

# **MEETING OF THE PARLIAMENT**

Wednesday 13 September 2000  
(*Afternoon*)

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## Scottish Parliament

Wednesday 13 September 2000

(Afternoon)

[THE PRESIDING OFFICER *opened the meeting at 14:30*]

### Time for Reflection

**The Presiding Officer (Sir David Steel):** I welcome to lead our time for reflection today the Right Rev Ian Murray, Bishop of Argyll and the Isles.

**Right Rev Ian Murray (Bishop of Argyll and the Isles):** Everyone who is called to the service of leadership in public or private enterprise, whether in the state, the Church or the community at large, is faced with what is almost a contradiction. How is it possible to be both servant and leader? One might be forgiven for thinking that the servant obeys and the leader commands. You are servants of those who elected you to office, yet they expect you literally to lay down the law for them and to lead them. They confer upon you power over many aspects of their everyday life. That does not sound like the job description of a servant.

Yet the leader offers a real and valuable service to others. The gospel tells us that when Jesus

“saw the crowds he felt sorry for them because they were harassed and dejected, like sheep without a shepherd.”

A people without a leader can easily become a people without a purpose. One function of leadership is to create and maintain cohesion within the group, while another is to give guidance and direction, to set objectives and to establish structures.

However, the leader must never lose contact with those who follow. The leader is also part of the group: he or she is one member among many, although with a distinctive role and a particular responsibility. If the leader is too far ahead of the way that the majority thinks or acts, he or she becomes isolated from people and detached from reality. It is important to remain part of the people, sensitive to their needs and responsive to their demands. It is imperative to share the experiences, hopes and anxieties of our fellow men and women.

In the gospel of Matthew, a Roman centurion approaches Jesus and asks him to cure his servant who is ill. He says:

“Just give the word and my servant will be cured. For I am a man under authority myself, and have soldiers under

me; I say to one man: Go, and he goes; to another: Come here, and he comes”.

The centurion knew how to lead because he knew how to obey. He could demand obedience because he gave obedience. He exercised authority because he also submitted to authority. That obedience and submission must be a feature of all rightly exercised leadership.

The service of leadership will take different forms according to different situations. The problem arises in relation to which form of leadership is appropriate to each individual situation. Sometimes, the leadership structure will take the form of a pyramid, where leadership is exercised from the top down. On other occasions, the leader will be at the centre of activity, like the hub of a wheel that permits movement on the perimeter while preventing the operation from going off in all directions. At other times, leadership may mean being part of a circle, facilitating co-operation, consultation and equality in order to discern the way forward. Identifying the appropriate model is the task of leadership.

Perhaps the chief characteristic of the great leader is humility: the ability to recognise not only our gifts but our weaknesses and to live with both.

## Business Motion

**The Presiding Officer (Sir David Steel):** I understand that Mr McCabe wants to move a motion without notice.

14:35

**The Minister for Parliament (Mr Tom McCabe):** Sir David, I seek your permission to move a motion without notice on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau.

**The Presiding Officer:** I am minded to accept such a motion. Is it agreed that we accept a motion without notice, relating to the business?

**Members indicated agreement.**

**The Presiding Officer:** I call Mr McCabe to move business motion S1M-1178, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, to set out a revised business programme.

**Mr McCabe:** The motion is to set out a revision to the business programme that we agreed last week. The main change to today's business is the substitution of the business that has been agreed with a statement on the developing fuel situation in Scotland, followed by questions for clarification only, which will be followed by a debate. The effect will be to move the ministerial statement on the Executive's programme to tomorrow afternoon.

I move,

That the Parliament agrees—

(a) the following revisions to the Business Motion agreed on 6 September 2000—

Wednesday 13 September 2000

after "Time for Reflection" delete all for that day and insert—

*followed by* Parliamentary Bureau Motions – S1M-1175 Change of Decision Time and S1M-1176 Suspension of Standing Orders

*followed by* Ministerial Statement, Questions and Debate on the Developing Fuel Situation in Scotland

5.00 pm Decision Time

*followed by* Members' Business - debate on the subject of S1M-1124 Shona Robison: Fibromyalgia Syndrome

Thursday 14 September 2000

after "Financial Resolution in respect of the Transport (Scotland) Bill" delete all and insert—

*followed by* Parliamentary Bureau Motions

12.30 pm Decision Time

2.00 pm Members' Business - debate on the subject of S1M-1122 Maureen

Macmillan: Screening for Prostate Cancer

2.30 pm Question Time

3.10 pm First Minister's Question Time

3.30 pm Ministerial Statement and Debate on the Scottish Executive's Programme

6.00 pm Business Concludes

and (b) the following programme of business—

Wednesday 20 September 2000

2.30 pm Time for Reflection

2.35 pm Question Time

3.15 pm First Minister's Question Time

3.35 pm Ministerial Statement and Debate on Spending Strategy

*followed by* Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5.00 pm Decision Time

*followed by* Members' Business - debate on the subject of S1M-959 Alex Johnstone: St Vigeans Primary School, Arbroath

Thursday 21 September 2000

9.30 am Ministerial Statement

*followed by* Executive Debate on Public Health

*followed by* Business Motion

2.30 pm Social Inclusion, Housing and Voluntary Sector Committee Debate on Housing Stock Transfer

*followed by* Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5.00 pm Decision Time

*followed by* Members' Business - debate on the subject of S1M-958 Michael McMahon: Palliative Care

Wednesday 27 September 2000

2.30 pm Time for Reflection

*followed by* Ministerial Statement

*followed by* Executive Debate on the Creative Economy

*followed by* Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5.00 pm Decision Time

*followed by* Members' Business

Thursday 28 September 2000

9.30 am Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party Business

*followed by* Business Motion

2.30 pm Question Time

3.10 pm First Minister's Question Time

3.30 pm Executive Business

*followed by* Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5.00 pm Decision Time

*followed by* Members' Business

**The Presiding Officer:** As no one has asked to speak against the motion, I will put the question. The question is, that motion S1M-1178 be agreed to.

*Motion agreed to.*

## Parliamentary Bureau Motions

**The Presiding Officer (Sir David Steel):** The next item of business is consideration of Parliamentary Bureau motions. I ask Mr McCabe to move motions S1M-1175 and S1M-1176, relating to tomorrow's business.

14:37

**The Minister for Parliament (Mr Tom McCabe):** These are consequential motions. Motion S1M-1175 seeks to move decision time in Parliament tomorrow to 12:30. The only business that requires a vote will take place in the morning, and the suggestion is that it would be more convenient for members to vote at 12:30 in these unusual circumstances.

Motion S1M-1176 proposes to take members' business at 2 o'clock tomorrow afternoon, as tomorrow's meeting will run longer than normal. In addition, if the chamber agrees, a further motion will be required to suspend standing orders to allow members' business to be separated from decision time.

I move,

That the Parliament agrees under Rule 11.2.4 of the Standing Orders that Decision Time on Thursday 14 September 2000 shall begin at 12.30 pm.

That the Parliament agrees that Rule 5.6.1(c) of Standing Orders be suspended for the purpose of taking members' business on Thursday, 14 September 2000 at 2.00 pm.

**The Presiding Officer:** No one has asked to speak against those motions, so I shall take them as read and we will vote on them at decision time.

## Fuel Situation

**The Presiding Officer (Sir David Steel):** We now come to the main business of this afternoon, which is a statement by the First Minister on the developing fuel situation in Scotland. There will be no interventions during the statement, but there will be a brief opportunity for questions of clarification only, if necessary, immediately after he has finished. We will then move straight into the debate.

14:38

**The First Minister (Donald Dewar):** I wish to make a statement on the current disruption to fuel supplies in Scotland.

As members know, the current situation in Scotland, as in the rest of the United Kingdom, has become serious—and I stress the word serious. It is affecting fuel supplies to most of the population and affecting emergency and other services. It has been caused by lorry drivers, farmers and others threatening to obstruct refineries and fuel terminals across the United Kingdom in protest at high fuel prices.

Although fuel duty is a reserved matter, the situation in Scotland is being very closely monitored by a ministerial group of the Executive, which I set up yesterday for the purpose. We also have our officials in London, where the United Kingdom position is being kept under review by the civil contingencies committee, chaired by the Secretary of State for the Home Department.

During the past 24 hours, I have on many occasions been in contact with the police—especially in the Central region—British Petroleum management at a variety of levels, co-ordinators in London and the Prime Minister. A police liaison officer is working closely with our emergency planning centre in St Andrew's House, and I pay tribute to the dedication of the staff, who are working very long hours to cope with present difficulties.

Last night, there was some limited movement, with 10 tankers leaving the Grangemouth plant. Three more have gone today. That disappointing and inadequate progress is very frustrating. There is no barrier to moving in and out of the plant, or indeed anything approaching an official picket line. The chief constable of Central police has assured me that he has adequate resources, including the availability of support from other forces under mutual aid arrangements, to meet the oil companies' needs. They are able to assure their staff that their personal safety will not be put at risk. I am satisfied that the police stand ready to assist in whatever way they can.

It is difficult to understand why there has been so little progress when emergency services, industrial production, jobs and in some cases even lives could be at risk. I expect the pace of movement to increase later today. It is in the national interest that that is so. I will be in touch with the oil companies again and I expect their full co-operation at a time of real difficulty.

I will not accept that Government policy should be dictated by protests of this kind, which so badly affect our everyday lives. I defend the right to legitimate protest, but that is very different from an attempt to bring the country to a grinding standstill. I simply note that no trades union would ever take action of this kind without giving notice of its intentions and making arrangements to protect supplies to the most vulnerable. *[Applause.]*

Our emphasis has been on the maintenance of essential services. That is why 2,500 filling stations throughout the United Kingdom have been designated, including more than 350 in Scotland. Those stations will have a key role in supplying essential users while the shortage lasts.

I am particularly concerned about the needs of the health service. I am relieved, therefore, that five tanker-loads of heating oil have been delivered to hospitals in the past 24 hours. However, many essential service vehicles use filling stations to obtain fuel, and as those supplies run out the threat to such services intensifies.

There is no doubt that the national health service in Scotland is coming under pressure. It is doing all that it can to secure more fuel, but the longer the disruption of supplies goes on, the more chance there is that lives will be placed at risk. The service is acting to maintain normal operations as far as possible. As of today, hospitals must cope with some staff being unable to get to work. Many patients have been unable to keep appointments. The situation is still manageable, but if shortages persist, there will be increasingly severe problems towards the end of the week.

I can reassure members that the Scottish Ambulance Service accident and emergency service is not under threat. However, patient transport services, which are vital for the smooth running of hospital appointments, will begin to be affected within the next day or so. Some non-emergency operations have already been cancelled. It is unfair to patients and to the dedicated staff in the health service.

Another major concern is the disruption to business and industry. Shortages are beginning to cause problems across a wide range of industrial sectors. Companies in the electronics and whisky industries have reported that lay-offs are inevitable unless there is an improvement in the situation

within the next 24 hours. I already know—in confidence—of two major electronics plants in Scotland, employing many hundreds of people, which tell us that there is now a very real danger that they will have to suspend production because of the difficulty of moving supplies. That is an increasingly pressing problem across a wide range of industries and if the situation were to remain static, the loss of jobs and production would be a major blow.

It may be of interest to members to know about the situation elsewhere in the energy sector. The situation at oil storage terminals across Scotland is mixed. Stocks at Aberdeen, Inverness and Scrabster, which are supplied by sea, are at reasonable levels. However, supplies at fuel storage depots in Inverness, Fort William, St Boswells and Forfar are low; Kilmarnock depot is particularly low on supplies of diesel.

The situation regarding electricity generation is currently not critical. Power stations in Scotland do not rely on road tanker deliveries of fuel, and while they do depend on delivery of other essential supplies, they all have around two weeks' worth of stock on site. I understand that some power station operators have made transport arrangements to ensure that their essential operational staff can get to work.

The electricity grid is more vulnerable to a prolonged fuel disruption. Repairs to any overhead line faults, occurring for whatever reason, must be carried out on the spot by linesmen who need fuel for their vehicles. That is a problem in the north, in particular. I am told that Scottish and Southern Energy has instructed its staff not to undertake any work-related travel that is not operationally essential. The company is seeking to conserve what fuel stocks it has for the use of linesmen, who have been experiencing problems in obtaining diesel from filling stations in various areas of the north and west, including the Western Isles.

The situation regarding gas supply seems satisfactory for the moment. Transco is monitoring the situation hourly and is ready to stop non-essential travel by its employees so that fuel is conserved for the use of maintenance crews. The St Fergus gas terminal, which is north of Peterhead, is powered by gas that comes ashore there and is not dependent on fuel deliveries by road.

Although arrangements have been made to safeguard essential services in the first instance, I should emphasise that the aim is not for supplies for just essential services to get through, but for normal supplies to be resumed as soon as possible. Nothing less will avoid the unpleasant and damaging consequences that threaten our economy and the livelihood of our citizens.

I recognise that there are concerns about fuel prices, although I note a tendency to concentrate on that question alone, rather than on the wider costs of running vehicles. I hold firmly to the view that this is a cause for legitimate public debate and decision making by a Government that is accountable to Parliament. I hope that common sense will prevail and that the country will soon be operating as it should, in the interests of industry, the workers and the vulnerable. In Scotland, that means a normal flow of fuel from Grangemouth. In the past hour and a half, I called in BP senior management and underlined in forthright terms the need for action.

**The Presiding Officer:** I will take short questions for clarification of the statement, but I emphasise that I will not allow argument to precede the debate.

**Hugh Henry (Paisley South) (Lab):** Can the First Minister obtain for the Parliament a list of those companies in the haulage industry that are involved in the dispute—pleading a threat to jobs—that were also active participants in the miners' strike in 1984 and went through picket lines then?

**The Presiding Officer:** I am not allowing that question. I hope that Mr Quinan can do better.

**Mr Lloyd Quinan (West of Scotland) (SNP):** Can the First Minister clarify for the chamber why we pay VAT on fuel tax, but not on any other taxation?

**The Presiding Officer:** That question is not in order. I emphasise that members have to ask factual questions on the current situation.

**Bruce Crawford (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP):** I thank the First Minister for his statement. I would like some clarification on an apparent contradiction. In the early part of his statement, he said that the obstructions had been caused by lorry drivers, farmers and others. However, shortly after that, he told us that there was no barrier to movement at Grangemouth, and that he was disappointed by the inadequate progress that had been made. If there is no barrier, why is nothing moving in or out of the Grangemouth plant? What is the difficulty at which he is hinting?

**The First Minister:** That is a fundamental question, the importance of which I appreciate. There is no reason why fuel should not move out of Grangemouth, and other refineries up and down the United Kingdom. That is not happening for one central reason: I am told that drivers are very reluctant to move fuel because they feel that there is intimidation. I have inquired into that matter to the best of my ability. I have spoken to the police and a number of other people, and I know of no evidence at all of intimidation at Grangemouth. I believe that at a certain level there is almost a

measure of co-operation. That merely underlines my frustration. We need to get fuel moving out of Grangemouth, so that we do not face a crisis—perhaps within 48 hours—that none of us wants.

**Phil Gallie (South of Scotland) (Con):** The First Minister said that trade unions would always give notice in such a situation. Does he acknowledge that it is thanks to Tory legislation that the trade unions—

**The Presiding Officer:** I am sorry, Mr Gallie. Please sit down. I have said that we will not have argument during these short factual questions—that is for the debate. Let us try Margaret Smith.

**Mrs Margaret Smith (Edinburgh West) (LD):** I am sure that everybody in the chamber is pleased about the reassurance on ambulance services, particularly for emergencies. Have any steps been taken to assist essential health workers to ensure that they get to their places of employment? As well as the fuel requirement for ambulances and hospitals, I have been worried by the contact that I have had with a number of my constituents: health workers, who are worried that they will be unable to get to their places of employment as necessary.

