

MEETING OF THE PARLIAMENT

Thursday 26 April 2001

Session 1

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Scottish Parliament

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

Hepatitis C

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Mr George Reid): Good morning. The first item is a Scottish National Party debate on motion S1M-1865, in the name of Nicola Sturgeon, on hepatitis C, and one amendment to that motion.

09:30

Nicola Sturgeon (Glasgow) (SNP): I am pleased to have the opportunity to debate this issue. Compensation for patients, most of them haemophiliacs who were infected with hepatitis C through contaminated blood products, is an issue I feel strongly about, as do many other members from all parts of the chamber. It is important to put on record the background to a set of circumstances that—for those affected—amounts to a human tragedy. There are around 300 haemophiliacs alive in Scotland today who, during the 1970s and 1980s, were infected with hepatitis C because they were treated with blood products that were contaminated with the virus.

Contracting hepatitis C is devastating for individuals and for their families. Ken Peacock, one of those who have been infected said, when giving evidence to the Health and Community Care Committee:

"I have severe haemophilia, but I can tell you something: when someone tells you that you have ... hepatitis C your whole life changes."—[*Official Report, Health and Community Care Committee*, 14 March 2001; c 1631-32.]

There is undoubtedly a stigma attached to hepatitis C. People who have it live with the constant worry—even though the risks are small—of infecting those close to them. They find it virtually impossible to obtain life insurance or even mortgages, except at prohibitive rates. The physical effects of hepatitis C can be severe and, in some cases, life threatening. Hepatitis C can cause chronic fatigue, making it difficult to hold down employment. Up to 80 per cent of sufferers will develop chronic liver disease, of whom 25 per cent will end up with liver cancer.

There has been and no doubt will continue to be a debate about whether the national health service could have done any more in the 1980s to prevent what happened to at least some of the people who were infected. Many people will argue that the heat treatment that is capable of killing the

hepatitis C virus in blood products should have been introduced in Scotland earlier than 1987 given that it was available in England as early as 1985. People will also argue that, until such time as effective treatment was possible, blood products could have been screened to reveal the existence of the virus. It can further be argued that patients should have been given better advice about the risks involved in treatment with blood products. Although hepatitis C was not isolated as a virus until 1989, it was known about much earlier than that; it was known that a virus—at that time known as non-A, non-B hepatitis—could be transmitted through blood.

I do not intend to go into all those issues today, except to make the point that a Scottish Executive inquiry has been the only investigation of them to date. The report that was published as a result of that inquiry, which is referred to in the Executive amendment, concluded that there had been no negligence. Certainly, I have no evidence to suggest that the report should have reached any other conclusion, but we must be aware that the inquiry was, in effect, an internal inquiry conducted by the Scottish Executive into one of its agencies, the Scottish National Blood Transfusion Service. The Haemophilia Society and the 70-plus MSPs of all parties who signed Brian Adam's motion S1M-323 on a hepatitis C inquiry believe that there is a strong case for a public inquiry. I hope that the Executive will reflect on that.

The question on which I will focus is whether people who are infected with hepatitis C through contaminated blood should receive compensation or financial assistance, regardless of whether negligence can be proved; in other words, whether there should be no-fault compensation for the loss that they have suffered as a result of being treated with contaminated blood.

The Scottish Executive's position to date has been quite straightforward. I quote Susan Deacon, in evidence that she gave to the Health and Community Care Committee last October:

"The NHS not paying compensation for non-negligent harm is a generally held principle."—[*Official Report, Health and Community Care Committee*, 25 October 2000; c 1260.]

I do not dispute that that principle is generally held or even that it is generally right, but it has been departed from on a number of occasions in the past. The most recent example occurred earlier this year, when the Government awarded compensation on a no-fault basis to the families of victims of variant CJD. However, of most relevance to the people who were infected with hepatitis C is the Macfarlane Trust.

The Macfarlane Trust was set up in 1988 by the then Conservative Government to compensate and provide financial assistance to haemophiliacs

who were infected with HIV through contaminated blood products. To receive money from the Macfarlane Trust individuals do not have to prove negligence on the part of the NHS; they must simply show that their illness is attributable to treatment with contaminated blood. The payments are made not because the Government accepts any legal responsibility, but because the Tory Government in 1988 believed—as the Labour Government does now—that the Government had a moral responsibility to compensate those who contracted a devastating illness through treatment on the NHS. Why should the distinction be made between haemophiliacs whose blood treatment gave them HIV and other haemophiliacs whose treatment—perhaps given on the same day in the same hospital—gave them hepatitis C? No convincing argument has ever been put forward to support such a distinction.

Ministers frequently talk about the stigma and the public fear that was associated with HIV in the 1980s—back then it was a virtual death sentence. I do not for one minute diminish the devastating effect of HIV on those who have it and on their families, but hepatitis C is also devastating. Perhaps it is less devastating than HIV—I dare say that that is a matter of debate—but if the only difference is one of degree, that should be reflected in the amount of compensation or financial assistance that is awarded. It is no justification for denying any financial redress for people who were infected with hepatitis C. The debate is fundamentally about equity and fairness—and the case is overwhelming.

Although the recent English High Court judgment should, for a number of reasons, be treated with great caution—not least because it is an English court judgment—it contains an important principle that adds moral weight to the case for no-fault compensation for all haemophiliacs who were infected with hepatitis C. The judge said that people were entitled to expect clean blood on the NHS. He said that if the blood or blood products that people received were defective and they suffered harm as a result, they had a right to be compensated without the need to prove negligence. If that is right in principle south of the border—it is worth saying that there is to be no appeal against the judgment—surely it is right in principle in Scotland as well.

Let me say that I am greatly encouraged by the terms of the Executive amendment. The SNP called today's debate because we were concerned that the Minister for Health and Community Care, in a written answer on 5 April, signalled that she had no plans to review her decision on compensation in the light of the English judgment or in the light of the views that the Health and Community Care Committee may express in due course. Today's Executive amendment marks a

significant shift from that position, which I welcome.

However, I want to express one concern about the Executive amendment, on which I hope the minister can offer some reassurance. The amendment talks of examining the implications of the English High Court judgment. Although I welcome that, we should remember that even if the judgment were implemented in full in Scotland, it would result in compensation only for people who were infected with hepatitis C after 1988. Most, if not all, haemophiliacs in Scotland were infected before that date. The danger would be that, as well as the unjust distinction between those who were infected with HIV and those who were infected with hepatitis C, we would create a new division between those who were infected before 1988 and those who were infected after 1988. That would be wrong. I ask the minister to reassure me that the welcome further examination promised in the amendment will apply to all haemophiliacs infected with hepatitis C, irrespective of whether they were infected before or after 1988.

This is not a party political issue. It is an SNP debate, but MSPs from all parts of the chamber have expressed support in a range of ways for the affected haemophiliacs. It is about fairness and justice. A group of people in Scotland—albeit a very small group—have so far been denied justice. We can start to put that right today and I hope that we do just that.

I move,

That the Parliament calls upon the Scottish Executive to review its decision to refuse compensation or financial assistance to patients who contracted hepatitis C through NHS treatment with contaminated blood products.

09:40

The Deputy Minister for Health and Community Care (Malcolm Chisholm): I welcome the opportunity to debate this important and sensitive issue. I am conscious that, in a short debate, we will be unable to do justice to the complexities of the issue. For that reason, I am pleased that the Health and Community Care Committee continues to examine the matter in greater detail.

Primarily, this is not a legal or a political issue; it is a human issue. Susan Deacon and I share absolutely the concern that has been expressed about the human consequences for individuals who suffer from hepatitis C and their families. Those individuals must receive the best possible care and treatment, which is why we have targeted additional investment and effort to the causes, treatment and prevention of hepatitis C. We recognise also the particular tragedy of those

who contracted the infection through blood transfusions and blood products when medical and scientific knowledge was considerably less advanced than it is today.

As members know, Susan Deacon was especially concerned at the suggestion that the Scottish National Blood Transfusion Service could or should have acted sooner in the 1980s to introduce the heat treatment necessary to eliminate hepatitis C from the blood-clotting agents that are essential to the health, and often the survival, of many people with haemophilia. That is why she commissioned an investigation into the sequence of events in the mid-1980s. That examination found that, given the level of scientific knowledge at the time, the SNBTS could not have eliminated the risk any sooner than it did. The report, which was published last October, found no evidence of negligence or of a failure to act. I am therefore disappointed that Nicola Sturgeon is still suggesting that fault was involved. I refer her to the independent expert, Professor Mike Greaves, professor of haematology at the University of Aberdeen, who said that it was

“a carefully researched and detailed report”

and

“a thorough and balanced assessment”.

As politicians with an interest in health—and especially as health ministers—we have a responsibility to do all that is in our power to reduce the risks involved in medical procedures and treatments. Risk, however, can never be eliminated. Sadly, a potentially life-saving drug, blood transfusion, operation or other procedure can often have tragic consequences through an individual adverse reaction or, as in these cases, an inadvertent or unknown side effect.

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

Malcolm Chisholm: Perhaps later on, but I am up against the clock.

All medical treatment involves, to some extent, the calculation of risk, including the risk of not undertaking the treatment. Every health care system and every health care professional has to grapple with how that risk is managed. Successive Governments of different political persuasions have adopted the general view that the NHS should not offer compensation in cases of non-negligent harm. Time and again, politicians and the medical profession have revisited the issue but on each occasion the same conclusion has been reached. The contrary view not only has cost implications for the NHS but, more crucially, might have adverse effects on clinical practice, the development of drugs and therapies and patient care throughout the health care system.

Nicola Sturgeon is right to indicate that the recent judgment by Mr Justice Burton in the English High Court is significant, in that it does not concern itself with negligence. It is a long and complex judgment—the summary alone covers 40 densely printed pages. Members who are interested will want to read it for themselves—it is not for me to give an authoritative summary of the case—but the main point is that the court found in favour of a group of plaintiffs who had contracted hepatitis C through transfused blood. It is worth pointing out that the SNP motion, which refers exclusively to those contaminated by blood products, bypasses everyone in that category.

The case was brought under the Consumer Protection Act 1987, which came into effect in March 1988. Under the terms of the act, the National Blood Authority was judged to have provided a defective product. A judgment in an English court on specific cases within that jurisdiction is not binding on a Scottish court, although any Scottish court, when faced with similar circumstances, would have regard to it.

Cathy Jamieson (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (Lab): Will the minister take an intervention?

Malcolm Chisholm: I am pushed for time, so I will take one if I have time at the end.

