

Alexander, Ms Wendy (Paisley North) (Lab)
 Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Barrie, Scott (Dunfermline West) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Edinburgh Central) (Lab)
 Brankin, Rhona (Midlothian) (Lab)
 Brown, Robert (Glasgow) (LD)
 Chisholm, Malcolm (Edinburgh North and Leith) (Lab)
 Craigie, Cathie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (Lab)
 Curran, Ms Margaret (Glasgow Baillieston) (Lab)
 Deacon, Susan (Edinburgh East and Musselburgh) (Lab)
 Dewar, Donald (Glasgow Anniesland) (Lab)
 Eadie, Helen (Dunfermline East) (Lab)
 Ferguson, Patricia (Glasgow Maryhill) (Lab)
 Finnie, Ross (West of Scotland) (LD)
 Galbraith, Mr Sam (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (Lab)
 Gillon, Karen (Clydesdale) (Lab)
 Godman, Trish (West Renfrewshire) (Lab)
 Gorrie, Donald (Central Scotland) (LD)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Henry, Hugh (Paisley South) (Lab)
 Home Robertson, Mr John (East Lothian) (Lab)
 Hughes, Janis (Glasgow Rutherglen) (Lab)
 Jackson, Dr Sylvia (Stirling) (Lab)
 Jackson, Gordon (Glasgow Govan) (Lab)
 Jamieson, Cathy (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (Lab)
 Jamieson, Margaret (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (Lab)
 Jenkins, Ian (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD)
 Kerr, Mr Andy (East Kilbride) (Lab)
 Lamont, Johann (Glasgow Pollok) (Lab)
 Livingstone, Marilyn (Kirkcaldy) (Lab)
 Lyon, George (Argyll and Bute) (LD)
 Macintosh, Mr Kenneth (Eastwood) (Lab)
 MacKay, Angus (Edinburgh South) (Lab)
 MacLean, Kate (Dundee West) (Lab)
 Macmillan, Maureen (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Martin, Paul (Glasgow Springburn) (Lab)
 McAllion, Mr John (Dundee East) (Lab)
 McAveety, Mr Frank (Glasgow Shettleston) (Lab)
 McCabe, Mr Tom (Hamilton South) (Lab)
 McConnell, Mr Jack (Motherwell and Wishaw) (Lab)
 McLeish, Henry (Central Fife) (Lab)
 McMahon, Mr Michael (Hamilton North and Bellshill) (Lab)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow Kelvin) (Lab)
 McNulty, Des (Clydebank and Milngavie) (Lab)

Morrison, Mr Alasdair (Western Isles) (Lab)
 Muldoon, Bristow (Livingston) (Lab)
 Mulligan, Mrs Mary (Linlithgow) (Lab)
 Murray, Dr Elaine (Dumfries) (Lab)
 Oldfather, Ms Irene (Cunninghame South) (Lab)
 Peacock, Peter (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Peattie, Cathy (Falkirk East) (Lab)
 Radcliffe, Nora (Gordon) (LD)
 Raffan, Mr Keith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (LD)
 Robson, Euan (Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (LD)
 Rumbles, Mr Mike (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (LD)
 Scott, Tavish (Shetland) (LD)
 Simpson, Dr Richard (Ochil) (Lab)
 Smith, Elaine (Coatbridge and Chryston) (Lab)
 Smith, Iain (North-East Fife) (LD)
 Smith, Margaret (Edinburgh West) (LD)
 Stephen, Nicol (Aberdeen South) (LD)
 Stone, Mr Jamie (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD)
 Wallace, Mr Jim (Orkney) (LD)
 Watson, Mike (Glasgow Cathcart) (Lab)
 Welsh, Ian (Ayr) (Lab)
 Whitefield, Karen (Airdrie and Shotts) (Lab)
 Wilson, Allan (Cunninghame North) (Lab)