**The First Minister:** That is a legitimate worry, and staff are undoubtedly having difficulties in a number of key areas. We are dealing with a fast-developing situation, which has effectively been running for only 48 hours. The speed with which our essential services are affected when fuel dries up is astonishing.

Consideration is being given to ensuring that some of the designated filling stations will be able to give immediate priority to defined groups of essential users. The difficulty about that is administrative. It is not easy to do, and I cannot give Margaret Smith an undertaking on it. We are well aware of the problem, and are considering the possibility of such prioritisation.

**Roseanna Cunningham (Perth) (SNP):** Can the First Minister clarify the extent of the consultations that he has had with consumers and suppliers, which would have been expected under the implementation of section 1 of the Energy Act 1976, albeit the Government has moved directly to implementation of section 3?

**The First Minister:** The powers that we have taken do come under the Energy Act 1976, and they are limited. As Roseanna Cunningham will no doubt know, there has been discussion about whether earlier statutes should come into play, but I think that, for good reasons, we want to proceed down the road that we have chosen. That gives us certain powers, for example to designate filling stations, but the solution is for people to recognise that to go on in the way that they have been doing will cause enormously serious damage to a very large number of people who are not in any way

involved. That is imperative, and no fiddling around the edges with regard to what is essential and what is not will get over the fact that people's jobs matter, people's medical treatment matters and people's transport needs matter. If we go on as we are doing now, all of those will suffer considerably.

**Karen Gillon (Clydesdale) (Lab):** Given the concerns of people in my constituency about gas safety, I am particularly interested in clarification on Transco and its ability to maintain emergency contact should there be reports of leaks or any damage to pipelines during this crisis. Can the First Minister clarify that that is the case? If not, will steps be taken to ensure that Transco has adequate fuel?

**The First Minister:** Transco will certainly be doing all it can. Obviously, the longer the situation lasts, the more difficult it becomes. However, we are confident at this stage about the continuance of gas supplies. In my statement, I used the term "satisfactory". Transco is of course monitoring the situation, but we believe that maintenance crews are still able to get to any difficulty that may arise, and that safety can be preserved. That is the essential point.

**The Presiding Officer:** There is now a difficulty, as a large number of members wish to ask questions. I will overlook all those who have asked to speak in the debate because, in fairness to them, we should—[*Interruption.*] Either we carry on with questions, in which case we limit the debate, or we bring questions on the statement to a close and move on to the debate. Let us see how we go for a little while.

**John Young (West of Scotland) (Con):** The First Minister mentioned the whisky and electronics industries, saying that if the present situation were to continue for 48 hours, there would be job lay-offs. Has he any idea from those industries how many lay-offs might be involved in that period? It is possible to lay people off partially, but not to close a company or enterprise down totally.

**The First Minister:** No, I cannot give John Young a figure, and I think he would be surprised if I could. All I can say is that we have had contact with a number of companies that are talking in absolute terms about closing down production. Clearly, that would mean the laying off of a large number of jobs. We have also been in touch with the Confederation of British Industry (Scotland), the Scottish Trades Union Congress and a number of other interested bodies—chambers of commerce and so on—all of which are alarmed, concerned and fear the worst if we cannot get a return to normalcy very quickly indeed. The situation is serious—I hope that I have made that clear—and we take it very seriously.

**Donald Gorrie (Central Scotland) (LD):** Will the First Minister clarify the position of the 350 designated petrol stations? Will they be instructed to give fuel only to priority people or, if ordinary motorists—such as MSPs—roll up, will they get some? No doubt the First Minister has already done this, but it would be helpful if the arrangements could be publicised. We do not want lots of motorists chasing non-existent petrol, but if petrol were available, it would be useful to know which were the designated garages.

**The First Minister:** There is nothing ordinary about Donald Gorrie, which is perhaps fortunate. He asks an important question. At present, the 350 designated stations are in a position to help motorists other than those in the authorised user groups. The groups are still being defined. We may—I say that because it is still at the planning stage—get a further designation, as well as ring-fencing of a group of petrol stations within the 350, the use of which will be dedicated to defined essential users. The problem is not in the wish or the intent, but in the administration and policing, which could cause difficulties. However, we are seized of that problem, which I accept is important.

**Brian Adam (North-East Scotland) (SNP):** The First Minister has told us that he has had or will have—quite sensibly—discussions with a range of people, from the police and his colleagues in the Government to the CBI (Scotland). Does he have plans to meet or have discussions with those who are protesting?

**The First Minister:** Not at this stage. One of the things about the protestors—this is not a complaint; it is simply a remark—is that it is extremely difficult to discover exactly what their demands are, apart from a general discontent with the price of petrol and diesel fuel. The protestors are not an organised body. They have no formal structures. I therefore do not think that it would be appropriate or possible to do as the member says. We know that the Scottish National Party takes a strong position, attacking high fuel prices. We know that its pledge is not to reduce them, but to freeze them.

**Mr John Swinney (North Tayside) (SNP):** No it is not.

**The First Minister:** The pledge is to freeze them with no inflation factor.

**The Presiding Officer:** Order. I must ask the First Minister not to transgress the rules that I have been trying to apply to everybody else.

**The First Minister:** I was merely remarking that I have read John Swinney's speech to the Scottish Grand Committee. The point that I was going to make is that most of the protestors probably would not see the SNP's action as adequate. The protestors' requirements are ill defined at present.

**Cathy Jamieson (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (Lab):** I thank the First Minister for his statement. I have a couple of specific questions following consultation this morning with one of the local authorities in my area. Will the First Minister clarify whether the order on emergency facilities will cover provisions for social services, including private providers of care services—nursing homes, sheltered housing and so on? Also, will the order cover school transport, bearing in mind that many children, particularly vulnerable children and those in rural areas, rely on support services to maintain a decent quality of life?

**The First Minister:** Emergency arrangements of this kind are always rough and ready. We would hope that the concept of the essential user would extend to most of the groups of individuals and workers that this chamber would regard as being involved in essential services. However, I cannot, at this stage, give blanket assurances. The tragedy is that if we get a situation in which fuel does not move, inevitably, in a very short period of time, there will be many people who are inconvenienced—some to the point where the situation could genuinely be described as damaging.

**Mr David Davidson (North-East Scotland) (Con):** In the list of essential users, will the First Minister consider those who pick up milk in milk tankers? Obviously, milk cannot be stored on a farm. Will he also consider those in fishing vessels and those who are trying to take in our harvest?

**The First Minister:** The food industry will be taken into account in any arrangements. However, I have no doubt that, on the edges, there will be difficulties—of course there will be. We want food processing and food supply services to be preserved and protected in these difficult circumstances. We have to look for an immediate solution—a short-term solution—that allows us to get fuel moving again.

**Alex Neil (Central Scotland) (SNP):** I am amazed that the First Minister does not know what the protestors are looking for. I have just come from—

**The Presiding Officer:** You can say that in debate, but not in questions.

**Alex Neil:** I have just come from Grangemouth, where I spoke to the senior police officer in charge, who confirmed that there have been no threats or intimidation. Is the First Minister aware of that? Is the First Minister also aware that the protestors, to whom I also spoke, have no intention of engaging in any form of intimidation whatever? They are seething with anger at the Government's spin against them.

**The First Minister:** I am astonished by what

Alex Neil has just said. I covered those points in my opening statement. I made it clear that I did not believe that there was any cause to fear that there would be intimidation; and I made it clear that there had been a civilised relationship—at a certain level, at least—between the various parties involved. I drew from that the clear conclusion—which I hope Mr Neil shares—that drivers are in a position to move out, that the police are in a position to give all possible help in the unlikely event that it is required, and that it is in the interests of everyone in this country to get that process under way.

**Lewis Macdonald (Aberdeen Central) (Lab):** What discussions have there been with chief police officers about the proper way in which to deal with those who drive motor vehicles in a way that is calculated to cause maximum disruption to other road users? Will there be discussions with chief police officers about whether the approach that they appear to be taking at the moment will be followed in other disputes and protests in future?

**The First Minister:** I now know Chief Constable Andrew Cameron of the Central Scotland Police extremely well. We have spent a great deal of time together, one way or another, over the past 48 hours. I have also had the opportunity to discuss with the honorary secretary of the Association of Chief Police Officers in Scotland, Sir Roy Cameron, some of the issues that have arisen. The police have given a great deal of support. They have put in place, as I have said, machinery that allows mutual transfer of resources should that become necessary—although at this stage it is not necessary. They have set out to be as helpful as they possibly can, and I am grateful for that.

If people obstruct roads deliberately, they are putting themselves at risk in terms of the law. However, decisions as to whether it is sensible to take formal steps in such a situation are operational matters that I think are best left to police officers. I would certainly not want to pass a judgment on that.

**The Presiding Officer:** I have to protect the time for the debate, so I will take just two more questions.

**Dennis Canavan (Falkirk West):** Will the First Minister make appropriate representations to the Prime Minister in view of the fact that today's chaos might have been avoided if the Prime Minister had listened earlier to widespread concerns about the fact that we in this country have the highest level of road fuel tax in the European Union?

**The Presiding Officer:** That question is taking us into the debate, but the First Minister may answer.

**The First Minister:** I would say to Dennis Canavan that the arguments have been well rehearsed. I said that we cannot consider this matter in isolation. In France, for example, they have road tolls, to which Mr Canavan is strongly opposed, I think. They have vehicle excise duties that are very different from ours. The question is much more complex than people, on occasion, suggest.

It is interesting that, as I said earlier—and I do not want to incur your wrath, Presiding Officer—the SNP has made it clear that it believes in a freeze, not a reduction, in petroleum revenue tax. As David McLetchie will know, in at least two interviews this Tuesday, Michael Portillo made it clear that he, as Conservative shadow chancellor, was not undertaking to reduce petroleum revenue tax or giving any sort of promise to that effect.

**Mr Michael McMahon (Hamilton North and Bellshill) (Lab):** I welcome the First Minister's statement, particularly in relation to the accident and emergency services. Is he aware of information that I received this morning to the effect that some funeral directors and undertakers will be unable to conduct their business during the next 24 to 48 hours if they are not considered to be an essential service? Has there been any consideration of the impact that that would have? Will they be considered as an essential service to enable them to receive emergency fuel deliveries?

**The First Minister:** I cannot give a specific answer on that, but I take the point. Clearly, where there has been a death and a funeral is in prospect, that is a traumatic and difficult situation. The troubles would be multiplied many times over if there were difficulties in getting the funeral completed.

A great deal of thought has been given to whether it is possible to draw up a comprehensive list of essential users. I am sure that the particularly sensitive group of users to which Mr McMahon refers will be kept in mind.

**The Presiding Officer:** I have taken note of the eight members whom I have not called in the question period. I invite Alex Salmond to begin—or, rather, to continue—the debate.

15:06

**Mr Alex Salmond (Banff and Buchan) (SNP):** At 6 o'clock yesterday evening, the Prime Minister told a Downing Street press conference that, within the next 24 hours, things would be getting back to normal. That timetable has three hours to run and the situation described by the First Minister today across a range of sectors could be described as a range of things, but it does not sound like things getting back to normal.

Lothian Regional Transport has distributed a notice saying that the last buses from the city centre to the suburbs will run at 6.30 pm and that, after that point, the company will have no buses in Edinburgh. Half an hour after the point by which the Prime Minister said that things would be getting back to normal, there will be no buses in the capital city of Scotland. I should congratulate the Minister for Transport and the Environment on the outstanding success of her policies. She wanted to get cars off the roads and I can tell her that cars are off the roads in Edinburgh today. There are few cars indeed. Unfortunately, after 6.30 pm, people will not be able to get on buses either.

The First Minister's statement touched on the Government's fundamental quandary. He could not explain it. He said about Grangemouth:

"There is no barrier to moving in and out of the plant, or indeed anything approaching an official picket line."

He conceded that there was no evidence whatever of intimidation. There is no barrier, apparently, to the free movement of petrol from the Grangemouth refinery. Yet that petrol has not been moving and the seriousness of the situation is escalating, as the First Minister has described. What is the explanation that so frustrates the First Minister? We have heard from a number of Labour sources that they believe that it is possible that the large oil companies are colluding with the protestors at the gate. I do not think that that is a likely explanation. It is a symptom of the paranoia in 10 Downing Street in the past few days.

The First Minister is shaking his head. Is he saying that he has evidence of collusion between large oil companies and the protestors?

**The First Minister:** It is true that the oil companies and the protestors have been having discussions. At Grangemouth, there is a suggestion that no lorry can move without the permission of the protestors. That is an interesting and serious situation.

**Mr Salmond:** There is a substantial element of desperation when the Government is reduced to making accusations—which the First Minister seems to support although there is no evidence—that there is some sort of collusion against the Government and then says that the oil companies can have discussions with people who, only a few minutes ago, the First Minister said he was unable to have discussions with because he did not know who they were or what they wanted.

I think that I can give the First Minister an explanation for what is happening. The First Minister and the Government's ministers might not recognise it, but there is substantial public sympathy for the protest—of that there is no doubt. I would not be at all surprised if some of

that public sympathy is also present among the tanker drivers at Grangemouth. I suspect that that might explain why the First Minister is so perplexed and helpless.

To accept that explanation is to acknowledge that solving the crisis will be about more than getting tankers flowing from Grangemouth to the petrol pumps—it will be about realising what the underlying cause of the crisis is. It will be about realising why people are protesting and why so many of the public have such sympathy with the protest. I have seen nothing from the Prime Minister in the past few days that indicates that he has any semblance of such a realisation.

I have seen a replay of Margaret Thatcher and the poll tax, when she thought that the protests were the problem and that the tax was all right. Blair thinks that the protests are the problem and that the petrol tax is all right—he is fundamentally wrong. Until the Government has the sense and statesmanship to accept that, it might get petrol to the pumps, but it will not solve the underlying crisis.

**Mr Murray Tosh (South of Scotland) (Con):** Does Mr Salmond have the statesmanship to invite the demonstrators and protesters to consider the wider implications of their actions and bring the situation to a speedy conclusion?

**Mr Salmond:** I can not only invite the demonstrators to do that; I can tell Murray Tosh—who will not, perhaps, know this, because he is not as close to the situation as he ought to be—that, after talks with the Road Haulage Association, the demonstrators outside the Grangemouth plant have agreed to walk away with dignity and let the petrol flow from that plant. They have made their protest. I hope that that satisfies Murray Tosh.

**The First Minister** *rose*—

**Mr Salmond:** The First Minister wants to intervene—I have, obviously, given him some new information.

**The First Minister:** No. I am merely anxious to establish what the SNP's position is. Is Mr Salmond advising the protestors to continue their action, or is he joining the large number of people who are increasingly concerned about the situation and asking the protestors to call the action off?

**Mr Salmond:** I support the efforts that have been made this afternoon by the Road Haulage Association—[MEMBERS: "Answer the question."] The Road Haulage Association has done what the First Minister has refused to do—[MEMBERS: "Answer the question."] Members should listen—[*Interruption.*]

**The Presiding Officer:** Order. The member is trying to give an answer.

**Mr Salmond:** The information that I have just given is new information for every Labour MSP—the protesters have been asked by the Road Haulage Association to leave Grangemouth with dignity, having made their point. The information that I have is that that will happen as a result of the association's efforts. I am astonished that no minister and nobody who is in an official position thought to do that, and that we must rely on the Road Haulage Association to try to find a way out of the crisis.

If we are to deal with the underlying problems, we will have to deal with the reason for the fuel price crisis.