The Executive is considering carefully what the implications of the judgment might be for a small number of similar Scottish cases. We are also working jointly with other health departments to consider what the wider implications of the judgment might be for the NHS. The matter, rightly, merits careful consideration. However, it is clear that the ruling deals with different circumstances, different treatments and a different time period from the cases referred to in the motion and in Nicola Sturgeon's speech, and indeed from those that Susan Deacon examined in the report to which I referred.

I recognise that many observers and certainly anyone affected would ask, “Why not just provide compensation for the relatively small number of cases affected?” or perhaps, “Why not give some financial redress to all those who have been made ill by blood transfusions and blood products, or even to all those who have been made ill by other medical treatments and procedures?” That is, in a sense, precisely the point. If that door were opened, how many people—now and in the future—would be affected? How would we judge who, when and how much to pay?

Nicola Sturgeon: The point is that, in the past, there have been well-defined exceptions to the general principle. I refer to the example of the Macfarlane Trust, which compensates those infected with HIV. Will the minister perhaps spend

the rest of his time explaining to the chamber and to people outside the chamber why it is right to compensate those infected with HIV but not those infected with hepatitis C? Most people in Scotland do not understand the distinction.

Malcolm Chisholm: That is the only example from the NHS that Nicola Sturgeon can give, because variant CJD was not related to NHS treatment. It was exceptional, but no political party said that the principle should be changed because of that example. Nicola Sturgeon may remember that, at the time, people felt that HIV was different and that people were going to die very soon. Particular circumstances were involved.

Where negligence is proven, the long-established situation in the NHS is clear cut. Well-established arrangements for compensation and other action exist where negligence has been the cause of harm. However, what about cases in which someone is adversely affected by accident because a doctor could not have known any differently, science did not know, a patient reacted adversely to a routine procedure or, quite simply, because medicine is not a precise science and every day, by necessity, risks are taken to try to save a life or cure an ill? Would we want to create a climate in our health care system that made it risk averse? Would we want to discourage the development of new drugs and therapies because of what they might do? Would we want new treatments to be denied to people because they might involve a risk?

I hope that, even in the short time available, we can reflect on those broader issues while continuing to be sensitive to the real human experiences of those who, understandably, look to us for action.

I move amendment S1M-1865.1, to leave out from "calls" to end and insert:

"notes the Report produced by the Executive in October 2000 on *Hepatitis C and Heat Treatment of Blood Products for Haemophiliacs in the mid 1980s*; further notes the continuing deliberations of the Health and Community Care Committee on this issue and the recent ruling of the English High Court in the case of a number of NHS patients who have been infected with hepatitis C through blood transfusions, and encourages the Executive to examine constructively the implications of this ruling."

09:48

Mary Scanlon (Highlands and Islands) (Con): The Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party welcomes the extensive Health and Community Care Committee inquiry into this issue and the Executive's commitment, in its amendment, to examine constructively the implications of the English ruling. We wish to help and support all those affected by hepatitis C.

An inquiry into hepatitis C contracted from

contaminated blood has been an issue for many years. The ball started rolling in the Parliament when Brian Adam lodged motion S1M-323, which stated:

"That the Parliament calls for an independent inquiry into hepatitis C and other infections of people with haemophilia contracted from contaminated blood products in Scotland."

This is a cross-party issue: the first five signatories were Hugh Henry, Margaret Jamieson, Ian Jenkins, John Swinney and me. Support has since extended to include more than 70 members. I hope that, despite the fact that the debate is in SNP time, the issue will not become party political. We are examining it thoroughly and in a professional manner.

The Minister for Health and Community Care carried out a fact-finding exercise. One would have thought that the facts would have been taken from the Haemophilia Society representatives who had contracted hepatitis C from contaminated blood. On 14 September 1999, the Minister for Health and Community Care promised to hold a meeting with the Haemophilia Society. To date she has refused to meet its representatives, either before her report was published or to discuss its findings. There is no doubt that that approach has led to anger and frustration, has contributed to the need for the current debate and has resulted in the Health and Community Care Committee's approach and inquiry. It took around six letters from the Health and Community Care Committee to the minister, asking for a response on hepatitis C, before the committee got a reply.

The Health and Community Care Committee is currently taking evidence from the Scottish National Blood Transfusion Service and the Haemophilia Society. We took evidence before Easter and we have arranged to question the minister on 23 May. The Haemophilia Society is preparing further submissions to the committee and suggests that we take further evidence. The issue is therefore live and kicking. We are in the middle of an extensive inquiry. I hope that we will not be jumped into any conclusions today, given that we have not heard the full extent of the submissions from the Haemophilia Society and from others.

Because the ministerial inquiry was conducted, according to the Haemophilia Society, "behind closed doors", we have a responsibility to ensure that people have a say and can speak about their exposure to contaminated blood products. A member of the Haemophilia Society has said that the society is pleased with the conduct, manner and extent of the Health and Community Care Committee's inquiry, and stated categorically that the Haemophilia Society did not request that the SNP raise the matter in advance of the committee's conclusions. I ask all my colleagues

on the Health and Community Care Committee to be aware that today's debate was not arranged at the instigation of the Haemophilia Society.

The English judgment was based on the Consumer Protection Act 1987. We should realise that most of the people whom we have seen during our inquiry contracted hepatitis C before that act came into force. We should also be mindful of the fact that it was the judiciary, rather than the Parliament, that awarded compensation in England. Nonetheless, given that the Department of Health is not to appeal the decision, there is no doubt that the Scottish Executive should, as Mr Chisholm's amendment says,

"examine constructively the implications of this ruling."

The Health and Community Care Committee is not only examining the petition from the Haemophilia Society; we are also responding to the petition from Thomas McKissock, which relates to infection with hepatitis C through routine surgery, although Susan Deacon did not extend her inquiry to cover that group of sufferers. I agree that we are talking about a principle rather than a figure. There are 317 people in Scotland who have been infected with hepatitis C through treatment for haemophilia. Nicola Sturgeon says that she is keeping the issue wide open, and the issue is open.

The Macfarlane Trust, set up by John Major in 1990 to give financial help to people in the haemophiliac community, was established to help those who incur extra living costs arising from HIV or AIDS contracted as a result of having received contaminated blood. In 1990, we did not know as much about hepatitis C as we know today, and it is perfectly understandable that we should now re-examine the issue. I understand that the Health and Community Care Committee can recommend the setting up of a fund along the lines of the Macfarlane Trust. We cannot make that decision today—in the middle of an inquiry—but I am sure of a fair and reasonable outcome at the end of the process and I have no doubt that the committee will take account of the English court ruling.

09:54

Mrs Margaret Smith (Edinburgh West) (LD):

As other members have said, contracting hepatitis C through blood transfusions or contaminated blood products is a human tragedy. It is also a complex issue to tackle in a short debate. Nevertheless, it is useful for us to have a debate, because the issue has united people across all parties in the Parliament.

As Mary Scanlon said, the issue is live and kicking, because the Health and Community Care Committee is continuing to take evidence on the matter. We heard from the minister last year and

we have taken evidence from the Haemophilia Society and the Scottish National Blood Transfusion Service. We are due to hear evidence from the minister again at the end of May.

Malcolm Chisholm described this as, first and foremost, a human issue and that is indeed what the debate is about. However, it is important not to lose sight of the fact that, beyond the compensation mentioned in today's motion, we must also try to provide the best possible care and treatment, through the health service, for people who suffer from hepatitis C.

The Health and Community Care Committee inquiry has ranged somewhat more widely than compensation and the remit of the Executive's internal report, which simply considered heat treatment and information for patients. In his opening remarks, Malcolm Chisholm said that the report had been welcomed in some clinical quarters. It is worth mentioning that it has also been condemned by the Haemophilia Society, particularly the second part of the report's remit, which covered the relationship between doctors and patients and the information that patients were given about the disease. We will probably want to revisit that and do further work on it.

The committee has also considered screening, which was not within the remit of the Executive's internal report. We asked whether blood could and should have been screened for hepatitis C, which was known as non-A, non-B hepatitis until 1989. We have examined some Scottish National Blood Transfusion Service documents and have questioned representatives from the service on the range of reasons why screening might not have been done.

We are looking at the issue in a wide-ranging way, but that does not take away from the opportunity that we have today to highlight the ongoing impact of the condition on sufferers and their families. Hepatitis C can cause symptoms from fatigue and stress to liver failure and, in some cases, liver cancer. Set against that, there are anxieties about the social factors. There is a small risk—but a risk nevertheless—of transmission to other family members, through sexual activity with a husband, wife or partner, or through blood-to-blood incidents. People even worry about whether they should have children. Sufferers' right to have a family is being put at risk because of concerns. The disease also has a stigma attached to it and is associated, through ignorance, with drug misuse. Sufferers may be unable to hold down a job because of their medical condition and cannot get insurance or a mortgage to provide for their families.

Those are the human issues that Malcolm Chisholm mentioned, and those are the things that we must take on board when the Parliament and

the Executive deal with the issue. We must look at the situation with compassion. I welcome the Executive amendment for one word, if for nothing else. That word is “constructively”. Behind that word, we must put compassion, justice and dignity for people who have suffered through no fault of their own—they have been infected simply because of a mistake; somebody’s mistake, somehow. In a sense, it is even irrelevant whether it is the health service’s fault. We must deal with the consequences of the events, because the people who suffer from hepatitis C have no alternative but to deal day to day with the consequences of what has happened to them, irrespective of who might be to blame.

We must consider the need for a national strategy for care and treatment which, as we have heard, is patchy at the moment. There are issues surrounding the availability of combination therapies across the country and there are many things in last October’s Scottish needs assessment programme report that must be taken forward. Other countries have looked at the matter in different ways. The issue affects not only this country.

The SNP motion addresses compensation. There are still a number of unanswered questions about the number of sufferers, how one would go about determining eligibility and what the overall and continuing cost would be. A range of options could be examined, from hardship funds to on-going payments. We must ask ourselves about the realistic possibility of success for any legal challenge in the Scottish courts and whether we want to force people to seek justice simply through the courts system, rather than through the Parliament.

The Liberal Democrats want a constructive response from the minister on the case for compensation or hardship payments. The issue is less about negligence and more about justice; it is about allowing people who have suffered as a result of NHS treatment to live with dignity. I do not understand why there should be a difference between how we treat somebody who has contracted HIV/AIDS from blood treatment and how we treat somebody—perhaps even the same person—who has contracted hepatitis C.