AGAINST

Adam, Brian (North-East Scotland) (SNP)
 Aitken, Bill (Glasgow) (Con)
 Campbell, Colin (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 Canavan, Dennis (Falkirk West)
 Crawford, Bruce (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP)
 Cunningham, Roseanna (Perth) (SNP)
 Davidson, Mr David (North-East Scotland) (Con)
 Douglas-Hamilton, Lord James (Lothians) (Con)
 Elder, Dorothy-Grace (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Ewing, Dr Winnie (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness East, Nairn and Lochaber) (SNP)
 Ewing, Mrs Margaret (Moray) (SNP)
 Fabiani, Linda (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Fergusson, Alex (South of Scotland) (Con)
 Gallie, Phil (South of Scotland) (Con)
 Gibson, Mr Kenneth (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Grahame, Christine (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Hamilton, Mr Duncan (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Harding, Mr Keith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Harper, Robin (Lothians) (Green)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Lothians) (SNP)
 Ingram, Mr Adam (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Johnston, Mr Nick (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Johnstone, Alex (North-East Scotland) (Con)
 Lochhead, Richard (North-East Scotland) (SNP)
 MacAskill, Mr Kenny (Lothians) (SNP)
 MacDonald, Ms Margo (Lothians) (SNP)
 Marwick, Tricia (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP)
 Matheson, Michael (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 McGrigor, Mr Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 McGugan, Irene (North-East Scotland) (SNP)
 McIntosh, Mrs Lyndsay (Central Scotland) (Con)
 McLetchie, David (Lothians) (Con)
 Monteith, Mr Brian (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Morgan, Alasdair (Galloway and Upper Nithsdale) (SNP)
 Munro, Mr John (Ross, Skye and Inverness West) (LD)
 Neil, Alex (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Paterson, Mr Gil (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Quinan, Mr Lloyd (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 Reid, Mr George (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP)
 Robison, Shona (North-East Scotland) (SNP)
 Russell, Michael (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Salmond, Mr Alex (Banff and Buchan) (SNP)
 Scanlon, Mary (Highlands and Islands) (Con)

Sheridan, Tommy (Glasgow) (SSP)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Swinney, Mr John (North Tayside) (SNP)
 Tosh, Mr Murray (South of Scotland) (Con)
 Ullrich, Kay (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 Wallace, Ben (North-East Scotland) (Con)
 Welsh, Mr Andrew (Angus) (SNP)
 White, Ms Sandra (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Wilson, Andrew (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Young, John (West of Scotland) (Con)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division is as follows: For 67, Against 54, Abstentions 0.

Amendment agreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The third question is, that motion S1M-242, as amended, in the name of Mr Alex Salmond, on agricultural and rural affairs, be agreed to. Are we all agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: We will have a division. Members who wish to support the motion as amended should press yes.

FOR

Alexander, Ms Wendy (Paisley North) (Lab)
 Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Barrie, Scott (Dunfermline West) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Edinburgh Central) (Lab)
 Brankin, Rhona (Midlothian) (Lab)
 Brown, Robert (Glasgow) (LD)
 Chisholm, Malcolm (Edinburgh North and Leith) (Lab)
 Craigie, Cathie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (Lab)
 Curran, Ms Margaret (Glasgow Baillieston) (Lab)
 Deacon, Susan (Edinburgh East and Musselburgh) (Lab)
 Dewar, Donald (Glasgow Anniesland) (Lab)
 Eadie, Helen (Dunfermline East) (Lab)
 Ferguson, Patricia (Glasgow Maryhill) (Lab)
 Finnie, Ross (West of Scotland) (LD)
 Galbraith, Mr Sam (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (Lab)
 Gillon, Karen (Clydesdale) (Lab)
 Godman, Trish (West Renfrewshire) (Lab)
 Gorrie, Donald (Central Scotland) (LD)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Harper, Robin (Lothians) (Green)
 Henry, Hugh (Paisley South) (Lab)
 Home Robertson, Mr John (East Lothian) (Lab)
 Hughes, Janis (Glasgow Rutherglen) (Lab)
 Jackson, Dr Sylvia (Stirling) (Lab)
 Jackson, Gordon (Glasgow Govan) (Lab)
 Jamieson, Cathy (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (Lab)
 Jamieson, Margaret (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (Lab)
 Jenkins, Ian (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD)
 Kerr, Mr Andy (East Kilbride) (Lab)
 Lamont, Johann (Glasgow Pollok) (Lab)
 Livingstone, Marilyn (Kirkcaldy) (Lab)
 Lyon, George (Argyll and Bute) (LD)
 Macintosh, Mr Kenneth (Eastwood) (Lab)
 MacKay, Angus (Edinburgh South) (Lab)
 MacLean, Kate (Dundee West) (Lab)
 Macmillan, Maureen (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Martin, Paul (Glasgow Springburn) (Lab)
 McAllion, Mr John (Dundee East) (Lab)
 McAveety, Mr Frank (Glasgow Shettleston) (Lab)
 McCabe, Mr Tom (Hamilton South) (Lab)