I have been watching a double act in the past few days—Brian Wilson and John Reid. A journalist suggested kindly that the reason they have been chosen by the Government to be its propaganda spin merchants throughout the crisis is that they have no other jobs to do and are available to fulfil that role. I find that those gentlemen have been a pair of real dissemblers during the past few days. They said that the Organisation of Petroleum Exporting Countries is to blame and that the crisis is nothing to do with Government policy—it is all to do with OPEC.

I was struck by a newspaper article that showed a tanker of petrol and pointed out that £49,116 of the total cost of that tanker of petrol goes to the Chancellor of the Exchequer in taxes and dues. Another £14,000 of the cost of that tanker of petrol goes to refiners, retailers and transporters. That is the cost of petrol. Seventy-five per cent of every gallon of petrol is petrol duty and VAT. The issue is not OPEC but Government taxation policy and every person in the country knows it.

**The Deputy First Minister and Minister for Justice (Mr Jim Wallace):** Given that Alex Salmond and I jointly voted against every fuel duty tax increase in the past 10 years, does he agree that it is a matter to be determined by Parliament and not by mob rule?

**Mr Salmond:** I think that the people who have been demonstrating, who the First Minister has agreed have not been engaged in intimidation, will resent strongly the argument that they represent a mob.

*The Scotsman* has a picture of the demonstration outside the Grangemouth plant yesterday—three people, two sitting in deck chairs. It could be described as many things, but it is certainly not mob rule. What a nonsense.

**Mr Duncan McNeil (Greenock and Inverclyde) (Lab)** *rose—*

**Mr Salmond:** Not just now. That means no, Duncan.

One thing I will accept from the Deputy First

Minister is that he and I voted as recently as July against the latest fuel tax imposition, which has subsequently been shown to be a 3 per cent rise in petrol duties on the basis of inflation, in the very same budget in which the Government, on the basis of inflation, gave the pensioners 73p, or 1 per cent. The underlying question is whether the fuel price escalator made sense. Wilson and Reid argue that it is not about the fuel price escalator; they have even said that it has been abolished. At the budget, the chancellor said that it was going to be reviewed on a year-to-year basis. The Institute of Fiscal Studies' report today points out that since the Labour party took office, more than half of the price rise in petrol has been due to increased taxation and less than half to the rise in oil prices.

That brings me to the third misconception put across by Wilson and Reid. The argument is that if the Government acted to meet public concern, to lower fuel duty, somehow that would result in a massive hole in the chancellor's revenues. Since the budget, the chancellor has accumulated a forecast extra £600 million in increased VAT on the rising fuel prices. There is a forecast additional £2,000 million from oil revenues that the chancellor has accumulated from the rising oil prices.

**Pauline McNeill (Glasgow Kelvin) (Lab)** *rose—*

**Mr Salmond:** Not just now.

How can it be argued that the Government cannot afford to meet some of the manifest concerns of fuel-dependent industries and other people who are protesting—

**The First Minister** *rose—*

**Mr Salmond:** Before the First Minister speaks, I will see whether he remembers the Scottish Grand Committee last year. It is an indication of how misplaced Government policy was on the fuel price escalator and the expected revenues. He told me on 1 February last year that the price of oil was likely to stay at about \$10 a barrel

"for the foreseeable future"

and that

"we are worlds removed from the oil prices and production levels of the mid-1980s".—[*Official Report, House of Commons, Scottish Grand Committee*, 1 February 1999; c 8.]

If we are looking for oil price or budget forecasts, we had better not go to the First Minister.

**The First Minister:** Mr Salmond might like to consider that if oil prices vary at that level, they are not a very sound foundation on which to build the case for independence.

My point—and it is very important—is that Mr Salmond is giving the impression that he is in

favour of a massive reduction in fuel duty. At the most recent meeting of the Scottish Grand Committee, there was a quite definitive statement from John Swinney, his chosen successor as we understand it and certainly the front runner. Mr Swinney said:

"We have said that we shall freeze fuel duty. That is our clear policy commitment."—[*Official Report, House of Commons, Scottish Grand Committee, 10 July 2000; c 32.*]—

not freeze the price, but freeze the duty on it. Is that the Scot nat position? If so, it would mean a reduction of under 2p per litre, which would come as a rather cruel surprise to those who are campaigning on the issue.

**Mr Salmond:** I think that we should implement the cut of 10p a gallon which both the Deputy First Minister and I voted for in the budget. [MEMBERS: "It was 2p."] Yes, we voted for that in the budget, and if the Government had frozen fuel duty, it would mean that cut. I do believe that we should implement that—what is wrong with that? [MEMBERS: "It was 2p."] It is 10p a gallon; 2.4p a litre.

**Mr McNeil** *rose*—

**Mr Salmond:** I know that Duncan McNeil still counts in old money, but it is 10p a gallon and 2.4p a litre.

We argued that fuel duty should be frozen, but the Government—I think supported by the First Minister, although opposed by his deputy—proceeded to increase it by another 3 per cent. We are against that additional increase; we are talking about a reduction of 10p a gallon. That is the sort of move that the Government should now be making.

I call on the First Minister today to call a Scottish summit of all those people whom he mentioned—apparently he does not know where they are or what organisations they represent. I call on him to speak to the road hauliers, to the farmers, to the fishermen, and to the people who are fuel-dependent and whose industries are threatened by the crisis. That is the act of statesmanship that we want from the First Minister.

The First Minister should take to the table his support—we know that neither this Parliament nor he has the power—for taking off the budget increase in fuel duty. That would be the right thing to do, but in itself, it is by no means enough. There must be help for the fuel-dependent industries. There has to be a recognition that the essential users rebate must be extended. There must be a commitment to move to European levels of petrol prices over the next few years. No one in this country understands how Scotland can produce 75 per cent of Europe's oil and gas and have the highest petrol prices in the western world. No one

understands that position.

**The First Minister** *rose*—

**Mr Salmond:** No; I have given way to the First Minister twice already, so he will hear the conclusion of my speech.

The Labour party seems totally unaware of the mounting public concern on this issue.

**Cathie Craigie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (Lab):** Will the member give way?

**The Presiding Officer:** Order. Mr Salmond is winding up.

**Mr Salmond:** The Labour party seems totally unaware of why people are protesting. The First Minister seems totally incapable of taking Scottish action to meet the crisis. That is the same policy—the same recipe—which Margaret Thatcher pursued on the poll tax. The First Minister should remember this: even if we see the fuel flowing, and even if we see the immediate crisis end, what will happen to the Labour party is what happened to Margaret Thatcher at the polls as people faced the issue—the Labour party will go down in defeat.

15:23

**David McLetchie (Lothians) (Con):** At one level I wonder why we have to have a statement and a debate on this subject because, as Mr Salmond pointed out, the Prime Minister has announced that things will be back to normal within a couple of hours.

Mr Salmond is right to point out the contradiction that is inherent in the announcement about LRT buses, and the fact that there are no buses in this capital after 6.30 tonight. He could have gone on to say that there will be no buses in the capital after 6.30 tomorrow night, and Friday night, and Saturday night, and there will be no buses at all on Sunday. But if Mr Salmond had read the LRT revised bus timetable a little more closely, he would have seen that one of the few bus services that is going to be running in this crisis is the No 22, which will take travellers from the Gyle to the Scottish Executive offices at Victoria Quay, and at 10-minute intervals no less. It will come as small comfort to the public and motorists of Scotland to know that at a time when our country is grinding to a standstill our civil servants will still be hard at work in Victoria Quay perfecting Labour and Liberal plans to heap even more taxes and tolls on our motorists than they already suffer.

"All over by teatime" is another promise that Tony Blair will not be able to keep. This crisis is entirely of the Labour Government's own making, yet instead of listening to the reasons for protest and learning from past mistakes, this arrogant Government is doing its utmost to show just how

out of touch it is with public opinion. As usual, it is trying to blame everyone else for the present crisis. It is OPEC, it is the oil companies, it is even the lorry drivers. That will not wash. Everyone in the country knows that when it comes to the excessively high price of fuel, the buck stops at Nos 10 and 11 Downing Street.

**The Deputy Minister for Parliament (Iain Smith):** Will the member remind me who introduced the fuel price escalator?

**David McLetchie:** Yes, I will happily remind Iain Smith that it was done in the implementation of the country's international obligations in terms of the Kyoto agreement, which I do not recall any other political parties dissenting from.

However, I will tell Iain Smith which was the first of the major parties to call for the fuel escalator to be stopped and to get off it—that was the Conservative party. I am happy to say that we were the ones who recognised last April in Scotland that the fuel escalator had come to its peak and we had to get off it in this country because we had more than done our share in fulfilling our international obligations.

**Mr Salmond:** Will Mr McLetchie concede, as Brian Wilson was unable to, that the SNP has voted against that policy in every budget since 1993?

**David McLetchie:** I am happy to acknowledge that that is the case if Mr Salmond tells me that is the SNP's record. I am sure that Mr Salmond would not tell us any porkies; I will happily take his word for that.

All those impositions accelerating the fuel escalator budget after budget are part of Labour's vendetta—in both Westminster and the Scottish Parliament—against road users. It is ironic that at a time when the country is paralysed by fuel tax protests, tomorrow in this chamber we will debate the Transport (Scotland) Bill, which will lead to new burdens on motorists and businesses in Scotland, in the form of road tolls to enter our cities and taxes to park at our places of work.

**Mr Andy Kerr (East Kilbride) (Lab):** Will Mr McLetchie square this circle for me? Ken Clarke said at the time of introducing the fuel duty escalator:

"Any critic of the Government's tax plans who claims also to support international agreement to curb carbon dioxide emission will be sailing dangerously near to hypocrisy."—*[Official Report, House of Commons, 30 November 1993; Vol 233, c 939.]*

Is Mr McLetchie now guilty of that?

**David McLetchie:** I am never guilty of hypocrisy, but I plead guilty to common sense. Common sense tells me that when the tax on fuel in this country has risen to a level that meets and

fulfils the international obligations of this country in terms of these environmental agreements, it is time to call a halt to it. That is our policy and I am happy to sign up to that.

This collection of tolls, taxes, fuel and excise duties demonstrates clearly that the Government and the Executive are jointly committed to a dogmatic policy of driving ordinary motorists off the road. Under Labour, north and south of the border, it will be roads for the rich and not for the people whose taxes have already paid for them and more. Petrol has now overtaken mortgages and food as the most expensive item of expenditure in the average household budget, with vulnerable groups such as women, pensioners, the low-paid and people in rural areas being the hardest hit of all.

The facts of this matter are plain to see. I am afraid that Labour's deceptions and spins have been exposed. Motoring costs in this country are the highest in Europe. The costs of motoring have rocketed under Labour, especially the cost of fuel due to the chancellor's tax policies. The price of petrol has gone up from 59p a litre to 85p a litre under Labour, 70 per cent of that increase being due to tax—not oil companies or oil sheikhs but tax and Gordon Brown. The amount of tax on a litre of petrol when we left office in May 1997 was 45.7p; today it has climbed to 63.5p. Of the £50 fill-up, no less than £37 goes to the Chancellor of the Exchequer.

**Mr Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD):** I will ask Mr McLetchie a simple question. Can I have a straight answer? Will the Tories take down the tax, or will they talk about it?

**David McLetchie:** The Conservatives are committed to being a tax-cutting Government in the next Parliament, following the general election. Among the many candidates for reductions will be the increased taxes put on motorists by this Government, the increased taxes put on pensioners by this Government and the increased taxes placed on families by this Government. That is our commitment.

I say to Mr Stone and to Labour members that if Labour is returned at the next general election and proceeds with the irresponsible and unsustainable spending pledges that it has made, the one thing that people in this country can be guaranteed is that taxes on families will rise, taxes on pensioners will rise and taxes on motorists will rise. That is Labour's tax guarantee—up, up, up.

**Mr Jim Wallace:** Is Mr McLetchie aware that on BBC News 24 yesterday the Conservative shadow chancellor, Michael Portillo, was asked specifically whether the Conservatives would cut the tax on fuel? He answered, "Well, I don't know whether

that would be one of the things we would cut.” Was that a clear statement of Conservative policy?

**David McLetchie:** It was a clear statement that tax on fuel is among the candidates for many of the tax reductions that we seek to make in government. We will make a judgment to that effect when the time comes for Mr Portillo to deliver his first budget—a time that I hope is not very long in coming.

Before I was interrupted, I was outlining the increases announced by the chancellor in successive budgets. He is the man who put the accelerator on the fuel duty escalator, putting it up to 6 per cent above the rate of inflation. He had two budgets in his first year in office, piling a double whammy of increased fuel taxes on road users in each of them. In his third budget he went even further, hammering farmers and road hauliers with a diesel increase that was 12 per cent above inflation.

Gordon Brown would have us believe that he then underwent a very public Damascus-style conversion. He admitted that he had been wrong all along and would now abandon the fuel duty escalator and stick to an inflation-only increase in this year’s budget. At least, that was the public line. When it came to the actuality, however, he calculated the increase using a typical Labour fiddle, using the actual rate of inflation to uprate spending and the forecast rate, three times higher, when it came to hiking up fuel taxes. The consequence was that pensions went up by 1.1 per cent—a derisory 75p extra a week—while petrol went up by 3.3 per cent. The budgets by Brown meant penny pinching for the pensioners, and more misery for Scotland’s motorists.

**Dr Richard Simpson (Ochil) (Lab):** Does Mr McLetchie agree that there are two other facts that ought to be pointed out in his litany on this subject? The first is that increases in fuel duties this year were the lowest for 11 years, for seven of which his party was in power. The second is that the 18 per cent increase per litre over the past 16 months is due to the rise in the price of oil, which could go up or down in future. Does he acknowledge that there are other factors to be taken into account, including seven years of Conservative rule when duties were high?

**David McLetchie:** I am happy to acknowledge the statistical accuracy of what Richard Simpson says. However, I suggest that, instead of selectively taking some statistics from the past 16 months, he should wish his party, his Government and his chancellor to be judged by their record over three years. Those are the statistics that I am using, rather than the selected extracts from the John Reid bible that he is reading from.

Our haulage industry has been hit particularly hard because we have the highest-taxed diesel in Europe and because the road tax on large trucks is eight times that of other European countries. Current Government policy is not even reducing the number of trucks on our roads, because the number of foreign-registered trucks has increased by a third over the past year. All that Labour’s policy is doing is driving our hauliers out of business to the benefit of their foreign competitors.

As we know, it is not as if all the tax that is being paid by our motorists is being used to improve our transport system. In Scotland, our motorists and hauliers pay some £3.6 billion in tax each year. However, as we know from the Government’s spending proposals, central Government spending on transport and grants to local authorities amounts to a bare 10 per cent of that figure.

Once one adds all those tax elements together, one finds that our taxes are easily the most expensive in Europe, which contrasts with the position during the last three years of the Conservative Government, when our petrol was the third cheapest in Europe.

**Tavish Scott (Shetland) (LD):** In Mr McLetchie’s earlier point on the money that the Treasury takes from motorists in Scotland, was he arguing that the money should be ring-fenced for transport services?

**David McLetchie:** No, I was not arguing that the full £3.6 billion should be ring-fenced, but I was arguing that we need a fair deal for the motorist, a much higher level of investment in our transport services, and, particularly in Scotland, the reinstatement of the new road building programme, which has been slashed by the Scottish Executive since it came to power.

On the point about the protests that was raised in the animated exchange between the First Minister and Mr Salmond, the Scottish Conservatives are adamant that what are lawful and peaceful protests about Labour’s fuel tax policies should not threaten essential public services. It is the Government’s responsibility to ensure that that does not happen. We have to be very careful indeed that the protests do not threaten people’s jobs and livelihoods, as well as the national health service and other vital public services.