The Health and Community Care Committee is trying to give the situation the time that it requires. We want to examine it constructively, on a cross-party basis, and in a reasonable fashion.

The Executive amendment keeps the door open and means that we are, in the wake of an English judgment under consumer protection legislation, considering the issue again. On behalf of the Liberal Democrats and as convener of the Health and Community Care Committee, I welcome that.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We have two short debates this morning, further truncated by a foot-and-mouth statement at 12.15 pm. I regret that it will therefore not be possible to call more than three of the many members who have asked to speak in this debate. We must move on to winding-up speeches by 12 minutes past 10.

10:00

Brian Adam (North-East Scotland) (SNP): We heard from Margaret Smith about the social and health aspects of how haemophiliacs are affected and about the stigma.

I will concentrate on the most positive aspect of the Executive’s response: its willingness to consider a constructive examination of how we might make progress. I would like to hear, from the minister, exactly how the constructive examination will be conducted and whether it will consider the same group of patients that was considered in the English court or the wider group. Mr Chisholm mentioned a small number, but I am not sure whether he regards 317 as a small number or whether he means a different small number. I hope that we will hear about that when the minister winds up.

I do not think that the SNP was suggesting in any way—Nicola Sturgeon certainly was not—that negligence was involved. She said that she had no evidence to support that. I thought that Malcolm Chisholm’s remark was unfortunate, given that we are attempting to deal with the issue in a non-party political way.

Mary Scanlon was correct to say that the SNP was not asked by any organisation to arrange today’s debate. The debate was provoked by the English judgment and the minister’s response to my question on 5 April, which appeared to close the door.

In the minister’s winding-up speech, I would be delighted to hear an explanation—if one can be given—of the distinction between today’s amendment and the answer that was given on 5 April to the question of whether a review would take place.

The background to the matter is what patients and doctors knew and the choices that were available. Perhaps informed consent was not as well developed in the 1980s as it is today. Undoubtedly a group of patients was given treatment with blood, and/or blood products, with a percentage chance of an improved outcome, but a choice was involved. Some of the patients would not have exercised that choice had they known the risk.

I do not think that having to prove negligence is a good idea; we must grapple with, and come to a

positive conclusion on, the idea of no-fault compensation. The last thing that we want to do is to tie up large amounts of time and effort in the NHS on dealing with cases to prove or disprove negligence. No-fault compensation is the avenue to go down in some circumstances.

There is no clear acceptance of the distinction that is being drawn by the Executive and the Government south of the border, the result of which is that those who have been infected with hepatitis C are being treated differently from those who have been infected with HIV through transfusion or blood products. If the distinction is one of the extent to which there is disability as a consequence, that could be reflected in the level of compensation or financial assistance.

I am not too sure what the minister meant when he talked about this being about a different time period. As he said, I do not think that we are dealing with the matter only on a legal basis. We are certainly dealing with it not on a party political basis, but on a human basis. The minister advanced that argument and I do not think that a reasonable distinction can be drawn between those who were infected pre-1988 and those who were infected post-1988.

As far as I am aware, the challenge in the English courts was based on a legal technicality in consumer law, because that technicality was available. I do not think that we should pursue the matter only on legal grounds; it should be pursued on the basis of justice.

10:05

Dr Richard Simpson (Ochil) (Lab): When today's debate was announced, I began by feeling that it was very unwelcome at this time; that point was discussed extensively in the Health and Community Care Committee yesterday. I continued to feel that up to the point at which Nicola Sturgeon called for a public inquiry, because—in my view—that would be an expensive waste of money, just as, in Nicola Sturgeon's view, clearly it would not be.

I feel strongly that after an inquiry has taken place, which has disclosed all the facts, there is no reason to have a further public inquiry.

Shona Robison (North-East Scotland) (SNP): Richard Simpson started by alluding to the fact that the SNP was circumventing the Health and Community Care Committee's inquiry, but he has gone on to rule out the committee deciding in favour of a public inquiry. Is not that a contradiction in terms and a bit hypocritical?

Dr Simpson: I do not think so, because I have expressed that view in the committee. What the committee's report says and whether it is

unanimous are matters for consideration. I would not be talking about the issue today if the SNP had not raised the matter for debate.

As I said, up to that point in Nicola Sturgeon's speech I heard exactly what I had expected. However, since then members have all indicated that this is a serious human issue, which the chamber must address. The Executive's amendment is also very much to be welcomed.

Keith Raffan has consistently reminded the chamber that hepatitis C is a ticking time bomb: 10,000 Scots are known to be infected, but the figure is probably nearer 30,000. This is a broad issue; it is not only about those who were infected in a particular way at a particular time, or about whether there may be legal considerations. What is most important is the NHS plan, which clearly states the Executive's intention to provide support for hepatitis C sufferers during screening, diagnosis and treatment. If we are to make progress, we must flesh that out and ensure that everyone who suffers from hepatitis C is given the support that they require.

Of course, there are alternatives. Specific support for those who were infected inadvertently through blood transfusion is an interesting option. I have serious concerns about the effect of the ruling and the application of the Consumer Protection Act 1987 in that way. I have not yet read the full report, but I have read the summary. If the act is designed to ensure that best practice, producing the best product, is available quickly across Europe, no matter where the investment in that product has been effected, I think that it is a good law. However, if its effect is that any risk will have to be compensated, it will make the NHS incredibly risk averse.

Doctors—indeed members of all health professions—already practise increasingly defensive medicine. Good governance is vital, as are open and transparent results. Informed patients are vital. Brian Adam's point is well made; informed consent is dealt with in a much better way than it was previously. I am surprised that the court judgment is not being appealed against—not on the human issue, but on the legal issue—and I caution that it will have a serious effect on the NHS. Health professionals will begin to practise a degree of risk aversion that will seriously damage patients.

I ask members to think what doctors would have done in the mid-1980s—knowing that non-A, non-B existed, but not knowing exactly what it was or whether it could be, or was being, treated—had they known that substantial compensation would have been paid as a result of using a particular blood product. I suspect that they would have seriously considered not applying such life-saving products.

10:10

Ms Margo MacDonald (Lothians) (SNP): I will pick up from where Richard Simpson left off. I am surprised at his conservatism in this matter; although I do not ignore his arguments about the possibility of transatlantic attitudes entering the practice of medicine in this country, I think that it is part of this chamber's function to set the parameters not just for good practice, but for the morality and humanity that permeates our health service. It seems mean-spirited of the Executive to deny compensation to people who have been injured through no fault of their own. Although I understand the legal arguments that advise caution, we are not debating the legality of the situation, but protecting the people who have been harmed. The arguments against compensation do not hold water and I am glad that the Labour party whip seems to agree with me.

Mr Andy Kerr (East Kilbride) (Lab): Will the member give way?

Ms MacDonald: I might return to the member after I make the following important point.

I welcome today's debate not only for the people who have been affected by the faulty blood products that were used in their transfusions; as Keith Raffan would say more eloquently if he were here, the situation is a ticking time bomb.

I cannot explain just how deeply I feel about this matter. The right noises have been made about providing money and a scheme of treatment for sufferers, but no one understands how many people are involved. At a seminar yesterday, Dr Toby Delahook from the University of Edinburgh's infectious diseases research unit explained that 1,200 people with the virus had been picked up in Edinburgh alone. As yet there is no screening, because we have not worked out how to implement a screening programme that would not make life impossible for the people who have the virus, which incubates for 10 to 15 years. People can get on with their lives without knowing that they have the disease, so it comes as an absolute bombshell to realise that they probably have inoperable liver damage. This is not the time or place to go into details; however, it is the time to acknowledge that hepatitis C is as much a priority as HIV was. As a result, I ask the minister to tell us in his summing-up what happened to the promised helpline for hepatitis C sufferers. As someone who managed the national AIDS helpline, I know the absolutely crucial part it played in supporting sufferers and ensuring that the pool of transmission was contained. Such containment should be part of any hepatitis C strategy.

As the two ministers with responsibility for health are local Edinburgh representatives, will they urgently consider using some of the money for

drug action teams to ensure that Capital C—the support and counselling service for hepatitis C sufferers in Edinburgh—does not go out of existence because of lack of funding? It is a well-grounded and well-established service that desperately needs funding and, as far as I am aware, the money that was allocated to the drug action teams to combat the drug-related effects of infection has not all been spent.

I apologise for being a bit garbled, but I had a number of specific points to raise, and I hope that the minister will be able to answer them.

10:14

Nora Radcliffe (Gordon) (LD): Nicola Sturgeon and other members have outlined the devastating consequences for people who have contracted hepatitis C. Nicola Sturgeon and Richard Simpson commented on whether there should be a public inquiry, which is something that the Health and Community Care Committee will consider. Nicola Sturgeon also highlighted the precedents that had been set by the provisions that were made for CJD sufferers and by the establishment of the Macfarlane Trust for HIV sufferers; she also pointed out that the English court ruling is not directly transferable. Such a transfer would simply create new divisions. In that light, although the issue forms part of the debate, it is not particularly helpful.

The minister majored on the general principle that compensation should not be paid where negligence could not be proved and touched on the possible consequences of departing from that principle. Richard Simpson also highlighted the implications of what he called "defensive medicine".

Margaret Smith pointed out that, although we are talking about compensation, we need to focus on providing the best on-going treatment for sufferers of hepatitis C. As she said, one of the outstanding issues from the SNBTS report is the relationship between the doctor and patient. Furthermore, as Richard Simpson and Margo MacDonald mentioned, hepatitis C is a much wider problem and needs to become a priority issue; the sufferers are not limited to the small number of haemophiliacs who have been infected with blood products.

As this is a brief debate, we can only highlight the issues. The committee system is one of the strengths of the Scottish Parliament and the Health and Community Care Committee's in-depth examination of the matter will make a valuable contribution. Although this has been a useful, though brief, debate, we should proceed on the basis of the Health and Community Care Committee's reasoned recommendations, whenever they come.

10:16

Ben Wallace (North-East Scotland) (Con):

First, I recognise that the debate on hepatitis C is on-going in the Health and Community Care Committee and I hope that the committee's inquiry goes some way towards the independent inquiry that Brian Adam's motion calls for.

However, we must be very careful not to offer an empty pot at the end of the rainbow. There is a perception—which, having spoken to Nicola Sturgeon yesterday, I understand is not necessarily being put out by the SNP—that the new ruling in England means that compensation will be paid out in Scotland, and that a public inquiry might magic up new faults somewhere else. The English judgment was made under the Consumer Protection Act 1987—which was based on a European Union directive that goes back to 1985—and basically found that consumers had the right to expect to receive goods that were not dodgy. The case was brought neither on medical grounds nor on the grounds of fault; in other words, it did not focus on whether the health service knew about the status of the product.