McConnell, Mr Jack (Motherwell and Wishaw) (Lab)
 McLeish, Henry (Central Fife) (Lab)
 McMahon, Mr Michael (Hamilton North and Bellshill) (Lab)
 McNeil, Mr Duncan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (Lab)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow Kelvin) (Lab)
 McNulty, Des (Clydebank and Milngavie) (Lab)
 Morrison, Mr Alasdair (Western Isles) (Lab)
 Muldoon, Bristow (Livingston) (Lab)
 Mulligan, Mrs Mary (Linlithgow) (Lab)
 Munro, Mr John (Ross, Skye and Inverness West) (LD)
 Murray, Dr Elaine (Dumfries) (Lab)
 Oldfather, Ms Irene (Cunninghame South) (Lab)
 Peacock, Peter (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Peattie, Cathy (Falkirk East) (Lab)
 Radcliffe, Nora (Gordon) (LD)
 Raffan, Mr Keith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (LD)
 Robson, Euan (Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (LD)
 Rumbles, Mr Mike (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (LD)
 Scott, Tavish (Shetland) (LD)
 Sheridan, Tommy (Glasgow) (SSP)
 Simpson, Dr Richard (Ochil) (Lab)
 Smith, Elaine (Coatbridge and Chryston) (Lab)
 Smith, Iain (North-East Fife) (LD)
 Smith, Margaret (Edinburgh West) (LD)
 Stephen, Nicol (Aberdeen South) (LD)
 Stone, Mr Jamie (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD)
 Wallace, Mr Jim (Orkney) (LD)
 Watson, Mike (Glasgow Cathcart) (Lab)
 Welsh, Ian (Ayr) (Lab)
 Whitefield, Karen (Airdrie and Shotts) (Lab)
 Wilson, Allan (Cunninghame North) (Lab)

AGAINST

Aitken, Bill (Glasgow) (Con)
 Canavan, Dennis (Falkirk West)
 Davidson, Mr David (North-East Scotland) (Con)
 Douglas-Hamilton, Lord James (Lothians) (Con)
 Fergusson, Alex (South of Scotland) (Con)
 Gallie, Phil (South of Scotland) (Con)
 Harding, Mr Keith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Johnston, Mr Nick (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Johnstone, Alex (North-East Scotland) (Con)
 McGrigor, Mr Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 McIntosh, Mrs Lyndsay (Central Scotland) (Con)
 McLetchie, David (Lothians) (Con)
 Monteith, Mr Brian (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Scanlon, Mary (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Tosh, Mr Murray (South of Scotland) (Con)
 Wallace, Ben (North-East Scotland) (Con)
 Young, John (West of Scotland) (Con)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division is as follows: For 71, Against 17, Abstentions 0.

Motion, as amended, agreed to.

Resolved,

That the Parliament recognises the difficulties being faced by the agriculture industry; endorses the principle contained in the Partnership for Scotland agreement of working to support and enhance rural life and the rural economy; commends the steps already taken by the Scottish Executive to achieve these aims, and supports the Executive in its determination to promote long-term sustainable development, both in the agriculture industry and throughout rural Scotland.

The Presiding Officer: The fourth question is, that motion S1M-243, in the name of Mr Tom McCabe, on the designation of lead committees, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to.

That the Parliament agrees the following designations of committees:

the Justice and Home Affairs Committee to be the lead committee in the consideration of the Abolition of Feudal Tenure etc. (Scotland) Bill;

the Justice and Home Affairs Committee to be the lead committee in the consideration of the Adults with Incapacity (Scotland) Bill and that the Bill should also be considered by the Health and Community Care Committee;

the Social and Inclusion, Housing and Voluntary Sector Committee and the Local Government Committee to report to the Justice and Home Affairs Committee on the Abolition of Poidings and Warrant Sales Bill; and

the Rural Affairs Committee to be the lead committee in the consideration of the Plant Health (Scotland) Amendment (No. 2) Order 1999 (SSI 1999/129) and that the Order should also be considered by the European Committee.

The Presiding Officer: The fifth question, that motion S1M-245, in the name of Mr Tom McCabe, on the approval of a statutory instrument, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to.

That the Parliament agrees that the Food Protection (Emergency Prohibitions) (Amnesic Shellfish Poisoning) (East Coast) (Scotland) Order 1999 (SSI 1999/110) be approved.

Scottish Parliamentary Elections

The Presiding Officer (Sir David Steel): I appeal to members who are leaving to do so quickly and quietly, so that we can proceed with the members' debate on motion S1M-212, in the name of Lord James Douglas-Hamilton, on Scottish parliamentary elections. Members who wish to should please press their buttons.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament notes with grave concern that 2097 votes in the Scottish parliamentary election list vote from the West Edinburgh parliamentary division were not counted as well as other irregularities elsewhere, and calls upon the First Minister to consult urgently with the Secretary of State for Scotland with regard to the outcome of the arrangements for counting these votes and to make a statement to the Parliament.

17:07

Lord James Douglas-Hamilton (Lothians) (Con): In addressing the issue of 2,097 votes in Edinburgh West that were not properly counted in the overall result in the Scottish parliamentary elections, I will express the case as concisely as I can to allow as many members as possible to speak.

It is a matter of great regret that those 2,097 votes were not counted in the overall result. I will address the background to the debate and the position of the Secretary of State for Scotland, who is responsible. I will then suggest three recommendations.