I am happy to say to the protesters at Grangemouth and elsewhere: “You have made your point and you have made it well. The public are on your side. This party is on your side. However, it is time to focus the campaign on Westminster, not the refineries. Otherwise, you may allow the Government to change the nature of the argument and wriggle off the policy hook. It is up to the Government to get a grip on the situation

and accept responsibility for its policies.”

As I said at the outset, Labour is failing to deal with a crisis of its own making. Its habit of coming up with a ready-made scapegoat for every failure that it has presided over is leading to increasing public contempt for Labour at Westminster and the Executive here in Scotland. The public are saying that it is time for a change. Before long, the general election will give us the opportunity to bring about a change of Government and to make a real difference and a change for the better.

**Mr Davidson:** On a point of order. Is it not against parliamentary procedure for a senior minister to ask the Parliament to listen to a statement then leave without listening to the response?

**The Deputy Presiding Officer (Mr George Reid):** That is not a point of order. That is up to the minister.

15:38

**Tavish Scott (Shetland) (LD):** I welcome the First Minister's statement, particularly on the progress made in ensuring that fuel for emergency services and accident and emergency provision is available. That must be a priority. The First Minister pointed out the health service risks that are now prevalent in Scotland—that is sobering information, which surely no one will welcome. In the light of what the chamber has heard today, those who do not argue for a cessation of action are being thoroughly irresponsible.

The Scottish Executive's responsibility is the safe and secure delivery of the nation's public services. That must be of paramount importance. Energy policy is a reserved matter, yet despite the constant lobbying, the debate and indeed the political heat in the Parliament over the past year and a half, we have witnessed truly worrying scenes on our television screens over the past few days. Why are haulage firms, farmers and self-employed people considered to be so in tune with public feelings? Why do people resort to direct action in the form of slow-moving convoys of vehicles, as we saw outside the chamber less than an hour ago?

**Fergus Ewing (Inverness East, Nairn and Lochaber) (SNP):** Has Tavish Scott attended any demonstrations, as members of this party did yesterday? We met many employees, including some Transport and General Workers Union members. Does Mr Scott have evidence that he has attended any demonstrations, or is he making this up?

**Tavish Scott:** I will not even dignify that pathetic question with a response. If Mr Fergus Ewing's definition of political virility is rushing round

Scotland to every demonstration, he can have it.

Why is it that, barely a week after condemning the French for stopping British holidaymakers and trucks crossing the channel, many now hold up the French model as the way to get the Government to change its policy?

There are concerns that air services might be disrupted throughout Scotland, and I seek assurances, particularly for those who are moving from islands for medical services in hospitals in Aberdeen and Inverness, that that will not happen. There should be infrastructure planning for such emergencies; for example, Heathrow and Gatwick airports have private pipeline facilities for aviation fuel. What thought has been given to the position of Scottish airports?

**Andrew Wilson (Central Scotland) (SNP):** As Tavish Scott seeks assurances, does it occur to him and his fellow Liberal Democrat members that he is seeking them from a Liberal Democrat front bench? Once again, when there is trouble in store, Labour ministers clear out and leave the Liberals to take the flak. Furthermore, will he confirm whether it remains Liberal Democrat policy to increase fuel duty rather than cut it?

**Tavish Scott:** The answer to that question is, what is Andrew Wilson's policy? Does he follow Alex Neil's policy of a 20 per cent cut in the fuel duty, or John Swinney's policy? We should have fewer sanctimonious lectures from the SNP on these matters.

Scotland is now facing considerable problems. Some of the fuel shortages have undoubtedly been created by panic buying over the past couple of days.

**Mrs Margaret Ewing (Moray) (SNP):** Will Tavish Scott give way?

**Tavish Scott:** Do SNP members mind if I make a few points? They all seem very keen to interrupt.

The Government cannot be surprised by the frustration felt by people and businesses. Opposition parties, professional lobbying bodies such as motoring organisations and other representative bodies have all argued against successive rises in fuel prices, given the cost to the consumer and to industry throughout the UK. OPEC wields powers that put world demand and supply in a frighteningly small collection of rich hands. Oil companies are resistant to reducing prices. When a barrel of Brent crude fell to \$10, I do not remember the petrol price in Shetland falling at all.

Why have the oil companies played a mysterious game in supplying fuel in Scotland and the rest of the UK? These organisations are multinational and it was not edifying to see the British Prime Minister effectively phoning around

corporate chiefs to plead for progress in supplying fuel. Such organisations have little regard for national Governments or individuals in our communities, and their actions over the past few days have been pretty questionable.

Successive Governments not only have turned a deaf ear to the growing clamour over fuel prices, but have justified higher fuel prices as a mechanism to reduce vehicle congestion on the nation's roads and as helping the nation's contribution to meeting international standards on emissions—fuel prices are higher because it is the right environmental thing to do.

The Liberal Democrats have consistently argued for investment in public transport and alternative measures for rural Scotland. The Scottish Parliament has rightly raised the profile of such issues and tomorrow we will debate the Transport (Scotland) Bill, which will begin the process of putting policy initiatives into legislation to tackle congestion. As he has just lucidly explained, Mr McLetchie opposes that particular policy.

Rural Scotland, where vehicles are used by mums taking their kids to school or by fish-processing companies taking whiting to market, has not seen investment in desperately needed alternatives. There must be more such investment than in the past. As the mantra now goes, the car is not a luxury but a necessity, and I welcome the Scottish Executive's recognition of that.

**David McLetchie:** Is Mr Scott familiar with the Liberal Democrat policy statement called "Moving Ahead: Towards a Citizen's Britain" which states that the fuel duty escalator should be applied at a rate 8 per cent above inflation?

**Tavish Scott:** Mr McLetchie will be interested to know that that is not the Liberal Democrats' policy position. I will tell him what our position is, so that he is quite clear on the matter. The Liberal Democrats propose to freeze the level of fuel duty in real terms for the next five years. Furthermore, we propose that any extra VAT revenues that the Government achieves from rises in fuel prices should be ring-fenced for public transport. The Liberal Democrats are concerned about congestion in our cities and helping road hauliers in their current situation.

**Mr Tosh:** Will Mr Scott give way?

**Tavish Scott:** I want to make some progress.

In many parts of rural Scotland, petrol is 10p to 15p higher than in Edinburgh and Glasgow. That situation is not all down to distribution costs. Such arguments, put forward by successive Westminster Governments for higher fuel prices, are one thing; however, what has really annoyed people and has illustrated the frustration felt across the whole country is the conversion behind

that justification. People are now told that fuel price revenues are needed to create a stable economy, to invest in public services and to build new schools and hospitals.

Arguably, the Prime Minister's statement on television last night was the first straight answer that people have had on that issue. He confirmed that rising fuel prices were a revenue-raising measure for the Treasury. Therefore, the Westminster Government has benefited from the windfall, as have all along the supply chain.

However, Government income rises through VAT receipts as prices rise. City analysts put the windfall at £600 million in the current year. The budget red book forecasts North sea oil receipts for 2000-01 at £4.3 billion—£1.8 billion higher than the previous year. That estimate was based on the Government's projection of \$22 a barrel, while \$33 a barrel will mean a further £2 billion windfall for the Government. I recognise that prices can change.

**Dorothy-Grace Elder (Glasgow) (SNP):** Tavish Scott talks about windfalls for the Government, but Scotland is in the unique position of being an oil-producing country that has no control over the tax revenues imposed on that oil. Does the member, in his liberality, agree that it would be much more sensible for us to have full control of those fuel taxes? If that were the case, those taxes would be lower.

**Tavish Scott:** On the contrary, individual MPs from Scotland would have control over those issues if they were to go down to Westminster to argue for them. However, the SNP's record on such matters is not terribly wonderful.

**Mrs Ewing:** Will the member give way?

**Ms Margo MacDonald (Lothians) (SNP):** Will the member give way?

**Tavish Scott:** No.

It has been stated that any measures to aid the haulage industry, freeze tax on fuel or provide rebates for all essential users would devastate public finances, but that is clearly not so. The Government could implement price stabilising mechanisms, but the right occasion on which to do so would be the budget.

Liberal Democrats argue for a freeze on the tax on fuel, aid for the haulage industry and rebates for essential users, particularly those in rural areas. The argument is about carrot and stick, but there has been too much stick and, as yet, not enough carrot. It is time that the Government redressed that balance.

Through their frustration, the people are sending a clear message to the Westminster Government. People are concerned about ever-increasing fuel

costs without alternatives being in place. The Government should use the autumn statement to target its financial windfall on transport spending—on essential users and those in rural Scotland, on the car and on the truck. However, people should win that argument in Parliament, not by disrupting both essential public services and basic services for all Scotland's industries. Using democracy is ultimately the way in which the argument for change in Government policy will be won.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** Nineteen members have asked to speak, but not all will be chosen. If speeches are kept to four minutes, plus time for interventions, more members will get through.

15:48

**Dr Richard Simpson (Ochil) (Lab):** I will address three areas in my speech: the effects of the fuel blockade and the go-slow, fuel prices and the environment.

Having made their point, the protesters must allow the democratic process to take over. If they fail to take a democratic approach, they will endanger life. The problems are not just with ambulances or hospitals, as the staff in hospitals and primary care services also face problems. Deaths are inevitable if doctors and nurses cannot get into work or out to visit patients.

Cancer patients from my constituency need to get from Clackmannanshire to the Beatson oncology clinic in Glasgow for radiotherapy. For them, the failure of private transportation to get them there puts them at risk. There are elderly patients in my constituency who require injections for diabetes not some time today, but now—they require those injections when they require them. Go-slows and blockades put those patients seriously at risk.

The country cannot permit this protest to hold the Government to ransom, for to do so and to give in to the protest, or to give in to any groups, means that we would have to give in to such groups in future.

On fuel prices, the fuel escalator was switched off this year, despite our continuing commitment to Kyoto, in recognition of the imbalance in prices across Europe. Mr McLetchie acknowledged that the rapid rise in oil price from \$10 to \$34 has been a major cause of the recent rise in the cost of fuel. Surely members accept that fact.

The Government should have three objectives in relation to fuel prices. First, it requires to raise revenue to ensure the development of services such as the NHS and education. Secondly, the Government must continue to ensure that our industry is competitive. Thirdly, there is the

question of the environment.

In the longer term, I have concerns over transport costs, which need to be addressed. Combined, the new taxes that are being discussed—climate tax and aggregate tax—will also seriously affect the glass, paper, aggregates and fibreboard industries in my constituency. We must therefore consider taxation in the round.

**Brian Adam:** Dr Simpson has highlighted many of the potential problems with, and downsides of, the current difficulty. Does he agree that we require this matter to be resolved, and that in any dispute it is necessary to speak to people to gain a resolution? Can he give us the answer that the First Minister failed to give: should we be discussing with those who are concerned how to resolve the matter?

**Dr Simpson:** The Road Haulage Association says that this is a spontaneous action. If it is that, whom should we speak to? That association is not saying that it is striking. Both drivers and road hauliers are out: it is different groups. This is not an official action, with notice given, as the First Minister said. If it had been that, there would have been someone to negotiate with; however, there is no one to negotiate with.

If the volatility of oil prices continues—and we do not know whether it will—the Government is not going to be able to control fuel prices. To do so against the market has proven, in the past, to be impossible. Perhaps the Government could consider a tax-varying power that would allow it to provide stability for industry, for Government income and for citizens. Modelling the oil volatility is necessary: it has gone from \$19 to \$10 to \$34 a barrel. Who knows how much it will be next? It is difficult for industry to manage transport costs, and it is the sudden rise in fuel prices that has caused this massive protest to erupt.

My final point concerns the environment. The protest has been over fuel prices, but it has forced us to recognise the absolute dependency of our society on fossil fuels. Therefore, the Executive is right to pursue resolutely its integrated transport policy.

I have listened carefully to the speeches that have been made by the leaders today, and the one thing that has disappointed me is the fact that Mr Salmond, as the outgoing leader of the Scottish National Party, has failed to say that the protesters should now go home, having made their point.

**Andrew Wilson:** He did say that.

**Dr Simpson:** He did not say that—he certainly did not make that clear. He was asked to make it clear and he did not.

I hope that the SNP will join Labour, the Liberals and Mr McLetchie in saying, "You have made your

protest. Do not endanger life. Go home and allow the democratic process to proceed.”

15:53

**Fergus Ewing (Inverness East, Nairn and Lochaber) (SNP):** This is not the first time that I have spoken about the fuel tax in Parliament and, no doubt, it will not be the last. When I spoke last week about the highest fuel tax in the world, Alasdair Morrison said that he felt inclined to yawn. Well, I am pleased to see that all the Labour ministers are wide awake this week.

I am sorry that Alasdair Morrison is not here today, as he is a Gaelic linguist. I attended the Gaelic college in Skye, where someone told me what they thought about Labour's utterances on the fuel tax. In Gaelic, people say:

“Tha na Laboraich làn ròlaistean”,

which means that Labour is prone to wildly exaggerated speeches that may not always have a factual content. That is a loose translation.

This morning, I spoke to my constituents who are involved in haulage, fishing and farming. I spoke to the medical director of Raigmore hospital, who says that Raigmore is unaffected. I spoke to a fishermen's representative in Mallaig, who says that many fishermen are facing bankruptcy. I spoke to a haulier who said that many of his men may not be in a job next year, because Tony Blair will never act on fuel tax.

**Robin Harper (Lothians) (Green):** Will Fergus Ewing give way?

**Fergus Ewing:** Robin Harper should sit down; we know his views.

Tony Blair and Donald Dewar tell us that we are supposed to enter the democratic process. Today, the First Minister says that the arguments are well rehearsed. The problem is quite simple: nobody in the Labour party listens. That is why normally peaceable and respectable people in Scotland are driven to protest in a way that they do not enjoy. They are driven to such protest by a Prime Minister whose life's ambition is to resemble Margaret Thatcher.

**George Lyon (Argyll and Bute) (LD):** Will the member give way?

**Fergus Ewing:** I fear for the future of our small communities in the Highlands if action is not taken. Today, I have heard the Liberal Democrats and other members say that they want action to be taken. However, we know that no action will be taken under Tony Blair. Tony is not for turning. The laddie is not listening; he is following his heroine, Mrs Thatcher.

History tells us that many figures—from Canute

to Marie Antoinette—lost touch with reality; the Prime Minister and the First Minister have joined them.

**George Lyon:** Will the member give way?

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** Order. The member is not giving way. However, he will be kept tightly to four minutes.

**Fergus Ewing:** The Deputy First Minister's remarks on mob rule will be deeply resented by many people in Scotland.

**Mr Jim Wallace:** Yesterday, on the radio, I heard protesters say that their ambition was to bring down the Government in the next few days. Does Mr Ewing, as a democrat, believe that to be a noble ambition?

**Fergus Ewing:** It is not a unique ambition. We hope to see the Government go as quickly as possible. The Government is the problem: it is not listening and it is not acting. That is why we are seeing peaceful, civil protest on a scale unlike any we have seen before. That protest will continue.

The argument has moved on. We no longer have to prove that fuel tax is too high: everyone in Scotland accepts that fuel tax must be cut. I remind members of the late John Smith's phrase, “settled will”. The settled will of the Scottish people is that there must be a fuel tax cut. The Labour party in Scotland either listens to that and agrees with the Scottish people, or suffers the consequences.

15:57

**Mr Mike Rumbles (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (LD):** I want to make it clear that the Liberal Democrats do not condone any illegal actions that may take place in the protest.