For information, we should briefly examine the chronology of hepatitis C. In 1975, it was first suspected that there was a disease other than hepatitis A or B. In 1988, that disease was called, effectively, non-A, non-B hepatitis, but no one quite knew its exact nature. Not until 1989 was the first test for hepatitis C—the Ortho ELISA test—produced. I have probably pronounced that wrongly; I did not do very well in Latin at school. In April 1991, the first tests were introduced in England and Wales and it was not until a year later that the test was introduced in Scotland. Any fault could have developed only during that year-long gap. That chronology highlights the fact that the health service was doing the best it could.

We should remember that the case was brought not by haemophiliacs, but by people who had been infected through transfusions or organ transplants. The SNP motion completely cuts out the latter category of sufferers.

I have dealt with the question of holding a public inquiry. I am content that the cross-party Health and Community Care Committee's inquiry goes some way towards that aim and I hope that the minister will abide by its recommendations.

The crux of the SNP's case seems to come from the moral argument presented by the Macfarlane Trust, which was set up by the Tory Government in 1990. Although Mary Scanlon mentioned the trust's remit, I will briefly repeat it. The trust was set up

"to provide financial help to people in the haemophilia community—parents, spouses, children ... who incur extra costs of living arising from HIV and AIDS".

However, HIV is different from hep C; it is much more likely to be fatal when it develops into AIDS.

Ms MacDonald: Will Ben Wallace give way?

Ben Wallace: No, I am sorry. I do not have time.

I do not know the reasons for John Major's Government setting up the Macfarlane Trust, but I wonder whether such a trust would be set up now. We did not know as much about HIV then as we do now. Now that we know more about hepatitis C, do we have a moral incentive to establish a similar trust? What matters to us is that those people who develop hepatitis C are given the appropriate support and treatment. That support need not be financial; it could be appropriate medical support.

What really counts—and what interests me most, although I intend no disservice to those who are already infected—is the ticking time bomb that is hepatitis C. I demand to know what the Government intends to do to deal with that future problem, which we must face today.

10:21

Malcolm Chisholm: This has been a complex debate, dealing with matters of great importance. Margaret Smith and Richard Simpson made the point well that it is the care and treatment of people who have hepatitis C that is crucial now. We cannot change the events of the past, but we can change the future.

Various members have mentioned the many initiatives for people who have hepatitis C. Margaret Smith referred to combination therapy, which is becoming more widely available. That should continue. Reference was also made to the SNAP report, which contains many excellent recommendations and which I praised during the members' business debate on hepatitis C a few weeks ago. Margo MacDonald referred to information and prevention, and the Executive has allocated £7 million for the prevention of blood-borne viruses. Over and above that, £12 million has been granted to fund a recombinant clotting factor, which will soon become available to all haemophiliacs, although there are temporary supply difficulties.

Mary Scanlon referred to the Haemophilia Society, in which context I have two points to make. First, Susan Deacon met the Haemophilia Society before the report was written. Secondly, written evidence was taken both from individual patients and the society. However, as Mary Scanlon also reminded us, this debate does not relate only to people who have haemophilia. Cathy Jamieson would like to make that point, so I will give way to her.

Cathy Jamieson: Mary Scanlon referred to my

constituent, Mr Thomas McKissock, who I have supported in bringing a petition to the Parliament. I have been fighting his case for almost two years.

I recognise, from the wording of the amendment, that the Executive has moved some way towards keeping the door open. However, I seek an assurance that Mr McKissock's case and cases like it—he was infected when he received a blood transfusion during routine surgery in 1989—will be considered and that some form of compensation for those people will not be ruled out in light of the ruling in the case south of the border, which I understand is not to be appealed. I recognise the complexities of Mr McKissock's case and acknowledge that it might not have been negligence that caused him to receive that infected product during a blood transfusion, but it was not his fault. He went into hospital to receive what he thought was a life-saving treatment, not one that turned out to be life threatening.

Malcolm Chisholm: Cathy Jamieson makes an extremely important point. The debate is not just about those who have haemophilia, nor just about blood products, although that is what the SNP motion refers to. Clearly, it is about people who have received blood transfusions and—as Mary Scanlon reminded us—people who have contracted hepatitis C by other means, such as surgery. Beyond that, it is about many other medical conditions.

The crucial question that we must ask is how we are to exercise judgment concerning who deserves compensation and who does not. That question and the wider issues that have arisen today have important implications.

Nicola Sturgeon: Malcolm Chisholm has hit the nail squarely on the head. The issue is the judgment regarding who deserves compensation and who does not. No one is suggesting that the general principle of no-fault compensation should be rejected; the question is what well-defined exceptions to that principle would be justified. We have made an exception for HIV sufferers, but people in the same circumstances who contracted hepatitis C are being denied compensation. How can the Executive justify its judgment in saying yes to HIV sufferers but no to hepatitis C sufferers? That is the nub of the issue.

Malcolm Chisholm: Nicola Sturgeon can refer to only one decision, which was clearly exceptional—that is why she always refers to it—whereas I am talking about the general principle and the way in which distinctions will be made.

Nicola Sturgeon: I can give Malcolm Chisholm another example.

Malcolm Chisholm: No, I do not have time. I have only half a minute left.

Richard Simpson made the important point, which I too made in my opening speech, that we must reflect on the consequences for the NHS of awarding compensation. The result of what is being suggested may be to make the NHS incredibly risk averse; as I said, that may have adverse effects on clinical practice and patient care. What might seem the fair, reasonable and sensitive human response to the individual could—when it is analysed fully—prove deeply damaging to a far wider range of people in the long run. Members should reflect on that fact, even if they do not agree with it on first hearing it.

10:26

Shona Robison (North-East Scotland) (SNP): I am pleased that so many members have welcomed the opportunity to debate this issue. Mary Scanlon was correct to say that the Haemophilia Society did not initiate this debate; however, I assure members that the society welcomes it. In an e-mail, the society urged members to attend the debate on behalf of the 400 Scottish people with haemophilia who were infected with hepatitis C as part of their NHS treatment and expressed the hope that members would show their support. I am happy that so many members have done that. The Executive amendment signifies some movement on the issue, although members must have had difficulty picking that up from Malcolm Chisholm's opening speech, which was disappointing in its tone. I shall return to that in a couple of minutes.

The debate has provided an important opportunity for the Deputy Minister for Health and Community Care to do the right thing and provide some hope for the 300 or so Scottish people with haemophilia who suffer from hepatitis C. All that we ask today is that the Executive review its decision. It is important for the morale of those who are affected that the debate is kept open and the door is not closed on the possibility of no-fault compensation, as appeared to be the case in the Minister for Health and Community Care's written answer on 5 April to Brian Adam's parliamentary question.

Mary Scanlon: Will Shona Robison give way?

Shona Robison: I will, although Mary Scanlon did not give way to me.

Mary Scanlon: When Shona Robison talks about compensation, is she talking about the 317 people in Scotland who are haemophiliacs and who contracted hepatitis C through contaminated blood, or is she including all those who were infected during routine NHS surgery and the thousands of people in Scotland who contracted hepatitis C by other means?

Shona Robison: The terms of the SNP motion

are limited to the people who have haemophilia. However, there is a case to be made for considering compensation for other people who are affected. That is one of the complexities of the issue and something that the Health and Community Care Committee will have to consider.

Malcolm Chisholm: Will Shona Robison give way?

Shona Robison: I shall move on and develop my argument.

Although the recent ruling in England has no direct bearing on what happens in Scotland, it places a moral obligation on us to consider no-fault compensation. The precedent has been set by the Macfarlane Trust, which was established under the Tory Government in 1988 to provide financial assistance of some £10 million to those who were infected with HIV through contaminated blood products. When that trust was established, the NHS did not disintegrate in the way that the minister implied would happen if the same support was given to people who have contracted hepatitis C. The world did not stop with the establishment of the Macfarlane Trust.

The Haemophilia Society has recommended a similar model for those with hepatitis C. We have heard no logical argument to support a situation in which someone who contracted HIV through contaminated blood products receives financial assistance, while someone who contracted hepatitis C through possibly the same contaminated blood products receives no financial assistance. That situation is patently inconsistent and unfair and the minister has provided no logical argument to support its continuation.

A precedent has been set for departing from the principle of no non-fault compensation in well-defined circumstances. I hope that the minister will not continue to indulge in scaremongering about the impact of such a limited departure from the principle. Is he suggesting that providing financial assistance to a small group of people would somehow lead to the collapse of the NHS as we know it? His words are a smokescreen and do little to develop the argument. Talking about the floodgates opening to thousands of people is scaremongering and detracts from the central issue, which concerns consistency, fairness and equity.

Financial assistance is important for people with hepatitis C, which is an infection that causes great anguish, ill health and hardship. Financial assistance would not remove hepatitis C or its devastating effects but it would improve dramatically the quality of life of those affected. This debate is about the human cost of hepatitis C. There are many valid but unanswered questions beyond what we are discussing today,

which the Health and Community Care Committee will consider. The petitioners raised issues about whether Scottish patients were exposed to risks for longer than they should have been, given the extent of knowledge at the time, and about why Scottish blood products were not made safe from hepatitis C until two years after their English equivalents. All those questions must be answered.

I do not know whether those answers should be supplied by a public inquiry, but I do know that the limited internal inquiry did not answer the questions to the satisfaction of those people who have given evidence to the Health and Community Care Committee. As many members have said, that issue will continue to be raised and answers to those important questions will continue to be sought. However, those matters are not for this morning's debate.

I give a cautious welcome to the Executive's amendment. I hope that the intention behind the amendment is to give a clear signal that the Executive is prepared to reconsider the issue and to provide some hope to the more than 300 people in Scotland who suffer from haemophilia and have contracted hepatitis C. This is not a party political issue; MSPs throughout the chamber have expressed support for giving financial assistance to people who contracted hepatitis C through being treated with contaminated blood or blood products by the NHS. This is about justice and fairness. Today, by supporting the motion, we can put right the wrong that has been done.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I have a word of guidance for members, which results from the debate. In a tight debate, during which a member is unlikely to be called but has a matter of specific constituency interest to raise, a note to that effect to the Presiding Officer or the Deputy Presiding Officer will normally result in the member being squeezed in for a minute in order to get the matter recorded in the *Official Report*.