Regarding the count for the list in the Lothians parliamentary constituency, the facts are plain and unmistakable. Counting ceased at approximately 6.45 am on Friday 7 May. Before that, at approximately 5.54 am, 10 additional pairs of counting staff were asked to help. Because insufficient room was available in hall 3, the votes were taken to the pairs in an adjacent room.

The votes were then counted and returned. However, a mix-up occurred between the person returning the votes and the superintendent in the hall. It appears that the superintendent made a human error in not recording 2,097 votes in the overall figure. However those votes might have been counted, it would not have affected the overall result nor come close to doing so. *[Interruption.]*

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Mr George Reid): Order. Excuse me, Lord James. If members wish to conduct conversations, they should do so outside the chamber.

Lord James Douglas-Hamilton: I am also informed that the error is extremely unlikely to have affected the order of the last three members elected, who were me, the Presiding Officer—Sir

David Steel—and Robin Harper. Incidentally, I have to mention that on three other occasions I have been elected in Scotland with one of the three smallest majorities, so some of us are used to small majorities. I suspect, however, that the Presiding Officer is not so used to that situation.

Who is responsible? The Secretary of State for Scotland. He wrote to me on 27 October. The letter has been lodged in the Parliament library. He was informed about the debacle by the chief executive of City of Edinburgh Council, but chose not to make the information public. I would have preferred the information to have been made public. I have always believed that if a mistake occurs it should be put right as soon as possible.

The secretary of state wrote in his letter:

"Various provisions were made by order in implementation of Section 12 in The Scottish Parliament (Elections etc) Order 1999. But no power was given to the Secretary of State under this Order to order a recount."

If 2,097 votes from Edinburgh West were unaccounted for, they should be recorded in the overall result. It goes against the principle of natural justice if they are not counted. Indeed, if they are never counted, it will mean that the principle of one person, one vote did not exist in Scotland during the first elections to the Scottish Parliament. A mechanism must therefore be found and put in place to count them.

The fact that the order made under section 12 of the Scotland Act 1998 contains no powers to order a recount is a serious deficiency in the act, which must be remedied as soon as possible. After all, the people of Edinburgh West are being deprived of their right to have their votes recorded. I would be failing in my duty if I did not draw that to the attention of the Parliament. I will therefore respectfully submit to the secretary of state that a change to the legislation is necessary so that, in future, all votes cast in Scotland will be recorded properly in the overall result. That is my first recommendation. It is deplorable and a scandal that those 2,097 votes have not been recorded.

My second recommendation is that there should be a national review. After all, there were substantial differences between the number of votes cast for list candidates and for first-past-the-post candidates, not just in Edinburgh West, but in Glasgow Anniesland, Cunninghame South, Hamilton South and Cumbernauld and Kilsyth. The matter requires careful examination. The secretary of state has agreed to a wide-ranging review, which I believe should have the status of a national review.

My third recommendation is that the counts for local authority and Scottish parliamentary elections should be held on separate days. If the Scottish Parliament and local government

elections are held on the same day, there is the potential for four counts on one day, if proportional representation is introduced for local government elections.

Frank Sibbald, the Scottish branch secretary of the Association of Electoral Administrators, wrote to the secretary of state about the elections. He said:

"Although the ship did not sink, it came uncomfortably close to doing so and did spring leaks in many places . . . In almost all cases survival was only achieved by considerable, if not unreasonable, personal effort . . . by election staff, and by some degree of luck."

More significantly, Gavin Anderson, the Government adviser on elections, told the City of Edinburgh Council on 28 October:

"The Association is very likely to take a very strong representation to the Secretary of State that, if the situation we had on 6 May—a combined poll with proportional representation—is repeated, he will be inviting administrative disaster."

Holding four elections on the same day would be asking for trouble that would make the recent difficulties over football admissions in Glasgow look insignificant.

My primary reason for asking for this debate is that the people of Edinburgh West and Lothians were responsible for electing me to this Parliament, for which I am extremely grateful. I feel a strong sense of dismay that 2,097 of their votes were not properly recorded in the result. I hope that assurances will be given that, in future elections, the people of Edinburgh West—and of Scotland as a whole—will be treated very much better.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Five members have indicated a wish to speak. All will be called if remarks are kept to three minutes.

17:15

Mrs Margaret Smith (Edinburgh West) (LD): I welcome the opportunity to speak in this debate. I also welcome the fact that an independent inquiry into what went on at the Lothians count, and a review by the Secretary of State for Scotland, are being undertaken.

As the constituency member for Edinburgh West, I am in a slightly different position from the members elected on the Lothians list. I represent the people of Edinburgh West, whose votes were not counted in this first historic election, but at the same time I was not, as it were, elected by the failed system. I am involved in this but not involved.