**Tricia Marwick (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP):** Will the member give way?

**Mr Rumbles:** For goodness' sake.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** Let the member get started.

**Mr Rumbles:** The protest has struck a chord in rural Scotland. Everyone who lives in our countryside understands the iniquity of the continuing and seemingly never-ending rise in fuel costs, which the Westminster Government has so far failed to address. That is an example of the Westminster Government's lack of understanding of rural issues and contrasts sharply with our approach to rural issues in Scotland, where we have a rural affairs department as well as a Minister for Rural Affairs.

People living and working in remote and rural areas are particularly badly hit by the constant rise in petrol taxes. They cannot choose simply to use

the bus or the train as an alternative to the car, so I find it understandable that our farmers, road hauliers and others should be frustrated and should have said that enough is enough.

However, there is no doubt that the objective of those who have taken to the streets has now been achieved. Fuel tax is at the very top of the political agenda, and the Westminster Government must listen. There is a danger that further protest and disruption would be counterproductive. The good will that has been generated and felt—even by those most directly affected by the protest—will disappear as quickly as it arose. I believe firmly that the protest should end now. I call on all those individuals who are involved in the dispute to return to their normal business.

As rural affairs spokesman for the Scottish Liberal Democrats, I want to make it absolutely clear that our colleagues in Westminster have listened. In the past, we have voted against every fuel duty increase because the proceeds have not been reinvested in public transport.

**Andrew Wilson:** I am sure that every party in the chamber agrees with that sentiment. However, will Mike Rumbles confirm the answer that was given to David McLetchie some moments ago, and specify exactly when Liberal policy changed from support for a rise in fuel duty to support for a cut?

**Mr Rumbles:** Andrew Wilson well knows that there has been a development in policy. The point is that we are listening and addressing the needs of rural Scotland.

We alone among the Westminster parties have addressed the real fears of the protesters. They fear that there will be a never-ending saga of fuel tax rises, which will hit our vulnerable rural areas disproportionately. We alone have announced our intention to freeze the level of fuel duty in real terms over at least the next five years.

I am looking across the chamber at Conservative members because I do not want to forget them. When the Conservatives last came to power, petrol tax was 33p a gallon, but when they left office, it was 222p a gallon. I have not even tried to calculate the percentage increase that that represents, as I do not think that people would believe it.

**Mr Tosh:** Does Mr Rumbles acknowledge that at the time of the general election, UK fuel prices were in line with those in other countries in Europe and that the variation in prices has occurred in the past three years? Will he confirm that a freeze in fuel duties is unlikely to help the haulage industry in this country, whose complaint is that those duties are wildly out of line with those paid by its competitors, which are taking its business? Rather more needs to be done for road haulage.

**Mr Rumbles:** I will take no lessons from the Conservative party, which cannot even tell us whether it intends to cut taxes on fuel.

I repeat the most telling point against the Conservative party: fuel taxes were 33p a gallon when the Conservatives entered office and 222p a gallon when they left.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** Please close now.

**Mr Rumbles:** Let us not forget the Labour party, which in Westminster has abandoned the automatic fuel escalator. However, this year it has put 9p on the price of a gallon of petrol. It is somewhat disingenuous of Tony Blair to say that lower taxes on petrol mean less cash for schools and hospitals.

There is an understandable problem, as people—especially in rural Scotland—have been outraged for far too long by the lack of recognition in Westminster of the impact of rising petrol taxes. Petrol tax is now at the top of the political agenda. Protesters have succeeded in making Tony Blair listen—at last—and should now return to their usual business and allow the politicians in Westminster to address the problem.

16:03

**Alex Fergusson (South of Scotland) (Con):** No one in the chamber seeks to conceal the fact that the actions and demonstrations that have taken place over the past few days have been highly disruptive and economically damaging. Matters may well get worse over the next few days. I hope that they will not, but I am told by the major supermarkets that they consider their situation in rural Scotland to be manageable up to the weekend, but do not wish to make forecasts beyond then. Stockpiling of the basic foodstuffs began yesterday in rural Scotland and continues apace. Things may reach such a state that even Jamie Stone will perceive next week

“that there is something not quite right here”—[*Official Report*, 6 September 2000; Vol 8, c 29.]—

a sure sign of a situation in meltdown.

A significant difference that has set this dispute apart from most others is that those people whose lives have been, and are being, disrupted continue to show a remarkable degree of tolerance to those who seek to disrupt their lives. That fact alone should set alarm bells ringing at Labour party headquarters.

It is not as if the Government has not been warned. At every possible opportunity since the Scottish Parliament came into being, Conservative members and others have warned constantly of the irreparable damage that was being done, particularly in rural Scotland, as a result of the

ever-widening gap between fuel prices in this country and those in other European states.

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

**Alex Fergusson:** Mr Stone is the only member to whom I will give way this afternoon.

**Mr Stone:** That is typical of the good manners that I would expect from Mr Fergusson, whose speech I was enjoying for the first few seconds. Does Mr Fergusson, whose sister is a constituent of mine, agree that the fuel tax is bitterly unpopular in the remotest parts of Scotland and is damaging our economy? Will he use his good influence on Mr McLetchie and his cohorts to move Conservative policy to the point where it favours a reduction in the tax?

**Alex Fergusson:** I agree completely that the fuel tax is very damaging to rural Scotland. That is the whole basis of my speech, if Mr Stone would like to wait to hear the end of it.

That widening gap has opened up the United Kingdom to continental hauliers who fill their tanks in Europe, spend the week in this country and return to the continent to refuel both themselves and their lorries, ready for another working week in Great Britain. The gap has ensured that some hauliers in Dumfries and Galloway cross the Irish sea to refuel in southern Ireland, where the price of diesel is 42p per litre, as opposed to the 68.5p per litre that they have to pay here.

The widening gap has sickened many industries—road haulage, agriculture, fishing, forestry and tourism—and crippled the rural economy to such an extent that there was almost a feeling of relief at the blockades, convoys and queues that have marked the past week.

The blockades, convoys and queues are nothing less than a signal that the buyers and users of road fuel have had enough, that there is a limit to their willingness to fund wider Government policies and that that limit has at last been reached. That is particularly relevant in rural Scotland, where the sad irony is that everybody, except those in the Labour party, seems to know that the car is a necessity. Public transport cannot, and will not, replace the car as the principal means of transport in rural Scotland. It is time that the Government addressed that fact specifically, by considering ways of rebating the increased costs of fuel to those who live and, in particular, work in rural areas.

Furthermore, an ironic situation is turned into a tragic one by the equally well-known fact that wages tend to be lower in rural areas. Therefore, the lower wage earners have to pay the higher prices that exist in rural Scotland simply to go

about their everyday lives: getting to work, getting to the shops or visiting hospitals. For people who live in Stranraer and need to visit someone in hospital, the chances are that they will have to go to Dumfries. That is 70 miles each way, which is a fair old trip by car; by public transport, the journey becomes the logistic equivalent of a Himalayan expedition.

Rural Scotland—by the look of things, rural Britain—has had enough and any Government, especially one that portrays itself as a listening Government, must begin to apply itself to ways and means of addressing those real issues.

Transport costs have risen to the level where the phrases “economically competitive” and “rural Scotland” are no longer compatible. That is unacceptable.

The disaster is of the Government’s own making, and the Government must act: by considering rebating schemes; by considering whether fuel tax could be used as a price regulator; or by lowering the tax rate when crude oil prices rise and vice versa. The Government must take an innovative view of the structure of fuel taxation. That is the message from the past week, and I endorse it heartily.

16:08

**Robin Harper (Lothians) (Green):** I hope to live up to Fergus Ewing’s expectations, Presiding Officer.

I welcome the statement that all is being done to keep the refineries open and essential services going. I welcome the steps that are being taken by the Government in Westminster; they are a little late in the day, but I welcome them.

I am alarmed by media reports that oil companies—which would, of course, stand to gain from a reduction in fuel taxes, through increased sales—may have colluded tacitly with the road hauliers by holding back fuel supplies over the past few days. Bill Speirs gave vent to that fear at the Trades Union Congress conference yesterday when he indicated that this might be a bosses’ protest—and nothing to do with the people of Scotland—to protect profits. The bottom line is that the Government and the Scottish Executive cannot allow a small number of protesters to jeopardise the future of most of the population.

The key message that the Government and the Executive must get through to the public is that we, including farmers, depend on a stable world climate. I find it slightly bizarre that farmers and fishermen have joined the protest. How much tax do fishermen pay on their fuel? None.

**Mr Tosh:** Will the member give way?

**Robin Harper:** I will give way if the member will listen to the end of my point. Farmers pass the cost of haulage by road hauliers on to the supermarkets. Do the supermarkets pass those costs on to the customers? No. They keep down the prices that they pay to farmers, so why have the farmers joined the road hauliers?

**Mr Tosh:** Does Mr Harper have any conception of the importance of haulage to farming and fishing interests? They have been crippled by the events of recent years. If anyone has the right to be indignant, it is the farmers and the fishermen, who are the victims in all of this.

**Robin Harper:** Mr Tosh can stand up for his side of the argument. I stand up for mine.

**Mr Stone:** Will Robin Harper give way?

**Robin Harper:** I will.

**Mr Stone:** Robin Harper always gives way in a much nicer way than Mr Ewing, who is not on very good form today.

Robin Harper was born in Thurso. Does he accept that people up there simply cannot afford today's price of 90.9p per litre?

**Robin Harper:** If I were in the Executive, I would sit down and listen to our rural communities to see whether there was a way of alleviating the grave difficulties with expenses that those communities face. However, I insist that a policy of expensive fuel prices is the only way to save the world's climate. We cannot have a cheap fuel policy.

**Alasdair Morgan (Galloway and Upper Nithsdale) (SNP):** Will Robin Harper give way?

**Robin Harper:** No, I have given way several times already.

Startling new research by the University of London reports that new evidence from ice core samples in Greenland suggests that within 30 to 40 years, the gulf stream could be switched off by polar ice cap melting due to global warming.

I differ from the Executive and the Government. I believe that the present fuel duty is not a green tax, because the Government is not using enough of the revenue to restructure our transport infrastructure. The crisis is of the Government's own making. The Government will not persuade the road user to go for environmentally safe alternatives and pay higher fuel taxes if the alternatives have not been provided sufficiently. The Government must make it easier for people to use their cars less.

I have said before in the chamber that the real cost of motoring—compared with the general rise in incomes—has hardly increased since 1970. However, the real cost of travelling by train has gone up by 53 per cent and the real cost of

travelling by bus has gone up by 87 per cent. Proper audit and proper accounting show that it is the people who do not use cars who have problems, not the people who use them. They are the people who really suffer at the moment.

Fuel duty will become a green tax only if the revenue is ploughed into developing renewable energy, which means new liquid fuels as well as wind and wave power.

I have gone beyond my time. That is because I had so many interruptions.

16:13

**Bristow Muldoon (Livingston) (Lab):** I welcome the First Minister's statement, which set out the actions that are being taken by the Scottish Executive and the UK Government to protect emergency services and to try to bring the current blockades and protests to an end. I repeat what Robin Harper said: the oil companies' response today is puzzling. Questions need to be asked about the motives behind their inaction.

Before turning to fuel costs, I want to express my concern about the damage that is being done to individual people, going about their normal lives, and the potential damage to the national health service. Dr Simpson was absolutely right to put that issue at the centre of his speech. Several patients have already been transported around Scotland by air ambulance. Formal blockades may not be in place at the refineries, but much disruption has been caused on roads around Scotland, damaging the Scottish ambulance service's ability to carry out its business.

We should reflect on the view, expressed by Bill Speirs of the Scottish Trades Union Congress, that the protest is an attempt to circumvent democracy. As Bill Speirs reminded us, we should recall how much attention the road hauliers paid to picket lines during the miners' dispute 15 years ago when miners called on tanker drivers to respect their protests.

**Andrew Wilson:** Will the member give way?

**Bristow Muldoon:** Andrew Wilson will be the next speaker, so I will wait for that.

**Alasdair Morgan:** Will the member give way?

**Bristow Muldoon:** No, thank you—although I note that the SNP members are aligning themselves with those forces.

The debate on the cost of fuel has been distorted today. The Opposition, and many of the people who are carrying out the protests, have not recognised that the largest proportion of the increases has been caused by the increases in the price of crude oil. Everyone here should recognise that.

**Mr Kenny MacAskill (Lothians) (SNP):** Will the member give way?

**Bristow Muldoon:** No, thank you. I am sure that we will hear from Kenny MacAskill in due course.

I note that the caretaker leader of the SNP today committed his party to moving towards European Union levels of fuel taxation. I wonder whether he means also to commit his party to European Union levels of taxation in all other areas. As he is undoubtedly aware, that would result in an increase in taxation in the independent Scotland that he aspires to. I wonder, also, to what extent his comments will commit the two aspiring replacements—Mr Swinney and Mr Neil—to his policy. Their policies seem to differ. Mr Swinney wishes to reduce taxes by 2p per litre, whereas I understand that Mr Neil is calling for decreases of the order of 20 per cent. Which is the SNP policy? What will the SNP policy be after the leadership election?

The Conservatives should recognise that they introduced the fuel duty escalator, and although the party may have changed its position on that, I do not recall it having done so going into the 1997 general election. Its position changed only once it had gone into opposition.

**Mr Tosh:** I do not think that anyone has ever denied that the Conservatives introduced the fuel duty escalator; it would be a very rash person who did. There is a considerable difference between the fuel duty escalator in 1992 after the Rio conference, when we had virtually the cheapest petrol in Europe, and the fuel duty escalator in the late 1990s, when we had the dearest petrol in Europe. Budgets are settled annually and it is the responsibility of Government to consider the impact of budget increases every year. The present Government has failed to do so.

**Bristow Muldoon:** Murray Tosh has not recognised the fact that the Chancellor of the Exchequer took into account changes in the economy on a year-to-year basis, and then introduced changes in the budget to abolish the fuel duty escalator. Mr Tosh should reflect upon that.

The SNP owes the people of Scotland an exact explanation of its policies. What taxation does it intend to call for? What public spending does it intend to call for? The SNP's sums never add up. The SNP's position on this issue probably has more to do with a desire to reduce the party's tax bills than with any need to reduce petrol prices in Scotland.

It is important that the blockades come to an end, that the oil companies fulfil their duties and resume normal deliveries, and that decisions about taxation be left to Government. Such decisions should not be made in response to

weekly fluctuations in oil prices.

16:18

**Andrew Wilson (Central Scotland) (SNP):** The Labour party is always pleased to talk about best value. I think it should examine the value it is getting from its expensive advisers at the back of the chamber if the lines that they have given Labour back benchers to say are their best examples. It is an embarrassment that the governing party seems to fail to recognise the widespread anger about, and contempt for, what is going on in the country. The lesson of the past year for the Labour party has surely been, "Listen; recognise a problem; and then act. Do not bury your head in the sand with this Thatcherite bunker mentality."

The arguments the Labour party is employing in this dispute—using terms such as "mob rule" and "holding the country to ransom"—are exactly the same as those that were employed by Mrs Thatcher's Government during the miners' strike. Once the Labour party recognises that fact, it will begin to see the route out of the problem. The real issue here is the disparity between the Government and the people. Accountability to Parliament is not enough. The party has to be accountable to the people, and not only to a Parliament in which it has an in-built majority. Tony Blair must recognise that if he is to get anywhere in this grave dispute.

John Reid—the man without a job to do—is being employed at nearly £100,000 a year by the people to act as a spin doctor for the Labour Government, which refuses to recognise what the people really think. He said this week in the *Dundee Courier and Advertiser*:

"We do it the British way—and that means listening."

The question for Dr Reid is, "Who is listening to whom?" He clearly wants us all to listen to the Government, rather than speak out with our legitimate concerns. That is absolutely central to what is going on.