Fuel Crisis

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Mr George Reid): The next item of business is an SNP debate on motion S1M-1866, in the name of Kenny MacAskill, on the fuel crisis. There is one amendment to the motion.

10:34

Mr Kenny MacAskill (Lothians) (SNP): Fuel duty has been debated several times in the chamber. Only last autumn, we had two debates on the matter in a relatively short period. Considerable heat and discourse was generated during those debates. The Minister for Justice referred to mob rule when describing peaceful protests, a statement for which he has yet to apologise. That door is still open to him and I hope that he will take it, as those protests have continued—albeit at a lower tempo—and they have remained lawful and well-behaved.

Fuel was the issue of the autumn, as the price rocketed and the pain was felt by businesses and individuals alike. If the Government does not want fuel to become the issue of the summer, it must act, for the problems that were evident last autumn are back with us today.

The Chancellor of the Exchequer's amelioration of the issue in November has proved to be insufficient and short term. Although that amelioration was welcome, it was belated and inadequate and it has not prevented the problem from surfacing again. The price of petrol has again reached the levels that provoked the crisis last autumn. Moreover, there are parts of rural Scotland where the point at which a litre of petrol will cost £1 is not far in the distance, but around the corner. That is an unacceptable price to pay for an essential commodity.

Let us consider once again the reasons why we have the problem and the difficulties that it creates. Last year, I mentioned the significant problems suffered by the fishing, farming and road haulage industries. That was when foot-and-mouth disease was in the past, not the present. Farming and road haulage are now being crucified by the foot-and-mouth crisis. The farmers have secured a compensation package, but the haulage industry cannot and must not be overlooked. Only a foolish Government would forget an industry that was in the vanguard of previous protests and finds itself now in even more straitened circumstances. That industry, which carried out its protests with dignity and decorum, deserves not abuse from ministers, but assistance from the Scottish Executive. The situation is worse now than it was then. That assistance must relate not only to the foot-and-

mouth crisis but, more important, to the underlying problem of high fuel costs.

The fishing industry was in difficulties last autumn as well, even before the tie-up crisis and its crucifixion, not by an epidemic, but by the inaction of the Executive. Notwithstanding rebated fuel, fuel costs are a factor for that industry in terms both of uncompetitiveness with foreign fleets and distribution costs on shore.

Tourism was mentioned in the previous debates. The high value of the pound and the high cost of fuel made Scotland a high-cost destination for a vacation. That also pre-dated the foot-and-mouth crisis and the scores of cancellations that have afflicted guest houses and hotels across the country. Some of Scotland is closed for business by necessary restrictions to combat foot-and-mouth disease, but much of the country is closed by lack of business.

The First Minister, the Minister for Enterprise and Lifelong Learning and their colleagues may have travelled to Washington to proclaim that Scotland is open for business, but the problem remains that it is open for business at a price. As I said, the cost of fuel in the rural parts of the country is heading towards £1 a litre. One can almost fly the Atlantic for less money than it costs to drive up and down the A9. What an absurd situation to find ourselves in at the start of the 21st century. Rural Scotland finds itself crushed by the hammer of foot-and-mouth disease upon the anvil of high fuel costs.

While we support the action that the Executive is taking to combat foot-and-mouth disease, action must also be taken on fuel costs. Why? Because before foot-and-mouth there was a crisis; during foot-and-mouth there is a crisis; and after foot-and-mouth there will still be a crisis. The foot-and-mouth disease crisis may have subsumed that of fuel for the moment, but, when it has passed, the fuel crisis will remain. It may now be obscured, but it has not gone away.

What has been done and what should be done? The London Government claimed that it was listening. Tony Blair said:

"Of course we will listen ... we will carry on listening, we meet regularly with representatives of hauliers and farmers and will continue to do so."

Not only had the Chancellor of the Exchequer listened, he said that he understood the genuine concerns that motorists and hauliers have and that he would do more to meet people's concerns. Given that we have a listening Prime Minister and an understanding Chancellor of the Exchequer, why are fuel costs once again rising to the crisis levels of last September? That is the situation that we are in. What goes around comes around.

Mr Andy Kerr (East Kilbride) (Lab): Does Mr MacAskill agree with the Enterprise and Lifelong Learning Committee's report, which discusses the Chancellor of the Exchequer's recent budget and says that

"All of these developments have had a significant impact on the issue and indeed on the Committee's thinking"?

Mr MacAskill: As I was about to say, those developments are de minimis. The listening Prime Minister and the understanding Chancellor of the Exchequer may have thought that their de minimis actions would suffice, but they have been shown to be only a short-term fix for a long-term problem.

The threat of a windfall tax to deliver the roll-out of ultra-low sulphur petrol and diesel might have put a different type of petrol in the tanks, but it has not put a different price on the pumps. The price at the pump is the problem, and is primarily driven by tax. Fuel prices are going up, and further rises are anticipated. Urgent action is therefore necessary. On 6 April, Richard Freeman of the Automobile Association stated:

"The petrol price is inexorably heading to the point where it will wipe out the benefits of the budget ... We want the Government to introduce a de-escalator to get prices to come down to an acceptable level compared with the rest of Europe."

High costs are coming back, and with a vengeance. Action must be taken, or we fear that there will be a return to the demonstrations and the furore experienced but six months ago. Moreover, and more important, the economic and social effects will be catastrophic for Scotland. Why does the largest oil producer in the European Union have the highest fuel costs in the developed world? The reason is the level of taxation imposed by the present Government—and indeed by previous Governments of a different political complexion. It cannot and will not be forgotten that the Tories invented the fuel duty escalator. Fuel was an easy hit; the petrol pump a cash cow. People complained, but the money rolled in.

The Government tried to cover its stealth taxation in an environmental wrapping. However, as was made quite clear by the Government last year, the purpose of the high tax was not to meet Kyoto commitments, but to raise cash. According to the AA, about 79 per cent of the cost of a gallon of petrol is tax. No other essential commodity is hit by such punitive taxation.

And what of the Chancellor of the Exchequer's loudly hailed reduction in fuel duty? It is welcome, but it cannot be considered without bearing it in mind that the self-same chancellor, in four previous budgets, announced an increase. Tax on petrol is now 10p per litre higher than when he first took office. Even after last month's proudly trumpeted reduction, that is a tax increase of 27 per cent and a price increase of more than twice

the rate of inflation.

That is a tax too far, and the tax must come down. That is why we are calling for an immediate cut of 10p per gallon. That cut has been costed, and we have outlined how it will be paid for. It appears to us better to apply the maxim:

"From each according to their abilities, to each according to their needs."

The motor car, for many, is not a luxury, but an essential. The cost of fuel is disproportionately high in rural Scotland, where there is no affordable or accessible public transport alternative.

Mr Mike Rumbles (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (LD): The Scottish National Party raised the topic on Tuesday of this week where it should have—in Westminster. Half the SNP MPs were not there, on the pretext that they should be here, to discuss the matter in this Parliament. I notice that there is only one SNP MP in the chamber at the moment—now two, as Mr Swinney has just come in. That is a third of the SNP's Westminster parliamentary party. Is that not rather hypocritical?

Mr MacAskill: The proof of the pudding is in the eating. The proof in politics is how members vote. The SNP representatives at Westminster moved an amendment to reduce the cost of fuel and Mr Rumbles's people did not support it. That is what will come back to haunt the Liberal Democrats in future elections.

As I was about to say, is not it right that a small minority who can pay, should pay, so that the vast majority who can ill afford to pay can be afforded some relief?

Others in the SNP will doubtless speak further on the matter, but I will say that we in the SNP appreciate that, while the cost of fuel must come down, public services still require to be paid for. It is for that reason that we have specified how that cost reduction can be achieved. We realise that the cost of further cuts will also require to be met and paid for. That is why we are calling for a review on taxation. It cannot be right or sensible that almost £1 in £7 raised by the Government comes from the motorist. Our call for a review is not only because fuel is essential, but because it is finite.

At some stage, fuel cell vehicles or something similar will be mass-produced, first in the United States of America, and then elsewhere.

The Deputy Minister for Transport and Planning (Lewis Macdonald): Will Mr MacAskill give way?

Mr MacAskill: Not at the moment. Fuel use by vehicles will decrease. What do we do then? Do we massively increase income tax or VAT? Do we

cut services and public expenditure? If such a situation is to be avoided, steps must be taken now to review and reconsider how the tax burden is imposed and collected. This is not just a short-term fix, but a long-term change of direction.

Aside from the philosophy of it, what about the mechanism? The Parliament is currently prohibited from prescribing the remedy. However, we can recognise the gravity of the situation and address the chancellor with one voice.

The price of fuel affects our economic competitiveness. Given that we are a nation that is geographically distant from its markets and heavily reliant on its exports, distribution costs are a significant factor. Rising costs mean diminishing profits and uncompetitiveness, and, all too often, closure and redundancies. As a nation, we cannot price ourselves out of the market and the Government cannot price the nation out of economic existence by stealth taxation.

As has been said, particular industries are seriously affected by the high price of fuel. We have previously called for specific measures for fishing, farming and road haulage. We stand by those calls. The need is greater now than ever, and even before this crisis there was a *cri de cœur* from industries.

Tourism has been much in the news lately. The problems have meant not much good news for the Executive, and often not much good news for the industry. The number of visitors is down, and the foot-and-mouth disease epidemic has resulted in a situation in which, notwithstanding the belated advertising, what is open and what is shut remains a mystery. Even without the epidemic, Scottish tourism was facing yet another fallow year. There is a famine of visitors for all too many people working in the industry, but while foot-and-mouth could not have been foreseen, another bad year was clearly foreseeable.

I do not wish to underestimate the crisis that has been caused by foot-and-mouth, but the outbreak should not be used as an excuse to ignore the underlying problems that are caused by the high value of the pound, and, in the north of Scotland, by high fuel costs. The British Government is pricing Scottish tourism out of existence. We live in an age when international transportation is easier than ever before. The opportunity to visit new and exotic destinations is not only available, but affordable. Scotland cannot wish that opportunity away and Scottish tourism has to compete in a global environment. However, if it is to compete, it must do so without the ball and chain of the world's highest fuel costs around its feet.

I welcome the steps that the Executive has taken to allay the fears of potential American

visitors. Let us be clear, however: the principal market for Scotland is here and south of the border. If it is cheaper for somebody from the south of Scotland or from the metropolitan boroughs of England to holiday on the Algarve, no wonder hotels here are shutting, not just for the season, but for ever.