Over the years, I am sure that all of us have irritated a number of people on doorsteps when we have given them the relative merits of voting

for the Liberal Democrats, the Scottish National party, the Conservatives or the Labour party—or indeed the Greens. In my history of political campaigning, the people on the doorsteps whom I have taken most umbrage at have never been the people who have told me that they choose to vote for somebody other than me, but those who said that they choose not to vote. That is the point at which I become extremely annoyed and remind them of the situation that existed in South Africa and the situation that was challenged by the women's suffrage movement. It is for that reason that what we are discussing today is an affront to me as an individual who has grown up in a democratic society believing that I have political freedom and political rights.

The people of Edinburgh West have a right to believe that when they cast their vote, their voice will be heard no matter whether it is a first-past-the-post or a list vote. They have that right. They exercised it in great number and were let down by the system. We also owe it to the politicians who were brave enough to put their heads above the parapet, so that they knew what the result was on the day. There was a complete shambles.

I would like to concentrate, however, on what I believe to be a conflict of interest in having a council chief executive being the returning officer. Two weeks ago, the public relations committee of the City of Edinburgh Council was informed by Donald Anderson that the council leader was advised against an independent inquiry a matter of weeks after the debacle of the May elections. Who was the council leader given that advice by? By the very people who this inquiry is likely to show did not do their job properly.

Facts that were known after the election were kept from the elected members of the City of Edinburgh Council, and the whole thing shows that there is a conflict of interest between being a council leader and the returning officer at the same time.

My instinct would be to have the votes recounted. Donald Gorrie will pick up on the point that Lord James made, but we still have to sound a note of caution. Journalists from the *Edinburgh Evening News* have been photographed sitting on bags of the votes in question, which have not been under 24-hour lock and key and police supervision since 6 May. There will always be a question mark over those votes. There will not be a question mark over whether the people of my constituency went out and voted. They deserve better from the system. I hope that the secretary of state's review and the inquiry undertaken on behalf of City of Edinburgh councillors will show that this will not be allowed to happen again.

17:19

Fiona Hyslop (Lothians) (SNP): I welcome this important debate, but I do not think that the Lothians count scandal is necessarily the talk of the steamie. It does, however, go to the heart and soul of this place, because it concerns the democracy of the Parliament, and the Scottish Parliament does matter to the people of Scotland.

If we expect people to come out and vote, and if we want to encourage people—particularly young people—to use their vote, we have to ensure that every vote counts. That is the strong message: these votes must be counted regardless.

I was in a strange position. There was not just the one Lothians count at Meadowbank: there were two. I was perhaps the only member at the Bathgate count, where the same number of ballot papers was counted. Theirs was an exemplary count, which is an important point as there were different factors behind the problems that arose.

When I left Bathgate at around 3 or 4 in the morning, every vote had been counted. I arrived to find an utter shambles at Meadowbank. It is significant that, in the same region, there were two quite different experiences.

There are lessons to be learnt from the experience. An accident was waiting to happen at Meadowbank. When Alistair Darling was elected in 1997, the declaration took place at 4.30 am, which shows that there were problems then.

Important practical suggestions must be made. No one has mentioned our electronic voting system. A strong case could be made to review the form in which the election took place. I suggest that electronic voting should be considered. When elections are held is important. I call for separate local government and Scottish Parliament elections—separate elections and counts are essential.

The key to the debate is the role of the secretary of state. Mr Aitchison knew that there was a problem on 12 May; Scottish Office officers were informed on 23 June. Then there was silence. Elections are at the heart and soul of this Parliament and of democracy. It is essential that we find out from the secretary of state his role, what he knew and how he behaved. If we have to ask the First Minister to do that, we will do so.

I congratulate Lord James on securing this debate. We must learn exactly what happened and what the role and responsibility of the secretary of state was. I am not satisfied that everything that could have been done was done to ensure that we were aware of the problem.

17:22

David McLetchie (Lothians) (Con): I am happy

to endorse the comments that have been made so far. Like others who have spoken, I was the victim, if you like, of the incompetent management of the count at Meadowbank. I take the returning officer to task, as the conduct of the count was his responsibility.

Like Fiona Hyslop, I am concerned about the flow of information about this discrepancy between the returning officer and the secretary of state. Why was there such a gap? Was it in any way related to the fact that the same gentleman was going to be responsible for the European Parliament count during the intervening period?

The most complacent attitude that has come out of this issue is the one that says, "Well, it doesn't matter as it wouldn't have made any difference to the result." I know that many members who would prefer not to see me in this chamber will be disappointed—I should take that as some comfort—but, as others have said, that is not the principle.

In a democracy, it is not just the votes that are cast for the winners that count; those that are cast for the losers also count. The right to elect a Government is not the essence of a democracy; the right to throw one out is. The most important right in a democracy is the right to dissent and to have that dissent properly recorded at the ballot box.