This crisis is happening not just in the United Kingdom: all across Europe, a crisis is emerging. I understand that, next week, there is to be a meeting of the Council of Transport Ministers. The question is, will Sarah Boyack be there representing Scottish interests at her first Council of Transport Ministers meeting—or will Scottish interests fail yet again to be represented in a vital European forum? Mr Wallace can tell us in his summing up.

**The Minister for Transport and the Environment (Sarah Boyack):** I offer a piece of information. As happens with every subject in the Scottish Parliament, an input being made

throughout the process does not require physical presence. Scottish ministers are involved on a daily basis and are in regular contact with their opposite numbers in the UK Parliament. We do that by attending Council meetings in Europe and by engaging in discussions and meetings with our colleagues in Westminster.

**Andrew Wilson:** I think that there is a new and developing concept on the Labour front bench: virtual ministers who do not exist but can correspond by e-mail. There is no substitute for having a Scottish interest represented in what will be a key decision-making forum in the EU next week. That is central to our interests, but I think that we hear that Sarah Boyack will fail to turn up to represent our interests.

All across Europe—even last night, if one examines the news wires—Governments are responding to the crisis. In Norway, the ruling Labour Government has announced that it will reduce petrol taxes by 4.5 per cent. In Belgium, the Government and its partners reached an agreement on a compensation on duty. In Spain, Blair's ally Mr Aznar announced that he would freeze duty at 1999 levels. While those Governments respond to the crisis, the Government in Britain, like Thatcher used to do, is sitting in the bunker and relying on back-bench spin.

**Robin Harper:** Would it therefore be a good idea for SNP members in the European Parliament to campaign for a European level of taxation on fuel?

**Andrew Wilson:** As Alex Salmond made clear in his statement, we have to campaign in the UK and Scotland to get fuel duty levels down to a more reasonable European level. If there is logic in Mr Harper's argument that there has to be a worldwide approach to environmental control, that is what we should be doing. Mr Harper's suggestion is absolutely in line with our position.

At 5 o'clock today, the Taoiseach, Bertie Ahern, will meet social partners to discuss the issue that is facing Europe—but our ministers will not even begin to agree to enter discussions. Instead, their approach is exemplified by the Minister for Justice's rather questionable statement about mob rule.

We have to get out of the bunker mentality and recognise legitimate concerns when they are expressed. We should not rely on parliamentary sovereignty when popular sovereignty is far more important. This Parliament would not exist without it.

16:23

**John Scott (Ayr) (Con):** Another week, another crisis. In the 1960s, Harold Wilson said that a

week is a long time in politics. Now that we have moved into the high-tech age, it seems that three days is a long time in politics. Three days is all it has taken for the Labour Government's policies to bring our country to its knees. Three days is all it has taken to take us back to the memories of the winter of 1978-79—the winter of discontent that was the grand finale of the previous Labour Administration.

Yesterday, Donald Dewar said that there is no need to panic. He should try telling that to those who depend on transport and haulage for their daily bread and to hauliers and car owners whose fuel tax burden has risen by 34 per cent since 1997. They are panicking because they can see no future for themselves or their families due to current fuel prices.

Alex Fergusson has outlined the problems facing rural areas due to the dependence on private transport and the isolation that is experienced there. I want to talk about how it is possible to feel isolated in towns and urban communities. Those are the people about whom I am worried.

I have spent part of this morning, as I did yesterday, contacting people in Ayr. I have been reassuring them that there will be enough fuel for the ambulances and that all of the Y2K-related disaster planning has not been in vain. I have said that there will be enough fuel for the fire engines if they are careful and do not undertake any non-essential journeys. I have said that the police will be able to cope but that they are extremely worried about the developing situation.

The real problem lies further down the fuel food chain. Local bus companies are struggling and are starting to prioritise. They plan to maintain only skeleton and priority services and there will be absolutely no bus services on Sunday. South Ayrshire Council's crisis management team is meeting twice a day to ensure that essential services are maintained. Local supermarkets are still okay, but food stockpiling has started. That is the next step.

The next problem to be faced is how those who operate essential services—ambulance drivers, firemen, police officers, bus drivers and those who work in supermarkets and hospitals—get to work. If the blockade continues, panic buying becomes a problem; if petrol stocks can be cleared in three days, so can food stocks. The real problem is not so much for the young and able, but for the old and infirm. I am worried about elderly people who might, on what is possibly the only bus of the day, go to the shops only to find that there is no food. That conjures up pictures of Moscow and food queues.

Three days is all it has taken for Mr Blair and his

policies to transport us to his socialist utopian dream: a dream in which councils cannot supply basic services; a dream in which children cannot get to school; a dream in which the buses do not run; and a dream in which rubbish will presently be piling up on the streets. Wake up, Mr Blair—this is your wake-up call. The mad dream might turn into reality, as it did in 1979. Mr Blair has achieved all that in only three days.

16:26

**Tommy Sheridan (Glasgow) (SSP):** I spent most of this morning with a group who are involved in direct action. They are involved in a blockade, not in Grangemouth, but in Sanquhar Drive in Cardonald. They had to take physical action to try to prevent the erection of a mobile phone mast in their street. There is no requirement for planning permission for that mast because it is less than 15 m high. There are, however, 52 children living in that street and their parents are very worried. I, therefore, assisted them and took part proudly in that blockade. We stopped the erection of the mast today, but we will probably have to return tomorrow.

I must say to Mr Wallace that those people would take umbrage at being referred to as a mob. They were taking part in civil disobedience—their democratic right—because they feel that they have a realisable and justified objective. One of the problems that has resulted from my presence at the blockade is that I did not appear at court in Helensburgh today. I should have been there and a warrant has apparently been issued for my arrest. [*Interruption.*] I hear cheers from the Tory benches. My appearance in court was related to the part that I took in trying to blockade the Faslane nuclear submarine base. That is a legitimate form of civil disobedience and those who are involved in such action do not—I remind Jim Wallace—like to be referred to as a mob.

Today's fuel protest has been referred to as a "bosses' blockade". I argue that that is a gross over-simplification. Many people are involved in the protest. There are hauliers—some of them small hauliers—and there are taxi drivers. Some of those who are involved are trade unionists and some are ex-miners who were driven to unemployment by the previous Tory Government and used money to set up small businesses, some of them in the haulage industry.

**Cathie Craigie:** I cannot quite believe that some of the people who are involved in today's blockade are ex-miners, given the treatment road haulage organisations gave the miners during the 1984 strike. How will Tommy Sheridan's argument develop? He believes in taxing people and ploughing that tax back into public services. If he agrees with those who are protesting that fuel tax

should be reduced, how would he pay for the public services that are provided through that taxation?

**Tommy Sheridan:** I will take no lectures from any new Labour member about the role of the likes of Yuill and Dodds during that miners' strike. I will, however, remind the new Labour members who are telling us that the blockade is a "bosses' blockade" and that it is the bosses who are protesting and revolting, that they should know all about that—they are in bed with the bosses. They are now the bosses' party, and they know it.

**Mr McNeil:** Does Tommy Sheridan accept that Yuill and Dodds lorries picketing the TUC yesterday in Glasgow was a gross provocation?

**Tommy Sheridan:** I do not defend Yuill and Dodds. I was involved in the picket lines—I was arrested three times in the picket lines. I do not need lectures about it, Duncan.

The point is, we are 15 years on and the majority of people in Scotland support the protests, whether we like it or not, because of the Labour Government's taxation policy. Cathie Craigie is right: this is about taxes. It is about a new Labour Government continuing a discredited Tory tax policy of refusing to tax big business and the wealthy directly and instead taxing the poor indirectly. When the price of petrol in the pumps is forced up, that does not hit the hauliers and big business so much as ordinary punters who cannot afford to pay for a gallon of petrol.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer (Patricia Ferguson):** Wind up please.

**Tommy Sheridan:** Some people have suggested that the oil companies may be supporting the protest. I look forward to the new Labour ministers telling me in their summing up that they will increase the rate of taxation on the oil companies, because in this country they enjoy the lowest rate of taxation in the world.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** Come to a close please.

**Tommy Sheridan:** If we were to tax the oil companies appropriately, if we were to tax the wealthy appropriately, there would be no need for the fuel tax excise. Twice the revenue could be generated, which could be invested in a proper public transport infrastructure that we could be proud of. That is the environmentally friendly way forward—to invest in public transport and not to hammer ordinary people through indirect taxes.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** I remind members that when they overrun they impinge on the time allowed for other members. I ask members to take the direction of the chair when it comes to finishing their speeches.

16:32

**Alasdair Morgan (Galloway and Upper Nithsdale) (SNP):** I want to address the situation in rural areas, as other members have. As we know, fuel excise duty

“is a ferociously anti-rural tax and the Government should not be allowed to get away with it . . . it discriminates heavily against people living in rural areas.”—[*Official Report, House of Commons*, 23 January 1995; Vol 253, c 102.]

I say that with confidence because those are the words of the MP for East Lothian. I assume he sticks by them.

Fuel excise duty affects industry in rural areas—not just agriculture, although the farmers are out there, but tourism, manufacturing and fishing. Most of the inputs and outputs of all those industries depend on road transport. I say to Robin Harper that it is not just a matter of passing costs on to the supermarkets—or not—because many of the higher costs are not felt by competitors in other countries and the supermarkets have a choice, which they exercise, to buy outside this country.

This is also a matter of general living costs—getting to work, leisure, shopping and getting to hospital. My constituency has one of the highest levels of car ownership in Scotland, but we are one of the lowest waged constituencies in Scotland. It is not that my constituents, perversely, want to buy cars they cannot afford; they have no option but to buy a car—sometimes two—that they cannot afford and which are often less fuel efficient because they cannot afford a new car. The car is the only way they can get to work. In reality, although Dumfries and Galloway Council subsidises bus services generously, there will never be enough buses at the right time to substitute for cars. My constituents therefore pay a disproportionately high percentage of their lower incomes to get to work and live in the normal way.

The Government’s explanation—one of them, at least; we have had various explanations—which I heard in the House of Commons, is that it is all to do with the need to reduce global warming and pollution. The problem is that it is such a blunt instrument. There is little indication that all the increases in fuel tax have done anything to change the M25 from the large car park that it is for much of the day, but there is every indication that rural areas are paying heavily for the minimal pollution that they cause.

**Mr Stone:** Alasdair Morgan and I represent opposite ends of the country. Does he agree that the global warming that is caused by his end and my end of the country is a drop in the ocean? Should not there be a skewing to assist motorists in rural areas?

**Alasdair Morgan:** That is a valid point, and it

leads to my next point. Global warming is just that; it will not be cured by our country getting badly out of step with all our neighbours and while the French and the United States, in particular, are happy polluting to their heart’s content and their industry and agriculture are undercutting ours.

A second option that the Government gave during the summer—particularly when the Wilson-Reid sideshow had nothing else to do—was to promote liquefied petroleum gas. LPG is much cheaper because it is taxed less, which means less tax take for the Government. We are told that we cannot lower the tax on ordinary fuel because the Government would lose revenue, which it spends on health and education, yet the Wilson-Reid logic is that it is okay to switch to LPG and lose revenue that the Government would spend on health and education. It is okay to lose revenue one way, but not another way. How do we explain that contradiction? In reality, LPG is unlikely to be a viable option for most motorists in the short or medium term, so it was a good summer con to take the heat off the Government.

I will mention, briefly, the haulage industry in my constituency. A firm with six or seven lorries, which provided important jobs in the area, closed down recently. It made its money delivering to the south of England and relied on picking up return loads. It found that British firms based in France are paying 30p a litre less for diesel. It had to close because it could not get return loads.

The reason for the frustration that has built up is that the Government has shown no sign of listening to the concerns. It has not given an inch over the past three years. Changing a car from an automatic model to a manual model is not giving an inch in my view. The Government’s intransigence has got it where it is, and it should have the humility to recognise that.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** Malcolm Chisholm will wind up for the Labour party.

16:37

**Malcolm Chisholm (Edinburgh North and Leith) (Lab):** I am sorry to disappoint Tommy Sheridan by telling him that it is not a new Labour minister who is winding up the debate—just me trying to make some sense of what the Opposition parties have been saying today.

The debate began with Alex Salmond making what I can only call an opportunistic attempt to legitimise what Bill Speirs last night called the bosses’ barricades. In many cases they are the same people who drove through the miners again and again in the 1980s, so it ill behoves Andrew Wilson to compare what has been happening in the past few days to the miners’ strike, and it ill behoves Alex Salmond to compare what has been

happening to the poll tax protests.

**Tricia Marwick:** Will the member give way?

**Mr Salmond:** Will the member give way?

**Malcolm Chisholm:** I will give way to Alex Salmond.

**Mr Salmond:** The member mentioned barricades. Did he not listen to the First Minister's statement? There is no barrier to moving in and out of the plant. To which barricades is Mr Chisholm referring?

**Malcolm Chisholm:** I was quoting Bill Speirs.

This is different from the poll tax, first, because the poll tax was the most regressive of all taxes. One third of households in Scotland do not own a car. They have had to put up with bus and rail fares going up by 30 per cent in real terms during the past two decades, whereas the real costs of motoring have remained the same. Secondly, the fuel duty escalator—established by the Tories and abolished by Labour—has been an environmental issue and has saved up to 2.5 million tonnes of carbon in the past five years. As Richard Dixon of Friends of the Earth Scotland said, instead of developing serious environmental strategies, the SNP is

“trying to score cheap political points by pretending to be the motorists' friend.”

I will move on to what Alex Salmond did not say about the oil price and duty. Oil has gone up from \$10 to \$34 over the past year, whereas the increase in fuel duties this year was the lowest in 11 years. I will break the habit of a lifetime by quoting the *The Daily Telegraph*, which said that the last budget

“was the most motorist-friendly Budget in 8 years.”

**Ms MacDonald:** Do Mr Chisholm and his colleagues understand the genuine nature of the frustration felt by SNP members because we realise that underlying the present crisis is the absolute unsuitability of the taxation regime, which denies the fact that we are an oil-producing country? That should be reflected in our taxation. It is so insulting for us to have Tony Blair telling people to go and talk to the oil producers—we are the oil producers.

**Malcolm Chisholm:** That takes me to my next point, which also connects with Alex Salmond's point about the hole in the finances. The simple fact is that the 2p off duty is £1 billion that we all want for public expenditure. Budgets cannot be changed in the middle of the year because of fluctuating prices and predictions. It is worth making the point, which is what Margo MacDonald was referring to, that the economics of independence that we hear from the SNP is based on fluctuating oil prices, which go from \$10 to \$34

in two years. That is a serious problem that the SNP has in persuading the Scottish people to go for independence.

The final point that Alex Salmond made—David McLetchie also made it—is that we have the highest motoring costs in Europe. Examining the range of tax that is applied to the car-driving public, a motorist with a 1,000 cc engine pays £527 tax in the United Kingdom—that includes fuel duty and road tax. The equivalent figure in France is £640. In Norway it is £821—Andrew Wilson was unwise to mention that country—and in the Netherlands it is about £984. Both David McLetchie and Alex Salmond were wrong about that.

David McLetchie—I am sorry that I have not had more time for him—also gave us a trail of what we are going to hear tomorrow about the Transport (Scotland) Bill and a vendetta against motorists.

**Ben Wallace (North-East Scotland) (Con)**  
rose—

**Malcolm Chisholm:** How long do I have, Presiding Officer?

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** Less than a minute.