Last week, the SNP called for a fuel duty rebate to be extended to coach tours. We understand that that is being considered. We hope that that will be dealt with as a matter of urgency. After all, according to a written answer, *visitscotland* estimates that 700,000 people took a coach holiday in 1999. The revenue generated by those individuals amounted to £170 million. However, the Confederation of Passenger Transport UK informs us that the number of people travelling is falling fast, and that cancellations are being made by the score. We must reduce the price of the product. As that applies to coach tours, it also applies to visitors, many of whom come to or tour Scotland by car.

The issue of fuel prices has not gone away. No master stroke was pulled off by the chancellor last year. That modest reduction did not mask the massive tax take. All the chancellor did was buy himself some time. As the world markets cause prices to rise—and it is accepted that market forces have an effect—the effect of last year's price cut is minimised, given that, after all, 79 per cent of the price of fuel goes in tax.

Abusing demonstrators and pillorying oil companies will not mask the root cause of the problem. We do not go cap in hand to London, pleading for handouts. We are no whingeing Jocks. We are the nation that discovered oil, but found itself getting poorer. We are the eighth largest oil producer in the world, yet we find ourselves with the most expensive fuel on the planet. That is economically crippling, and is manifestly wrong.

This should be a message from the Scottish Parliament, on behalf of the Scottish people, recognising the interests of all Scotland. Cut the cost of fuel. Take 10p off the price of a gallon as a prelude to getting towards European price levels. If that is not done, the message to the people of Scotland must be clear: what is the cost of new Labour? It is £4 a gallon. Who stands for a fair deal on fuel? Those who stand for Scotland.

I move,

That the Parliament notes the serious problem caused to industries and individuals in Scotland through high fuel costs; further notes the additional burden that the foot-and-mouth disease crisis has placed on industries and areas vulnerable to high fuel prices; recognises that notwithstanding the changes in the Budget announced by the Chancellor of the Exchequer, fuel costs in Scotland remain the highest in the developed world and are set to

rise further towards £4.00 a gallon; therefore calls on the Chancellor of the Exchequer to reduce immediately fuel taxation by 10 pence per gallon and thereafter to move to a fairer system of taxation and ensure a harmonisation of fuel prices with our European competitors, and calls upon the Scottish Executive and Her Majesty's Government to take action to end the disparity of fuel prices in rural Scotland.

10:50

Miss Annabel Goldie (West of Scotland)

(Con): Although I welcome the opportunity to contribute to the debate—to that extent I am grateful to the SNP for bringing the matter to the Parliament—the terms of the motion are such that I find myself in the surprising position of feeling more bountiful than Mr MacAskill. Mr MacAskill and the SNP are not usually trammelled by budgetary constraints, whereas members of the Conservative party are frequently challenged as being among the most niggardly politicians in the United Kingdom. If that means that we are prudent in looking at the economy, that we are pragmatic in our attempts to apply help where help is needed, and that we make reasonable and manageable savings to achieve that end, I am proud to stand up and advance that cause.

The facts, which may be unpalatable to the Labour party, make chilling reading. In May 1997, the average cost of petrol was 59p a litre, of which 45.7p was tax. Under Labour, that tax has climbed to 61p, which represents an increase of 34 per cent. By any standards, that is a cold and unwelcome message to the motorist. Indeed, Mr Brown must seem to the motorist like a wolf padding round looking for victims. His attitude to the motorist seems to say, "I'll huff and I'll puff and—eventually—I'll blow your house down."

Perversely, if the motorists of Scotland turn for comfort from the threat and rapacious instincts of the wolf to the Scottish National Party, which masquerades as a good fairy, they will be somewhat surprised to find that, instead of Cinderella, they are presented with the two ugly sisters. The help that is offered in Mr MacAskill's motion is surprisingly limited—hence the Conservative amendment.

I will go back to the history of the price of petrol in Scotland over the past four years. There has been a deliberate and wilful attempt—

George Lyon (Argyll and Bute) (LD): Annabel Goldie talks about going back in history. Does she recognise that, when the Conservative Government came to power in 1979, the fuel duty and the VAT charged on that duty was 33p a litre, but that when the Conservatives left power in 1997, duty was 222p a gallon?

Miss Goldie: The first thing to point out to Mr Lyon, for whom numeracy is not a strong suit, is that if one takes a time span of 18 years, one can

expect to see a rise in tax. The depressing factor is that if we take a time span of four years under Labour, we see a dramatic increase in taxation over that short period which transcends anything that was done under the Conservatives—not that I expect Mr Lyon's numeracy to be improved by that elementary instruction.

I return to what the Labour party has done while it has been in power. In his first budget, Gordon Brown pledged not to increase taxes, but promptly increased the fuel duty escalator by 20 per cent. He held another budget in his first year, piling a double whammy of increased fuel taxes on to the motorist. Then, perhaps more devastatingly for those trying to make a living out of haulage, in his third budget, he increased tax on diesel by 12 per cent above inflation.

In manageable housekeeping terms, the average household finds that petrol has overtaken the mortgage and food as the single most expensive item of expenditure in the household budget. Currently, people pay £350 a year more for their petrol than they did in 1997. The difficulty is that either the chancellor is unable to understand what the rapacious effect of those tax increases has been on the motorists or, understanding that, is totally obdurate and reluctant to do anything about it.

Mr Kerr: Will the member give way?

Miss Goldie: I am sorry; I do not have much time.

The cosmetic legerdemain that Mr Brown applied in the budget defied belief by promising a carrot until the election is over and then promptly withdrawing it. It is undoubtedly the case that in our remoter communities, particularly—as Mr MacAskill has said—those that have been affected by the ravages of foot-and-mouth disease, there is a crisis for the motorist and the haulage industry.

Mr Rumbles: Will the member give way?

Miss Goldie: I am sorry; I am pushed for time. Presiding Officer, I am not sure what my time allocation is.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Patricia Ferguson): It is 10 minutes.

Miss Goldie: In that case, I will take Mr Rumbles's intervention.

Mr Rumbles: The amendment calls for a reduction of 3p a litre. During the 18 years of Conservative rule that the United Kingdom suffered, how many times was the fuel tax reduced?

Miss Goldie: I think that Mr Rumbles will find that there was minimal reduction in fuel tax in that period. That is not unexpected, for the simple reason that fuel in Britain was then among the

cheapest in Europe. Britain has now become the country with the second-highest fuel prices. Of course, Mr Rumbles conveniently overlooks the Kyoto agreement, for which all parties have pledged support. That commitment means that there was a need to apply some level of taxation to try to reduce consumption. The Conservatives always acknowledged that the fuel duty escalator would have a cut-off point and were prepared to apply that cut-off point. That is unlike Mr Brown, who, in lupine fashion, pursued his wolfish instincts and continued to ravage the motorist.

Dr Richard Simpson (Ochil) (Lab): Will the member give way?

Miss Goldie: I will make progress with the text of my speech.

Motorists find themselves in an impossible situation. In many places, particularly in remoter areas such as island communities, the car is not a luxury, but a necessity. Motorists find that they are penalised for relying on their motor cars for essential transport. That is unacceptable. Motorists in that beleaguered position must be offered some form of constructive help—certainly something more tangible than has been evident from any quarter of the Treasury.

The Scottish nationalists may masquerade to the people of Scotland as the good fairy, but if one analyses what they seek to do, one will find less comfort than they would like everybody to believe. Mr MacAskill has had to peg his purported help to the Scottish people at 10p per gallon. The motion offers to reduce fuel tax by 10p per gallon, but the motorist would like, and needs, much more than that. The Conservative party is committed to a cut of 3p per litre, which is 13.6p per gallon, because it acknowledges that there are pressing needs that must be addressed and it can see how costed help can be provided to a particularly desperate sector of an overtaxed community.

The reason why the SNP has to peg the help that it offers is the fundamental problem with its finances. The speeches of individual SNP members have been revealing to everyone who has witnessed them in the chamber during this session of Parliament. Almost without exception, those speeches have included uncoded spend commitments. A tally of everything that has been pledged by individual members of the SNP would reach a budgetary level that promises unacceptable expenditure cuts or impossible tax increases.

Mrs Margaret Ewing (Moray) (SNP): Will Annabel Goldie explain to the chamber—and to the Scottish public—the realities of the taxation policy of the Conservative party, which says that it will increase public expenditure at the same time as it cuts taxation?

Miss Goldie: I thank Mrs Ewing for the opportunity to explain that aspect of our policy. The Conservative party has said that there clearly are areas in which public expenditure can be reduced without unacceptable consequences for public activity. It has also said that it is perfectly possible to reduce the level of taxation, which is now regarded by most economic commentators as being unacceptably high, and in so doing stimulate and nourish further growth and increase the revenue that is gathered by the Exchequer.

The SNP does not address this fundamental shortfall: on the basis of recent figures, all the income that Scotland generates is £28.2 billion, but we currently expend £33.1 billion. The Scottish nationalists do not explain anywhere from where they will produce the missing £4.9 billion.

That is the hole in the side of the ship that sinks it. It is perfectly clear that, while the Scottish National Party purports to offer help to the motorist—to whom its motion seeks to give some form of tangible support—the underlying frailty of its economic arguments and calculations defeats that party's aspiration to offer more extensive help. That is why I lodged my amendment.

My amendment seeks to give tangible help to the Scottish motorist, not just by offering a cut in fuel tax, but by making some constructive suggestions as to how real help might be given in the more remote and island communities to motorists who desperately need it.

I move amendment S1M-1866.1, to leave out from "calls on" to end and insert:

"calls upon the Scottish Executive to make representations to the Chancellor of the Exchequer to reduce fuel tax by at least three pence per litre (13.6 pence per gallon) and to investigate a derogation of Vehicle Excise Duty for island registered private cars and the extension of such a derogation to designated remote communities in Scotland, identified on a postcode basis."

11:01

The Minister for Transport and Planning (Sarah Boyack): Today, we have two opportunities to debate the transport issues that affect rural Scotland: this afternoon, the Executive will set out the positive steps we are taking across rural Scotland to address the transport needs of rural communities.

Our agenda is positive. It is the result of hard and persistent effort and we have worked closely with rural communities, making a difference to real people in their daily lives. By contrast, this morning's debate has nothing to do with making a difference to rural Scotland and everything to do with electoral opportunism and political hypocrisy.

SNP members think that if they shout loud enough, no one will notice the hollowness of their

position. Rural Scotland will not be deceived: rural Scotland wants real progress on the ground, not empty gestures.