I am disappointed to find, as Lord James said, that there is no statutory mechanism to order a recount. Could the secretary of state petition the Court of Session under the *nobile officium*? Where there is a lacuna in the law, that avenue might be available to him to redress this crime against natural justice—as far as people in Edinburgh West are concerned. I ask the minister to consult the Executive's legal advisers and to encourage the secretary of state to do so. That may be a way out of this impasse.

If I have some sympathy for those who were responsible for the conduct of these counts it is because I think that it was a major error to hold the elections for the councils and the Parliament on the same day. That major error of judgment was committed by the then secretary of state, Mr Donald Dewar, who should be held to account for it. I sincerely hope that we will not compound that error in future elections and that elections to our councils, under whatever system this Parliament finally decides, will be held separately, on a day when local government issues can be fairly addressed and when all votes, however cast, under whichever system, can be accurately recorded. I support Lord James's motion.

17:25

Robin Harper (Lothians) (Green): I came last

on the last list to be declared, so I am in the enviable—or unenviable—position of being the very last person to be elected to the Scottish Parliament.

One of my complaints concerns the stress that we were all put under on that day for an extra 12 hours. I then suffered extra stress when the *Edinburgh Evening News* rang me to say that the election result might be invalid. I remember the horror that I felt; I was up in Aberdeen preparing for a debate—David McLetchie was with me—and we thought that we might have to go through the whole process again.

The Government should note that we are not calling for Tom Aitchison's head. He has been an extremely efficient and good chief executive for City of Edinburgh Council over the years. We want some action that will enable the voters of Lothian region and Scotland to have confidence in the way the system will work next time. If there had been a higher turnout on that day, we would have had total, utter and complete chaos rather than just chaos.

I back everything that I have heard so far. It is a matter of great concern to me, and to many people to whom I have spoken, that something went very badly wrong in the first election to the Scottish Parliament. I have not received a single word of apology from Tom Aitchison—no letter, no nothing. At the very least, we must have a statement to the Parliament to get the matter set right.

17:27

Donald Gorrie (Central Scotland) (LD): It is good that Lord James has raised this debate, because—as others have said—the vote is fundamental to democracy and if votes are not counted, that makes a mockery of the whole process.

I have one or two points that have not so far been raised. In fairness to the returning officer fraternity, they warned strongly that problems would arise as a result of having the elections and the counting on the same day.

I recollect that either my colleagues or I raised in the House of Commons the matter of not being able to have a recount. The establishment argument centred on the fact that the list votes would be counted in a number of different areas. It was not envisaged that thousands of votes would be lost, but if there was a close-run thing, the prospect of recounting in six or 10 different places was deemed so horrific that it just would not be done. That is not very satisfactory, but I assure Lord James that the matter was of concern and was raised in the House of Commons.

I am a sort of nut on voting systems in general, so I know that Lord James has a strong record of close contests. I have won 15 elections and lost eight, so I have quite a lot of experience both ways. We must do these things better in future and in our consideration of voting methods for local government elections we must bear in mind disasters of this sort. The sooner we can experiment in better methods of electronic voting, the better. If I am a bit incoherent, it is because the voting system in the House of Commons led to our voting at 1.15 this morning.

17:29

The Deputy Minister for Justice (Angus MacKay): I will begin by making two corrections of fact. I am sure that the errors were unintentional, but they are worth pointing out none the less. First, Lord James Douglas-Hamilton suggested that Gavin Anderson was a Government adviser. I do not think that that is the case. He is one of a number of administrators who helped to draw up the legislation.

Secondly, Margaret Smith confused the role of the chief executive and a leader of the administration in Edinburgh; I am sure that she did so entirely by mistake. I think she intended to say that it was not appropriate for the chief executive and the returning officer to be the same person. We should put that on the record as well.

Mrs Smith: That is correct.

Angus MacKay: Thank you. These are important issues; there is no doubt about that. If votes go missing, that is a matter of concern.

I remind the few members who are left in the chamber that parliamentary elections—including elections to this Parliament—are a reserved matter, so we do not have ministerial responsibility for them. I recognise, however, that concerns have been raised. It is proper and right that members should raise them.

I am sure that the first words most of us uttered after our returning officer declared that we were elected were words of thanks to the returning officer and his staff for the work that was done in delivering the election. Those are not simply customary platitudes. We can rightly say that we rely on a relatively small but dedicated band of people who, time and again, put in a tremendous amount of work and effort to ensure the continuation of the democratic process.

It is only right that we should take this opportunity to pay tribute to the achievement of the returning officers throughout Scotland for the work they did on 6 May. While we recognise that it was achieved only as a result of great sacrifice—as was said, there is no doubt that count

arrangements were under great strain—it is important that we do not overlook the task that officials were asked to perform on that evening. It is to their credit that Edinburgh is the only place where a major discrepancy arose.