**Malcolm Chisholm:** I must conclude.

I am glad that we have a Government—in this case we are talking about the Westminster Government—that takes the environment seriously, unlike the other parties, but has taken account of the success of the fuel duty escalator and abolished it in the last budget. I am also glad that we have a Government at Westminster that has put significant sums of money into public expenditure over the next four years and realises that that public expenditure has to be paid for by taxation. I am glad that we do not have a Government at Westminster or in the Scottish Parliament that is called either the SNP or the Tory party.

16:43

**Mr Murray Tosh (South of Scotland) (Con):** The debate this afternoon has at times had an unfortunate tone and some groundless allegations and colourful vocabulary have been thrown around. Members have mentioned—or quoted other people as talking about—barricades, collusion, obstruction and disruption. The First Minister introduced the word “intimidation”, although, to be fair, he did so to knock it down. The Deputy First Minister introduced the expression “mob rule”. When he found himself in a hole, he continued to dig. I hope that he will think carefully about the tone that he sets when he winds up the debate.

Let us make it clear what this week's events have been about. Some individuals outside the chamber may have used colourful phrases, to which Mr Wallace has objected, but what has happened has been about peaceful protest. This has been a week of demonstration, not of obstruction or collusion, and the events have not been controlled or planned. This has been a week in which people in the haulage industry have demonstrated. We have the First Minister's word for it; he said in answer to a question that, as he understands the situation, the problem is that the vehicle drivers will not drive their vehicles. He said that there were no grounds for fear of intimidation. We are left with the conclusion that the lorry drivers are not willing to drive their lorries because they are in sympathy with the demonstration. That is the fundamental truth of this. To go beyond that and to attribute motives and make accusations is unfair, unjustified and scandalous.

Many of us were pleased to hear that Phil Flanders had intervened to ask the demonstrators at Grangemouth to call off their demonstration. I now understand that, although the demonstrators at Grangemouth have not agreed to give up their demonstration, they continue not to obstruct the road, not to barricade the hauliers and not to stop fuel being distributed; however, the drivers are still unwilling to move the fuel. I would be perfectly happy to give way to ministers at this point so that they can tell us precisely what the Executive is doing to ensure that that fuel is moved, as nobody appears to be stopping its movement.

**Mrs Lyndsay McIntosh (Central Scotland) (Con):** There are no takers.

**Mr Tosh:** Very well. I shall move on to my next point. In closing the debate, ministers must dissociate themselves from the echoes of class warfare and revenge that we have heard directed against the road haulage industry by Labour members. I do not imagine that anyone in the Labour party or the trade union movement is particularly fond of Yuill and Dodds or other haulage companies, but let us be careful about what we say and what attitude we take to haulage. Let us just appreciate what haulage does for this country. It moves absolutely everything. It is critical to the fabric of our civilisation, to our economic competitiveness and to the future of the country.

Malcolm Chisholm told us that it is wrong to say that we have the most heavily taxed fuel duty regime in Europe and that to say otherwise is a load of lies. Well, I have a research paper from the House of Commons about fuel prices. It was published in May 2000, so presumably it contains reasonably reliable figures. It tells me that the duty on a litre of diesel in this country is 48.8p. In Ireland, which is a competitor, it is 19.95p and in

Belgium it is 17.53p.

Other costs may have to be taken into account when British hauliers carry freight on to the continent but, in this country, French, Belgian and Irish hauliers do not pay motorway tolls or excise duties. The only costs that come into play for them are the costs of their vehicles and fuel. That is the point that the haulage industry has been trying to get across for three years. Hauliers are being undercut in their domestic markets. The cost of licensing a vehicle in this country is so prohibitive that many choose to license their trucks in Ireland. The cost of fuel is so prohibitive that people load up with fuel in Belgium without paying a penny to the UK exchequer.

The hauliers have argued, put in their petitions, written their reports and made their deputations and delegations, but they got a pittance off vehicle excise duty in the budget and all they got for their trouble was a "mere" 3 per cent rise in fuel duty. Nevertheless, they are still in a hopelessly uneconomic and uncompetitive position.

Two things must happen. First, the demonstrators must call off the demonstrations and the lorry drivers must start to resume the supplies. That is essential and must happen sooner rather than later. Secondly, although it is right to say that we will not cut the taxes in response to demonstrations, the Government has a responsibility, too; it has a duty to heed public opinion and to listen to logic. It must accept the plight of our haulage industry, recognise its importance and take firm and effective action before it is too late to ensure the survival of that industry, in the interests of every one of us and the country's future.

16:49

**Mr Kenny MacAskill (Lothians) (SNP):** At the outset, the SNP made it quite clear that the Government was not listening, consulting or acting, and nothing that we have heard in this debate has made us change our minds. Labour is not solving the problem; Labour is causing the problem.

I have been asked to make a statement not on behalf of the Executive but on behalf of the Road Haulage Association. I have been in communication with Mr Flanders this afternoon and he has asked me to say that the Road Haulage Association has been deeply grateful for the marvellous support that it has received from the public. The Road Haulage Association does not want to jeopardise the good will that the public, motorists and pedestrians alike have shown. It is therefore asking its members to forsake any further action as of 7 pm tonight and to retreat with dignity and with their heads held high, knowing

that they have public support, that the Government has caused the problem and, more important, that the problem remains and requires to be addressed.

Earlier, I saw Mr McLeish nodding his head. I understand that there are difficulties at Grangemouth and that the Road Haulage Association is coming under some pressure. The RHA's position is not assisted by ignorant, arrogant and inflammatory language from a Government minister.

We are dealing with a difficult situation. To talk about mob rule, when individuals have behaved with dignity and when those who have been leading and advising them have acted with decorum, does nothing but undermine the position and manufacture a crisis, as has been reflected in the language and terminology used by Labour back benchers.

**Mr Keith Raffan (Mid Scotland and Fife) (LD):** Will the member give way?

**Mr McNeil:** Will the member give way?

**Mr MacAskill:** I will not give way.

I addressed the demonstration at Ingliston yesterday, as one of three speakers. The other two speakers—[*Interruption.*]

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** Order.

**Mr MacAskill:** At Ingliston, I did not address a mob and I did not deal with baying hounds; I addressed a dignified demonstration of men and women, justifiably concerned about their livelihoods and the future of their families, their industries and their communities. I was supported not by members of the Conservative party or the so-called country party—the agricultural voice of Labour—but by Jim Walker of the National Farmers Union of Scotland and Phil Flanders of the Road Haulage Association. There was no incitement of a mob; there was no mob.

**Mr Raffan:** Will the member give way?

**Cathie Craigie:** Will the member give way?

**Mr McNeil:** Will the member give way?

**Mr MacAskill:** Labour is the cause, not the solution. There are two crises in Scotland. One is at the pumps—it has to be addressed, and the Government is talking about that. We would appeal to those at Grangemouth and elsewhere to go away—as the RHA has said—with dignity, in the knowledge that they have the full support of the public and that the battle will continue to be waged. That battle will be won—sooner rather than later—when Labour is rolled out of office.

The current situation at the pumps is a symptom, not a disease. It is a symptom of the

frustration, desperation and anger of those involved, who have been given support by members of the public. I have listened with incredulity to the language that has been used—it is the language of Thatcherism.

**Mr McMahon:** Will the member give way?

**Mr MacAskill:** Not at the moment.

I heard Andrew Marr—who is rumoured to be a BBC appointee—say that Tony Blair is becoming more like Margaret Thatcher every day. The language used is intemperate and wrong.

On the road haulage industry and the miners' strike—

**Mr McMahon:** Will the member give way?

**Mr MacAskill:** Sit down!

I am sure that the Minister for Transport and the Environment will confirm that, in this country, a person must be 21 to have a heavy goods vehicle licence. As a Labour member said, the miners' strike was about 15 years ago. Unless someone is in their late 30s or older, they could not have been a driver of a Yuill and Dodds lorry at the time. The language that is being directed against those people is not only intemperate, but false and inflammatory, and it does not help a dangerous situation or address the crisis in our country.

There is a saying in the SNP: "There's lies, damned lies and Brian Wilson." There have been lies in this debate—Alex Salmond dealt with that.

**Mr McMahon:** Will the member give way?

**The Deputy Minister for Local Government (Mr Frank McAveety):** Will the member give way?

**Mr Raffan:** Will the member give way?

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** Order.

**Mr MacAskill:** The point was made by colleagues on the Scottish National Party benches that this Government, unlike those abroad, is not listening. It is not consulting and it is not finding a solution.

We have called for a summit, but it might be difficult to invite the Deputy First Minister to that summit unless he is prepared to apologise on record for his inflammatory language. Such language is not conducive to settling a dispute that is critical to Scotland's economy.

**Dr Simpson** rose—

**Mr MacAskill:** The crisis is not going away. It might be solved at the pumps, not by the Executive, but by the Road Haulage Association and other members of the rank and file—apparently so disparaged by Labour members—who will act responsibly and take with them the community's support. The crisis will not be dealt

with by the language of Margaret Thatcher.

**Dr Simpson** *rose*—

**Mr MacAskill:** These people want their community's problems to be addressed.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** One moment, Mr MacAskill. Dr Simpson, you can take it that Mr MacAskill is not taking an intervention at the moment.

**Mr MacAskill:** We need to address the crisis. However, the language of Tony Blair and the Labour party is not conducive to doing so. We need an Executive that will discuss, not dictate; listen, not lecture; and consult, not confront. [*Interruption.*]

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** Order.

**Mr MacAskill:** Every opinion poll shows that the people of Scotland are fully behind the demonstrators' legitimate and legal actions. The people who are out of kilter with public opinion are the Labour Executive and its Liberal Democrat lapdogs. The Labour party is causing the problem; it is not providing the solution and its intemperate language must cease, as such language is not facilitating a settlement, but provoking matters.

16:57

**The Deputy First Minister and Minister for Justice (Mr Jim Wallace):** One of the interesting aspects of this debate, in which many passionate things have been said, is that the Prime Minister was described by the SNP as acting like Margaret Thatcher and by John Scott as fulfilling a socialist dream. That indicates how at times the debate, particularly in the hands of the SNP and Tories, has lost touch with reality.

The debate took place against the background of a seriously developing situation, which the First Minister outlined in his statement. Murray Tosh said that this was a week of peaceful protest; however, it goes beyond peaceful protest when the NHS is talking about people being unable to keep appointments and non-emergency operations having to be cancelled. As Margaret Smith pointed out, health service employees are finding it difficult to get to work. It goes beyond peaceful protest if some Scottish companies indicate that they might have to lay off staff by the end of the week.

I know what peaceful protest is and I defend anyone's right to engage in it. However, as a parliamentarian, I will not condone people who go on the radio to say that they want to use direct action to bring down a legitimately elected Government of the United Kingdom. I did not vote for that Government and I do not support it in Westminster, where I sit on the Opposition

benches; however, as a parliamentarian and democrat, I believe that we deal with Governments that we oppose not through direct action, but through the ballot box.

**Mr Salmond:** The Deputy First Minister has just stated that some things are beyond peaceful protest. Is he saying that he knows of any violent action in the Scottish demonstrations? Earlier in the debate—and perhaps in the heat of the moment—he used the phrase “mob rule”. Having thought about that phrase, and given the seriousness of the situation outside, would he like to withdraw his remark, as it cannot be helping the situation?

**Mr Wallace:** I hope that, as a parliamentarian like me, Mr Salmond deplores and condemns those who say that direct action should be used to bring down a democratically elected Government. I repeat that I did not say that that claim was made by people protesting at Grangemouth, and I echo the First Minister's comment that there is no evidence of intimidation at Grangemouth.

However, it cannot be said that this has simply been a week of peaceful protest, as Mr Tosh stated, because such protest does not lead to a crisis in the NHS.

**Mr Tosh** *rose*—

**Mr Wallace:** I agree with Mr Tosh: there was no mob rule at Inghliston. Instead, there was peaceful protest at Inghliston. However, the situation at Inghliston did not lead to the serious trouble that faces the NHS or to companies having to lay off individuals.

**Mr Raffan:** Like me, the Deputy First Minister has sat through this entire debate. Does he agree that the continuous expressions of sympathy for the protesters made by Mr Salmond and other SNP members were disgraceful, given that there were none for those in hospitals or residential homes, for district nurses who have increasing difficulty reaching their patients, or for carers who have increasing difficulty reaching those who are dependent on them? We expect that from Mr Sheridan but not from a responsible Opposition.

**Mr Tosh:** On a point of order, Presiding Officer. Is it in order for the Deputy First Minister, when closing a debate, to attack a member of another party and then to take a point of information from a back bencher in his own party who has not, so far, played any part whatever in the debate?

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** That is not a point of order, Mr Tosh. Mr Wallace can take interventions from whomever he pleases.

**Mr Wallace:** Mr Raffan made a pertinent point. I listened carefully to Mr Salmond's speech and I do not think that we heard one word about the NHS, vulnerable people or those who are threatened

with being laid off by the end of the week. Mr Salmond said little, if anything, about those matters. To be fair, however, I should add that Mr McLetchie addressed that point.

**Mr Salmond:** On a point of order. In the general hubbub, I think that I heard the Deputy First Minister withdraw his comment about mob rule. Will he confirm that he did so? [*Interruption.*]

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** Order.

**Mr Wallace:** I indicated in response to Mr Tosh that those involved at Ingliston were not engaged in mob rule, nor were they the people whose involvement led to this crisis.

Alex Salmond suggested that the Road Haulage Association had been successful in persuading the protesters to leave the Grangemouth site and that the protest would not continue. I respect Mr Salmond and I know that he would not dissemble, but it is rather naive to think that what happened did so in the way that he said it did.

I accept that we are dealing with a changing situation in which it is often difficult to get up-to-date information. However, the information that I have, which was confirmed by Mr MacAskill, is that the RHA made an attempt to intervene—we would support the efforts of any responsible organisation to use its powers of persuasion. In fact, the protesters have not accepted the RHA's recommendation. I appreciate that it may be difficult to obtain accurate information in such situations, but my information is that the RHA representatives were heckled and left without having any discernible effect on the protest.

I sincerely hope that the protesters will leave Grangemouth, where, as has been said, there are no physical barriers. I reiterate my earlier comments and those of the First Minister. There is no evidence of direct intimidation of the tanker drivers. Nevertheless, many of the drivers are afraid to take the tankers out. There is one way to ensure that, without any intimidation, supplies can start to roll again: the protesters, having made their point, should depart and allow services in Scotland to return to normal working order. It would help if they were to leave now, and I hope that people such as Mr Salmond will endorse a call for them to go now.

A number of members raised specific points. Robin Harper talked about climate change; I assure him that the Executive is fully committed to the development of renewable energy. However, our society will depend on fossil fuel for many years to come and to suggest that renewable energies can be a solution straight away may not be realistic.

Alasdair Morgan raised the important issue of LPG. The Executive supports the use of LPG; we

recently quadrupled the funding available to assist car owners to convert their cars to LPG, which we believe has an important part to play in reducing motoring costs, particularly for those who live in rural areas.

Tavish Scott asked about Scottish airports. I share his concerns about patients flying from the islands. We understand that Glasgow and Edinburgh airports have limited supplies, although planes can refuel elsewhere. Although we do not have immediately available details of the position in airports in the Highlands and Islands, we understand that air services will be included in the possible extension of the designated station scheme, in order to ensure that priority is given to essential fuel users.

Much of this debate has focused on the causes rather than the consequences of the action. There is a legitimate debate to be had about the level of fuel taxation in this country—that is perfectly obvious. As Mr Salmond acknowledges, over the past 10 years he and I have voted regularly against the fuel tax increases that have been proposed by the Conservative party and by the current Westminster Government. Only last week, I made representations to the Chancellor of the Exchequer about haulage companies in island areas, after a haulage company in my constituency decided to give up because it could not afford the costs of going on.