We recognise the real concerns of many rural communities about high fuel prices and poor public transport services and that Scottish rural motorists travel longer distances, spend a higher share of their income on motoring and have fewer alternative forms of transport. There is also a substantial differential between prices in Scotland's remoter rural areas and elsewhere. Prices in Sutherland, the northern isles and the Western Isles are on average about 7p to 9p a litre higher than prices in the central belt. As MSPs from the Highlands and Islands know too well, the differentials are even higher in many instances.

Those serious issues need to be addressed in a serious manner, not with nationalist scaremongering. The nationalists' antics do a disservice to those they purport to help. That is particularly the case when rural Scotland is suffering from the effects of foot-and-mouth disease.

Mr Duncan Hamilton (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): Will the minister give way?

Sarah Boyack: No thank you; I have just started.

After so much struggle and effort by so many, the situation in Scotland appears to be improving, despite the disappointment of the confirmed cases further east, near Duns in the Borders. Ross Finnie is coming to the chamber to make a statement on that situation shortly.

Against that backdrop, the SNP has lodged a motion that raises the spectre of further large-scale price rises and that casually promises reductions in fuel duty.

What are the facts? Diesel prices have stayed constant, so Scotland's hauliers are paying no more this week than they were last month. We accept that Scotland's haulage industry has a major agenda that needs to be addressed, which is why we are working to implement proposals to improve the situation. As for the cost of petrol, pump prices have risen about 1.5p a litre over the past few weeks.

What are the facts about fuel duty? Our debate should be honest. Fuel duty is a sizeable source of revenue, raising about £23 billion in the past year, which is more than 6 per cent of the total UK tax take. That revenue has not been disappearing into a black hole; it is funding schools, hospitals, local government, environmental protection and transport.

Miss Goldie: Will the minister take an intervention?

Sarah Boyack: Yes.

Miss Goldie: I thank the minister for giving way and I appreciate the candour and clarity of her enthusiasm for the importance of petrol revenue taxes to the Exchequer. If that money is so essential to the Exchequer, will the minister concede that it would be more honest to increase income tax than to punish and pulverise a section of the community?

Sarah Boyack: Annabel Goldie is referring to the SNP's policy and the point that she makes is at the heart of this issue. I will speak about what Gordon Brown has done later in my speech.

Ten pence a gallon off fuel duty makes a great slogan and harmonisation of fuel taxes across Europe is a great piece of rhetoric, but what of the reality? It is interesting that Mr MacAskill did not mention the nationalists' plan to increase by 5p the top rate of income tax on taxable earnings over £100,000—the wealthiest Scots would pay that.

The motion tells us that the SNP's real agenda is tax harmonisation across Europe. What are the nationalists' plans for income tax for the future? We have a right to know that. They are adding new spending commitments as they go. A reduction of 10p a gallon would cost our budget some £65 million a year—that is quite a lot of schools, hospitals and roads—and harmonising tax levels could lose us about £450 million a year.

Mrs Margaret Ewing: Will the minister give way?

Sarah Boyack: No, thank you.

That is an awful lot of schools, hospitals and roads.

Andrew Wilson (Central Scotland) (SNP): Will the minister give way?

Sarah Boyack: No, thank you. I am just about to come on to the nationalists' policies.

This time last year, Kenny MacAskill told us that he was still looking for the best solution to the problem of exorbitant fuel prices in rural areas. He went on to say that European Union rules meant that national taxation had to be applied at a standard rate and that the only apparent scope for alteration was to surcharge motorists in urban areas. There was not much about that in his speech today. This year, he calls for a review, so the nationalists still do not have the answers.

So how are the nationalists going to pay for all this?

Andrew Wilson: Will the minister give way?

Sarah Boyack: I will take a timely intervention from Mr Wilson.

Andrew Wilson: I am grateful to the minister for giving way. Will she let the chamber know whether she thinks it is fairer to raise that money through income tax, which takes account of people's ability to pay, or from fuel tax, which does not? What is the fairest way of taxing people?

Sarah Boyack: We have examined the nationalists' uncoded wish list. Mr Wilson should add up that list to see what the impact would be on income tax. The SNP's motion talks about a marginal reduction in fuel duty and how it would be paid for, but the SNP is talking about a wider review and a total harmonisation of taxes in Europe, which has much bigger implications.

While the nationalists are at it, perhaps they might explain in their summing-up speeches how they will pay for the cost of renationalising the rail network, which would cost around £7 billion at the UK level, taking account of share buy-backs and assumed liabilities. Last week's commitments on the A9 and the A96 by an SNP candidate add another £1 billion. Nationalist candidates from around the country constantly add to the wish list. It is all hot air with an eye on the election.

Mrs Ewing: Will the minister give way?

Sarah Boyack: No, thank you.

By contrast, the Executive is serious about representing in London the interests of Scotland's rural communities. We have an easier time of it with a UK Labour Government that is committed to investing in Scottish services, rather than a Tory Government that would be committed to cutting £16 billion from public services, which are still recovering from the Tories' last time in office.

By working patiently and constructively with the UK Government, we will ensure that a balance is struck between the interests of Scotland's fragile rural communities, the environment and our wider spending policies.

Gordon Brown has listened. There has been a cash freeze for all road fuel duties, an extension from 1,200cc to 1,500cc of the lowest rate of vehicle exercise duty for cars, a cut of 2p in ultra-low sulphur petrol backed up by a temporary 2p cut in standard unleaded petrol until June—

Mr Murray Tosh (South of Scotland) (Con): Will the minister give way?

Sarah Boyack: No, thank you. I am in the middle of a list.

There has been a 3p cut in ultra-low sulphur diesel, abolition of VED for agricultural vehicles and a major reform of lorry VED which will save the UK's hauliers more than £300 million a year.

Mr Tosh: Will the minister take a brief intervention now?

Sarah Boyack: Yes, if it is brief.

Mr Tosh: Since we are hearing about all the great things that Gordon Brown, having listened, has taken action on, can the minister tell us what action he is taking on the point that she raised earlier—the serious issue of the rural fuel price differential? We would be delighted to learn what he—and, indeed, the Executive—is doing to tackle that issue.

Sarah Boyack: Mr Tosh will know that, last year, the Office of Fair Trading produced a report on that issue. He will also know about the current EU rules on derogation in rural areas. In our discussions with the UK Government, we are carefully examining what can be done within those constraints.

The Executive is working hard to address rural transport problems and to make a difference. By our own hand, the rural transport fund has provided new investment of more than £14 million in rural public transport, creating more than 380 new rural services, supporting 100 new rural community transport projects and assisting 23 rural petrol stations. As a result of the spending review 2000, we will increase our spending to £18 million over the next three years, which is an increase of 33 per cent. Support for lifeline air and sea services is at record levels, with new investment in airport terminals and new ferries.

Work is also under way on key trunk road schemes: the £10 million A830 Arisaig to Kinsadel widening and the £12 million A96 Fochabers to Mosstodloch bypass scheme. Over the next three years, a total of £92 million will be spent on rural trunk roads.

There has also been help from the public transport fund, which has provided support for rural public transport projects in Shetland, Orkney, the Western Isles, Highland, Argyll and Bute, Aberdeenshire, Dumfries and Galloway and the Borders. That is not empty rhetoric, but action.

Mr Davidson (North-East Scotland) (Con): Will the minister take an intervention?

Sarah Boyack: No, thank you.

The SNP's motion is disappointing, particularly when it is contrasted with the Enterprise and Lifelong Learning Committee's recent "Report on the Inquiry into Fuel Prices in Remoter Rural Areas". Committee members from all parties have worked together to produce a considered and constructive piece of work, as have members of the Rural Development Committee in that committee's "Report on the Impact of Changing Employment Patterns in Rural Scotland".

Unlike the SNP motion, the Enterprise and Lifelong Learning Committee's report acknowledges the complexity of the issues, the

constraints imposed by European Union policy and the practical measures that the Executive has taken. The Executive will give serious consideration to the committee's recommendations on vehicle excise duty, support for liquefied petroleum gas and the future of the petrol station network in remoter rural areas. We will respond formally in due course.

The Executive will continue to talk to the UK Government about motoring taxation. We have already done much to support LPG, in spending around £1 million a year on converting up to 1,000 cars a year and in providing grants to convert rural petrol stations to supply LPG.

Andrew Wilson: Will the minister give way?

Sarah Boyack: No, thank you.

We will meet the Petrol Retailers Association and the Scottish Motor Trade Association to discuss the difficulties that confront their members in rural areas.

A lot has been done but there is a lot still to do. Once again, the SNP has chosen to debate a reserved issue. That issue is important for Scotland. That is why the UK Parliament is important, why we have to work with it to promote Scotland's interests and why its debate on the Finance Bill on Tuesday was so important.

We do not want hot air and soundbites—that is all the SNP seems to offer Scotland's rural communities. The Executive is in the business of delivering and making a difference. I urge members to reject the motion.

11:11

George Lyon (Argyll and Bute) (LD): I will start with the rather headmistress-like lecture on my numeracy skills that I received from Annabel Goldie. Her and her party's weakness lies in history lessons, especially on the period from 1979 to 1997. I respectfully suggest that she spend some time refreshing her memory. The people of Scotland have certainly not forgotten that period.

I want to outline the Scottish Liberal Democrat policy on fuel. The Liberal Democrats at Westminster have voted against every rise in the fuel escalator that has been proposed by Tory and Labour Governments for the simple reason that neither Government has offered compensation measures for Scotland's remote island and rural communities, which are hit disproportionately by the policy. I welcome the Tories' late conversion in their amendment. They recognise that measures have to be taken to try to alleviate the huge differential between central belt prices and Highland prices. We support that position and my colleague, Mike Rumbles, will deal with that in more detail in his speech.

The Scottish Liberal Democrat position on fuel is clear and consistent. We believe that there has to be a cap on fuel tax for the next five years and that excise duty should be abolished for the most fuel-efficient cars to encourage the take-up and use of such cars. There should be specific help for the additional cost of fuel for Scotland's remote rural and island communities.

Andrew Wilson: Mr Lyon is clear on Liberal policy for the future, but do the Liberal Democrats believe that fuel tax is currently too high, too low or about right?

George Lyon: I will come to that.

In stark contrast to the SNP, the Scottish Liberal Democrats have been consistent and clear in stating our position on fuel tax. The SNP has had four different policies over the past year. The latest is the flagship general election policy of a 2p per litre reduction in fuel costs. The SNP also proposes to increase taxes on Scotland's highest earners from 40p to 45p. That is very similar to another party's policy that is not very dear to my heart.