As I am sure members are aware, electoral legislation is framed in such a way as to place statutory responsibility for the conduct of an election with the returning officer. The legislation provides that an election or a return to Parliament can be challenged only in the courts. Ministers are rightly kept out of the process. The returning officer in Edinburgh has already investigated what went wrong on 6 May and has proposed a number of changes to the practices that were in effect on that date. Many of the changes were in place for the elections to the European Parliament—which has also been mentioned—and which I am pleased to say passed without incident, despite their being proportional representation elections. Members will also have seen in recent press coverage that the returning officer has now agreed with his council that an independent inquiry should be set up to examine what further lessons can be learnt.

Mrs Margaret Ewing (Moray) (SNP): I am interested in the recommendations that may be made. Everyone here this evening is interested in the democratic process. How will the recommendations be implemented, given what the minister said about such matters being reserved to Westminster? Will a recommendation be made through this chamber to the Secretary of State for Scotland, or will one come through a committee? How can we effectively achieve the end that I think we all desire?

Angus MacKay: I will come to the bulk of those matters later. If members feel sufficiently strongly about the report from City of Edinburgh Council, or about any report from the secretary of state, they are at liberty to raise those issues here in Parliament and to have them discussed if that is merited.

Members will be aware that, after an election count, ballot papers are sealed up in sacks and deposited with the sheriff clerk by the returning officer. As I understand it, a court order is required to reopen the sacks and such an order can be granted only as a result of an election petition or a prosecution. Those provisions are set out in the Scottish Parliament (Elections etc.) Order 1999, which was made by the secretary of state under section 12 of the Scotland Act 1998. The order does not empower the secretary of state to have the ballot papers recounted.

I also understand that under that order the time for submitting an election petition has now passed. It would appear, therefore, that there is no way the ballot papers can be recounted, but that is for

others to confirm on the basis of their own legal advice, on the basis of this debate and on the basis of any other information that might come to light.

Fergus Ewing (Inverness East, Nairn and Lochaber) (SNP): Pursuant to that point, and taking up Mr McLetchie's suggestion, have the minister's legal advisers considered the possibility of petitioning the powers of the Court of Session under the *nobile officium*? In that petition, the Electoral Reform Society might be invited to supervise a recount of the votes. Perhaps some other mechanism could be used to remove this stain from the first Scottish parliamentary general election.

Angus MacKay: I understand from the legal advice that I have received so far that no mechanism to hold a recount is open to the Parliament or its agencies. If MSPs or members of the public have information that contradicts that advice, the Executive would have to examine it. However, the matter is covered by reserved powers and is more properly for the consideration of the Secretary of State for Scotland. I shall return to that matter, in passing, later.

As I said at the beginning of my speech, the matter needs to be reviewed seriously. The Secretary of State for Scotland has already indicated that he intends to undertake a wide-ranging review into the conduct of the election on 6 May. That is standard practice after an election, and it was promised before the election took place. It is particularly appropriate in these circumstances, given the fact that the elections were the first ever in Scotland to be fought under proportional representation.

The problems that were faced by the returning officer in Edinburgh make the investigation and review all the more appropriate. The City of Edinburgh Council has agreed to submit a report on its own investigation into the matter to the secretary of state, who has said that he will take account of it in his wider review.

As part of his review, the secretary of state will consult all returning officers and organisations such as the Association of Electoral Administrators and the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives. He will also consult the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities and all the political parties. He has stated that the problems in Edinburgh will be taken into account as part of that review.

Ministerial responsibility lies in ensuring that the statutory duties that are placed on a returning officer are deliverable and that the task that they are charged with is not too onerous. That is what the secretary of state's review is, and should be, all about. Given the individuals and organisations

that he is consulting, I am confident that he will receive full and frank views on what was asked of staff on 6 May, and that lessons will be learnt for future elections.

Michael Russell (South of Scotland) (SNP): Is the minister—as the minister who is responsible for this matter—prepared to pass the *Official Report* of this debate to the Secretary of State for Scotland so that he can consider the views that have been expressed in this debate when he undertakes his review? The Parliament might be able to pass a motion on that without notice, or it might require the permission of the Presiding Officer. I am sure that it would be useful to the secretary of state if the minister made that undertaking.

Angus MacKay: After the debate is concluded, we will draw it to the attention of the secretary of state and the City of Edinburgh Council, who will take a close interest in the subject of this discussion.

The notion that different elections should be held on different days to prevent such circumstances arising in the future has been mentioned. There is some way to go in advancing that argument before it can be proved that it would help to deal with the sort of problems that were experienced on 6 May.