We understand that there are problems and difficulties facing road users in rural areas. It has been interesting to hear some of the proposed solutions that have been given. The Conservative party cannot go much beyond Mr Portillo saying that he might or might not reduce taxation. The SNP gave us the luxury of three answers. John Swinney told the Scottish Grand Committee that the SNP would freeze fuel duty; Alex Neil wants a 20 per cent cut in fuel duty; and Alex Salmond and Andrew Wilson said that they want to reduce fuel duty to European levels. We can take our pick from the views of the ex-leader and the two contenders for the leadership to get the answer to the question of what the SNP wants. I suspect that, in spite of the bombast, Alex Salmond is not offering much to those to whom he pretends to be offering a lot.

**Mr Salmond:** Will the minister give way?

**Mr Wallace:** It is clear that this issue ought to be debated in the UK Parliament. The Scottish Parliament has had the opportunity to debate it and it is important that the debate now moves to the Westminster Parliament. The issue has been put on the agenda, but the way of making progress is to ensure that it is debated through the parliamentary process, not through the kind of action that leads to the disruption that we are experiencing.

**Mr Salmond:** Is the minister giving way?

**The Presiding Officer (Sir David Steel):** No, he is not giving way; he has sat down. That concludes the debate.

## Decision Time

17:07

**The Presiding Officer (Sir David Steel):** We come to decision time. There are two questions to be put as a result of today's business.

The first question is, that motion S1M-1175, in the name of Mr Tom McCabe, proposing that tomorrow's decision time should begin at 12:30, be agreed to.

*Motion agreed to.*

That the Parliament agrees under Rule 11.2.4 of the Standing Orders that Decision Time on Thursday 14 September 2000 shall begin at 12.30 pm.

**The Presiding Officer:** The second question is, that motion S1M-1176, in the name of Mr Tom McCabe, proposing a suspension of standing orders to allow tomorrow's members' business to be taken at 2 pm, be agreed to.

*Motion agreed to.*

That the Parliament agrees that Rule 5.6.1(c) of Standing Orders be suspended for the purpose of taking Members' Business on Thursday, 14 September 2000 at 2.00 pm.

## Fibromyalgia Syndrome

**The Presiding Officer (Sir David Steel):** The final item is a members' business debate on motion S1M-1124, in the name of Shona Robison, on fibromyalgia syndrome. The debate will be concluded after 30 minutes without any question being put.

### *Motion debated,*

That the Parliament notes Fibromyalgia Syndrome Awareness Week from 10 to 16 September; recognises that the condition, which affects up to 4 per cent of the population, is frequently overlooked or minimised by health professionals; recognises the problems sufferers have in claiming appropriate benefits; supports the demand for better education and awareness-raising about the condition, and calls for more research into the condition so that Fibromyalgia Syndrome is taken seriously as the devastating "hidden" disability that it is.

17:08

**Shona Robison (North-East Scotland) (SNP):** Several members have come to me and asked, "Fibro-what?", so that I have had to explain what fibromyalgia is all about. That is not surprising, as for a long time fibromyalgia syndrome has been the hidden disability. I am raising the issue during Fibromyalgia Syndrome Awareness Week to try to bring that hidden disability out into the open. I was surprised when I attended a meeting of the Tayside support group, which was attended by more than 150 people, all of whom exhibited various symptoms related to the condition. That is where my awareness of the issue came from.

What is fibromyalgia syndrome? It is a very debilitating condition that involves severe pain in the fibrous tissues of the body, such as the tendons, ligaments and muscles. Sufferers can be in agony because their muscles become spasmodic, tight and painful to move. The syndrome is also characterised by extreme fatigue, sleep disorder and many other unrelenting symptoms ranging from migraines to allergies.

To date, the hidden disability has no cure. Another symptom is forgetfulness, which many sufferers find to be the most frustrating symptom because often they cannot remember the names of everyday items. I know of one lady, a member of the support group, who used to have an important job in Tayside Chamber of Commerce. When she developed the syndrome she had to leave her job because of the effects of the illness. It is a very debilitating condition.

The condition is poorly understood and sufferers often find themselves labelled neurotic. However, it is a real condition that is estimated to affect 4 per cent of the Scottish population. Fibromyalgia syndrome probably has the same level of

awareness as ME had 10 years ago.

The syndrome affects seven times more women than men. We do not know why. Indeed, we do not know the answers to many questions. We do not know what the underlying causes of the syndrome are. Some evidence suggests that the illness may be post-viral; other evidence suggests that it is environmental. Organophosphates have also been linked to the condition. We need more research to find out the answers to those questions.

The key problems faced by people with fibromyalgia syndrome are lack of awareness in the medical profession and lack of access to the benefits system. The medical profession is generally unaware of the syndrome and many patients are told that they are suffering from muscle pain. In extreme cases, patients presenting a series of symptoms have been told that they are hypochondriacs.

The input of the medical profession is hugely important, particularly when it comes to claims for benefits. A claim for incapacity benefit, for example, depends not on the nature of a person's medical condition, but on how the condition affects the person's ability to work. The efficacy of the medical testing arrangements—the all-work test—depends on the doctors who are employed to carry out the medical assessments keeping abreast of and updated about conditions such as fibromyalgia. That is not happening. Doctors know very little about fibromyalgia and in some cases are misinformed about the condition. In both situations, the result is that many people with fibromyalgia who are very debilitated by the condition are denied access to benefits.

The Deputy Minister for Community Care could address the lack of awareness in the medical profession by agreeing to the issuing of guidance on the condition by the health department. I hope that that is the least that the minister will agree to today.

There needs to be far more research into fibromyalgia. Some good work has been done, but it is very limited and depends on the interest of a few people in the medical profession. I draw members' attention to the work of Dr Abdul Al Allaf from the rheumatology unit at Ninewells hospital, who has carried out limited research into the condition. He has been very supportive of the Tayside support group. That is not enough. We need more funding in order to investigate the condition. In the United States, far more research is under way. There is also much lobbying in order to secure funding from the National Institute of Health. We need something similar in Scotland.

Currently, there is no effective treatment for fibromyalgia, let alone a cure. That is likely to remain the case unless resources are put into

researching the condition. Fibromyalgia sufferers are calling for acknowledgement, recognition and awareness. I hope that the minister will give them a good response.

17:14

**Ben Wallace (North-East Scotland) (Con):** I was one of Shona Robison's colleagues who had to ask what fibromyalgia was. I do not speak as an expert or with much knowledge of the subject; if I tried to do that I would merely add to the confusion.

I want to talk about the fact that there are many conditions, across the board, that the medical establishment, Governments and society take a long time to recognise. In such cases, sufferers find themselves isolated and confused for many years.

One condition that is close to my heart is Gulf war syndrome. I know that Shona Robison's colleague Colin Campbell has worked hard to try to get the Ministry of Defence to recognise and treat that.

It took 10 years to raise awareness of ME, to which Shona Robison referred, and it is still treated with suspicion by clinicians.

I sit on the cross-party group in the Scottish Parliament on epilepsy. Although epilepsy is recognised as a condition and much more is known about it, health professionals are often cautious about dealing with it or helping to develop some form of strategy on it. Although health boards develop strategies—often at the prompting of Parliament—often they are not followed.

The Health and Community Care Committee should consider how the health service can be more responsive to new conditions. Perhaps the starting point should be acceptance followed by investigation, rather than suspicion and forcing the poor sufferers to prove that they have a condition. In my time in the Army, I visited the military hospital in Washington DC, where different treatments were tried for Gulf war syndrome—there was never any suspicion.

I would like to finish—

**The Deputy Presiding Officer (Mr George Reid):** The debate is about fibromyalgia—a few words on that would be welcome.

**Ben Wallace:** According to the Royal College of General Practitioners, the single most important intervention in the condition is a comprehensive explanation. That would go a long way towards helping sufferers.

17:17

**Euan Robson (Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (LD):** I congratulate Shona Robison on bringing this important debate to Parliament.

I know what fibromyalgia is, not because of any personal experience or medical training, but because of the experiences of one of my constituents. With her permission, I will briefly explain her experience. Christine Cottrell from Hawick was a senior industrial engineer who led a full life with her family and children and held down a responsible job in manufacturing in Hawick. She took out a critical illness policy with an insurance company against any problems that might arise in the future.

In June 1997, after taking out the insurance policy, she began to notice some problems with her muscular movements and some pain in her hands. From that beginning, the fibromyalgia syndrome grew and grew. She is now so afflicted that it was only with considerable pain and effort that she was able to come to my constituency surgery. I know what fibromyalgia is because I have seen it. It is very difficult for my constituent to walk 3 or 4 ft across a room, to change chairs or to go to bed at night. The effort that she made to come to see me was so outstanding that I felt that her case had to be investigated at all costs.

As Shona Robison said, a problem with fibromyalgia is that it is not well understood. However, after I wrote to the Minister for Health and Community Care, she was kind enough to reply with a full description of the condition, which was exactly the same as the one that Shona gave, and advice as to how my constituent might pursue matters with her insurance company. The insurance company's attitude was that the fibromyalgia syndrome did not exist. I invited the insurance company to come to see my constituent, but it declined to do so. It held to a number of outdated principles and said, in effect, that the syndrome was not well recognised or understood, despite the fact that, with the help of ministers at Scottish and UK level, we were able to explain to the insurance company what was meant by it.

Even with that helpful information from those ministers, the insurance company did not budge until we obtained expert advice from Ninewells hospital, where there was a specialist. I am sad to say that the insurance company then moved the goalposts by saying that there had been non-disclosure, which in my view was a fictitious assertion. The insurance company is still not prepared to meet my constituent's claim.

But enough of that. Christine Cottrell allowed me to mention her case because she felt that it is one that illustrates this serious problem. She has been

in contact with some of the other sufferers. Fibromyalgia apparently affects more women than men and is quite prevalent within the community, but, as the Minister for Health and Community Care said in her letter to me:

"We do not hold statistics on the possible prevalence of FMS."

I think that it is probably time that we started to do so. I invite the Deputy Minister for Community Care to think about that. He may not be able to give us an assurance tonight, but he could take the matter away for consideration. The minister could also help explain what the syndrome is, particularly among groups that might come into contact with it, such as general practitioners, consultants and, in particular, insurance companies holding critical illness policies on behalf of their clients.

Not only was my constituent confronted with the difficulties of her illness, but at one stage she was told by the insurance company that it was not permanent—that it was something from which she could recover. I would like to see someone recover from the state that my constituent is in.

The Government can assist us by explaining to professionals what the syndrome is and what the likely effects are, and by ensuring that the message that fibromyalgia syndrome is a very unpleasant, very painful and very distressing disease is put out. We could also do with investing some money in research on the condition to find the causes and obtain treatment plans.

I hope that my constituent's experiences will show that this is a serious problem that requires to be addressed. I look forward to hearing the minister's remarks.

17:22

**The Deputy Minister for Community Care (Iain Gray):** I join Euan Robson in congratulating Shona Robison on her success in obtaining this debate today. It is a strength of this Parliament that it can find time to discuss a condition which, as Ms Robison said, is little understood and about which there is a lack of awareness.

Fibromyalgia is a difficult and complex condition, as all the speakers in this debate have indicated. It is true that it is not fully understood, even by some medical professionals. There has been a great deal of commitment from both professional and voluntary organisations, but gaps remain in our knowledge about its cause, diagnosis and treatment.

We heard about a number of case studies in this debate, and it is clear that fibromyalgia can be the cause of considerable pain and disability. Unfortunately, there is no straightforward,

universally adopted, accepted diagnostic test for the condition. There is not even general agreement about what it should be called. It has been referred to not only as fibromyalgia but as fibrositis, fibromyositis, fibromyalgia syndrome or muscular rheumatism.

The condition is characterised by pain and tenderness in the muscles or the tissue next to the muscles. It is often accompanied by fatigue and sleeping problems. The difficulty faced by the medical profession is that such symptoms can be caused by a wide range of medical conditions, due to a spectrum of causes. In the case of any particular patient, the doctor may be unable to make a definite diagnosis. The condition appears to be most common in women, as Mr Robson said, although it also affects men and children.

Since Mr Robson's correspondence with the Minister for Health and Community Care, to which he referred, I am pleased to say that we have found some incidence statistics, gathered by the information and statistics division of the common services agency of the national health service in Scotland.

Some 2,029 people with fibromyalgia were seen in the year to 31 March 2000. That figure came from a sample of 53 Scottish general practices, taken from different communities and with a combined population of 307,741. That would give an incidence of 0.66 per cent for Scotland. The incidence referred to in the motion may be rather higher than there is evidence for, but I cannot dispute that the uncertainties surrounding fibromyalgia and the fact that the statistics depend on diagnosis by GPs may well mean that there are undiagnosed cases.

The NHS provides a range of services to which people with the condition have access, some of which may alleviate some of the symptoms. Aerobic exercise such as swimming and walking can improve muscle fitness, heat and massage may give short-term relief and antidepressant medications can help improve the quality of sleep and muscle relaxation. Many people with fibromyalgia may also benefit from a combination of exercise, physical therapy and relaxation.

The motion suggests that the condition is frequently overlooked or minimised by doctors. Let me make it clear that that should not be the case. All general practitioners receive appropriate training to help them meet the needs of their patients. Training for general practice is intended to provide the future GP with the skills, knowledge and experience necessary to provide quality services to NHS patients. That should and does include conditions for which the diagnosis and treatment are not yet well understood. That approach is designed to ensure—as Ben Wallace was urging—that future doctors have an improved

capacity to respond to changing patterns of disease, changing needs and modern patterns of health care delivery. Nevertheless, I appreciate the concerns that have been expressed. The understanding of conditions with no known cause or cure should include an understanding of fibromyalgia syndrome. Today I have asked the chief medical officer to look into the matter and to assure me that it is included in training for general practitioners.

The motion refers to access to benefits, which as we all know is a matter reserved to the Westminster Parliament. However, there is no condition that either automatically entitles a person to disability benefits or automatically excludes them. Everything depends on the effects that a condition has on a person's capacity, not on the name of the condition that is diagnosed. If members are aware of cases of constituents who are having difficulty with benefits—which should not happen—or insurance claims, as Mr Robson described, the best route is for the local member to take them up.

**Mrs Margaret Ewing (Moray) (SNP):** In my many years of involvement at Westminster and here, I have gained experience of the external doctors called in to examine people to see whether they are eligible for disability living allowance or other related benefits. In referring the matter to the chief medical officer, which I welcome, will the minister recommend that external doctors take the condition into account?

**Iain Gray:** The point I was making is that the decision of such doctors should relate to particular activities, as prescribed by the Department of Social Security—a department for which we have no responsibility—rather than to the name of the condition that leads to problems.

Many speakers referred to research. In all cases, health research funds are not ring-fenced for particular conditions. However, priorities for budgets reflect analysis of the burden of disease and of potential benefits. Within those parameters, the chief scientist's office, which is the Scottish Executive health department's principal source of research funding, is always prepared to consider well-founded applications for research into a wide variety of conditions. Indeed, the CSO is currently providing more than £10,000 funding for a research project at Ninewells hospital medical school, whose work Ms Robison referred to and which began on 1 September.

That project, which is a study of bone mineral density in patients suffering from this syndrome, follows a recently completed project on the role of physical trauma in the onset of fibromyalgia. The medical school itself is conducting a long-term self-financed study, due to finish in November, on prevalence and clinical associations. So it is

clear—and Ms Robison made this point too—that, at least at Ninewells, the doctors take fibromyalgia very seriously indeed and are taking steps to improve awareness. I hope that today's debate will be a further step towards ensuring that there is broader awareness.

*Meeting closed at 17:30.*

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