In the past, elections for national Parliament and local government have taken place on the same day. Although the Scottish elections were proportional representation elections, which made them slightly different, the votes were counted on two separate days. That was the case in Edinburgh and throughout most of the rest of Scotland, so I do not think that having the elections on the same day could cause problems with the count. However, that is a matter for the reviews to examine.

Michael Russell: The European Parliament does not permit its elections to be held on the same day as other elections in any of its member states. There must be a reason for that. The reason is that it causes confusion in the counting process. That is a good European example that we should follow.

Angus MacKay: I do not want to speculate on the reasons for the way in which the European Parliament made its electoral arrangements. If that is the case, it will come out in any future review.

The anticipated difficulties that were highlighted before the elections took place were, by and large, focused on the difficulty of explaining to electors how they were expected to use their ballot papers to vote, accommodating the volume of electors through different parts of polling stations and finding sufficient space in polling stations to accommodate all the ballot boxes. Several criticisms were raised in advance of the elections,

but most of them did not—I cannot recall any that did—relate to the conduct of counting the ballot papers. If I am wrong, I am happy to accept that, but I am not aware that there were any further problems.

Lord James Douglas-Hamilton: Will the minister give way?

Angus MacKay: I shall give way for the final time.

Lord James Douglas-Hamilton: Is the minister aware that we were informed that all local authority ballot boxes had to be checked on the day of the election to ensure that parliamentary votes had not been deposited in the local authority ballot boxes? That procedure places additional pressure on those who are conducting the voting and the count.

Angus MacKay: We are in danger of straying from the subject of the review. I ought to point out that the ballot papers were different colours, so checking which ballot papers were in which boxes should have been a relatively straightforward, if time-consuming, task.

Mrs Margaret Ewing: Will the minister give way?

Angus MacKay: I will not give way again as I have done so often enough already.

To conclude, I echo the concerns about the elections last May that have been expressed throughout the chamber. I think that those concerns are legitimate. However, I am sure that, between them, the returning officers and the secretary of state will thoroughly examine what went wrong and that lessons will be learnt in time for the next elections to this Parliament.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes the debate on the vote in the Edinburgh West parliamentary division. I now close this meeting of Parliament.

Meeting closed at 17:40.

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

Members who would like a copy of the bound volume should also give notice at the Document Supply Centre.

No proofs of the *Official Report* can be supplied. Members who want to suggest corrections for the bound volume should mark them clearly in the daily edition, and send it to the Official Report, Parliamentary Headquarters, George IV Bridge, Edinburgh EH99 1SP. Suggested corrections in any other form cannot be accepted.

The deadline for corrections to this edition is:

Thursday 11 November 1999

Members who want reprints of their speeches (within one month of the date of publication) may obtain request forms and further details from the Central Distribution Office, the Document Supply Centre or the Official Report.

PRICES AND SUBSCRIPTION RATES

DAILY EDITIONS

Single copies: £5

Annual subscriptions: £640

BOUND VOLUMES OF DEBATES are issued periodically during the session.

Single copies: £70

Standing orders will be accepted at the Document Supply Centre.

WHAT'S HAPPENING IN THE SCOTTISH PARLIAMENT, compiled by the Scottish Parliament Information Centre, contains details of past and forthcoming business and of the work of committees and gives general information on legislation and other parliamentary activity.

Single copies: £2.50

Special issue price: £5

Annual subscriptions: £82.50

WRITTEN ANSWERS TO PARLIAMENTARY QUESTIONS weekly compilation

Single copies: £2.50

Annual subscriptions: £80

Published in Edinburgh by The Stationery Office Limited and available from:

The Stationery Office Bookshop
71 Lothian Road
Edinburgh EH3 9AZ
0131 228 4181 Fax 0131 622 7017

The Stationery Office Bookshops at:
123 Kingsway, London WC2B 6PQ
Tel 0171 242 6393 Fax 0171 242 6394
68-69 Bull Street, Birmingham B4 6AD
Tel 0121 236 9696 Fax 0121 236 9699
33 Wine Street, Bristol BS1 2BQ
Tel 01179 264306 Fax 01179 294515
9-21 Princess Street, Manchester M60 8AS
Tel 0161 834 7201 Fax 0161 833 0634
16 Arthur Street, Belfast BT1 4GD
Tel 01232 238451 Fax 01232 235401
The Stationery Office Oriol Bookshop,
18-19 High Street, Cardiff CF12BZ
Tel 01222 395548 Fax 01222 384347

The Stationery Office 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
0870 606 5566

Fax orders
0870 606 5588

The Scottish Parliament Shop
George IV Bridge
EH99 1SP
Telephone orders 0131 348 5412

sp.info@scottish.parliament.uk

www.scottish.parliament.uk

Accredited Agents
(see Yellow Pages)

and through good booksellers