What does the SNP propose to do with that money? Does it propose to give it to our hard-pressed schools or to our hospitals, which the SNP tells us week after week are in desperate straits? Does it propose to give it to pensioners, who week after week the SNP says are insulted by the increases that have been given so far? No. The money is to be given to the oil companies in the vain hope that they might pass it on to consumers instead of pocketing it as profit. How on earth will the SNP guarantee that that money will be passed on to consumers?

We now know the SNP's priorities for the general election: oil company profits first; schools, hospitals and pensioners last.

Mr MacAskill: Will the member give way?

George Lyon: Mr MacAskill is not noted for taking interventions on his speeches, but I will let him in once.

Mr MacAskill: I actually took two interventions. If George Lyon had been listening and watching he would know that.

George Lyon: I was listening and watching.

Mr MacAskill: How are the oil companies going to benefit? Is George Lyon suggesting that the Executive is bringing in some form of windfall tax? If the tax cut is on the Government's income, how does that affect the oil companies unless the Government is imposing taxation on them?

George Lyon: How will the SNP guarantee that the oil companies do not pocket the reduction in tax but pass it on to the consumer instead? What cast-iron guarantee will the SNP extract from the

oil companies to make sure that the reduction is passed on to consumers?

The SNP has learned the lesson of the last debate in the Parliament on fuel tax, which is a reserved matter: this time, they raised it in Westminster—unlike the last time. Such was the importance that they attached to standing up for Scotland at Westminster that three of their six MPs did not even bother to turn up. That included their leader and their deputy leader. So much for the SNP standing up for Scotland at Westminster. That instance reinforces the argument that a vote for the SNP at Westminster is a wasted vote.

Mrs Margaret Ewing: Will the member give way on that point?

George Lyon: Certainly. I believe that Mrs Ewing was actually there.

Mrs Ewing: I certainly was there and I will always be at Westminster when matters concerning Scotland are being debated. Where were the Liberal Democrats in the division lobbies? They say one thing in their constituencies and do nothing when it comes to the vote at Westminster.

George Lyon: It really is a bit rich that when half of the SNP's MPs will not even turn up to support their party's policy, they expect the Liberal Democrats to do it. Come on; that is ridiculous. The Liberal Democrats chose to abstain because the vote was nothing more than a general election ploy, as we all know.

The SNP has also, under its new policy, called for the harmonisation of fuel taxes with the rest of Europe. What does that mean? It means that the SNP is demanding the abolition of tax-free red diesel for our farmers, fishermen and forestry industry. The SNP policy would mean a rise in diesel prices in Scotland from 22p per litre today to the European average of 55p per litre for our farmers, our fishermen and our forestry industry. In Europe, the majority of countries do not have a red diesel policy. The increase in diesel would be nearly threefold.

Mr Davidson: Will the member give way?

George Lyon: I am sorry, I have to continue.

The increase would mean economic ruin for rural Scotland. I suggest that Mr MacAskill's suggestion that the SNP is standing up for the rural primary industries was nothing more than crocodile tears and hype. The SNP seems willing to put the final nail in the coffin of our hard-pressed rural industries. Its policy is ill thought out and ill judged. It could inflict ruin on rural Scotland and the rural economy.

I ask members to reject the motion.

11:18

Mr Duncan Hamilton (Highlands and Islands)

(SNP): More than any other member, I have had the opportunity to follow George Lyon's speeches in his constituency and in the Parliament. The speech that he has just given was the most bizarre I have yet heard. It culminated in the wonderful thought that the SNP's proposal to cut 10p off a gallon of fuel is somehow a hit on rural communities. We have to wonder which world the man inhabits.

George Lyon: Will the member take an intervention?

Mr Hamilton: I think I know which world George Lyon inhabits. I will let him in later.

The lack of honesty in the debate is quite remarkable. I will come on to that in just a minute, but first I will make a quick point about the Government's handling of fuel. Last autumn, as everyone knows, it was the No 1 issue. It drove the whole political debate. Now, there is a degree of success, we are told, because the issue is off the agenda; it has been lanced.

I suggest that if it takes a crisis in fishing, a crisis in farming and a tourism industry on its knees to get the Government off the hook, that is no way to proceed. The way out of a crisis is not to invent a worse crisis; the way out of a crisis is to face up to responsibilities and do something.

The minister and her Labour colleagues have been utterly disingenuous. We are told—as we have been for months—that it is the fault of the oil companies. Today, we can still say that 79p in the pound goes to the Government in the tax take. That suggests that this is a Government problem. It has been a Government problem and it is still a Government problem. The minister has come to the chamber today to tell us, in breathless tones, that this is an important issue for Scotland—so important, in fact, that it should be passed to the UK Parliament. What is this Parliament for if not to express an opinion and to argue the case for Scotland? What precisely is the minister's job if not to make the case on behalf of the rural communities that she says she listens to and understands? That is why this Parliament exists. I suggest that there has been a blatant abdication of responsibility.

Sarah Boyack: If Duncan Hamilton had listened to the whole of my speech, he would have heard that that is precisely what we are doing, day in, day out, with the UK Government. We are promoting Scotland's interests at the UK level and we are working in Scotland to deliver what is within our powers.

Mr Hamilton: That brings us seamlessly to the next point. If the minister is indeed making those

representations, she is not making them very well. When the same party is in power in Scotland as is in power in the UK, what kind of Executive is it that, even then, can argue for Scotland but cannot deliver for Scotland? If that is meant to be an effective Executive, frankly, all is lost.

The minister made points about nationalist candidates running round the country making pledges they could not keep. That brings me on to a perfect example of Labour dishonesty. It comes from Dave Stewart, the MP for Inverness East, Nairn and Lochaber. It is impossible to disagree with anything in the first page of Mr Stewart's maiden speech made back in May 1997. In the first paragraph of the second page he said:

"Tourism is very important. It is responsible for 20 per cent. of the highlands' gross domestic product and it supports more than 20,000 jobs throughout the highlands. That is why transport is so important in my constituency and why I shall campaign for a reduction in the price of petrol and diesel, which is extortionate in the highlands and islands."—[*Official Report, House of Commons*, 21 May 1997; Vol 294, c 772.]

Let us contrast that statement with Dave Stewart's voting record. He voted for an increase in tax in 1997; against a cut in tax in 1998; for an increase in 1999; against a cut later in 1999; for an increase in 2000; and, only yesterday, against the Scottish National Party amendment to cut the price of fuel. If we are going to talk about dishonesty, let us start at home with the Labour candidates who were elected on a basis on which they have not delivered.

The Liberal party masquerades as a party of rural Scotland. I suggest that its abstention at Westminster yesterday will be remembered. That was a chance to make a substantial difference for the people of Scotland by cutting fuel duty. The Liberal party decided to abstain. In this debate, the Scottish National Party has made a constructive proposal. We have said that we will cut fuel duty immediately by 10p. According to the minister, that is scaremongering. It is not: it is about the long-term aspiration for the sustainability of rural Scotland. That is something around which this Parliament should unite. There should be no division and no dissension. The fact that there is says a great deal about this Executive.

11:23

Mr Kenneth Macintosh (Eastwood) (Lab): Before I talk about rural fuel prices, I will say that I am aware that members know me as a townie—an urban, if not quite urbane, representative of that most suburban of constituencies, Eastwood. It may interest members to know that I was introduced at a public meeting recently as the MSP, Ken Macintosh, who was born in Inverness and who takes an active parliamentary interest in crofting and Gaelic.

I am not sure that I recognise myself in that description and I think that the meeting was disappointed that I was not wearing one of John Farquhar Munro's colourful tweed jackets instead of my usual suit. Despite my impeccable Highland credentials, I want to speak as a member of the Enterprise and Lifelong Learning Committee—not on behalf of that committee, but as a Labour member of that committee—on our "Report on the Inquiry into Fuel Prices in Remoter Rural Areas". Several points are worth bringing to the chamber's attention.

Before I do that, however, I have to say that I am dismayed by what I have heard from the Opposition on rural fuel prices and on other, more general, rural issues. The Opposition constantly tries to play on the rural-town divide. That is an artificial divide and I do not accept it. There are differences, but the problems of people who live in the country are the same as the problems of people who live in the cities—tackling child poverty, tackling pensioner poverty, creating social justice and equality of opportunity and building schools and hospitals. Those are the things that really matter to people, whether they live in small villages or town estates. Those are the priorities on which the Executive is delivering.

I recognise, however, that there are differences. Fuel prices are a particular problem. Fighting my way through the foot-and-mouth disinfectant roadblocks on my way to see my relatives in Skye over the Easter weekend, I was struck yet again by the dependency of people in smaller communities in rural areas on cars, lorries and buses. Public transport is not good in those areas. Not only are people very dependent—overly dependent—on cars, they have to use them to travel much longer distances.

Mr Jamie McGrigor (Highlands and Islands) (Con): As a member with an interest in crofting, what would Mr Macintosh say to the crofters on the island of Harris who are paying 90p a litre for diesel and 87p a litre for unleaded petrol?

Mr Macintosh: I am about to talk about the measures that we are proposing. Both at Westminster and in the Scottish Executive, those problems are being tackled—especially with the action that we have taken to reduce rates for rural petrol stations, to give grants for tank replacements and to encourage alternative, cheaper fuels.

The Enterprise and Lifelong Learning Committee has made a number of observations. The problem of noticeably higher petrol prices is not uniform across rural areas. There may be a difference of 1p or 2p per litre in some areas, but it is in the islands and in the remotest areas where the difference can be big. The most crucial factor affecting prices in those areas is not transportation

costs or exploitation by retailers or oil companies; it is low turnover and the low volume of sales at those petrol stations. The committee also noted that the Office of Fair Trading is to continue its investigation into the Western Isles because the market there is not fair.

Having made those observations, the committee went on to consider some other options. We agreed to rule out reductions in VAT or fuel duty, but we thought that there was room for action in a number of areas, including the introduction of a lower rate of vehicle excise duty. That already exists on some islands for lorries and it could be extended. The committee recognised the role of the Scottish Executive and the work that it is doing. I would like to draw the Executive's attention to the potential for co-operative schemes for the bulk buying of fuel. Highland Council's experience of operating a scheme for fishing boats in Skye was especially encouraging and could be extended. I believe that the Rural Development Committee has also made that point.

Yet again, one of the committees of this Parliament has shown that it can make a constructive contribution to the debate. Far from being divisive, the committee's report builds on the work that is being done at UK and Scottish Executive levels. I noted the minister's comments and I commend the Enterprise and Lifelong Learning Committee's report to the Executive as providing a helpful way forward.

11:28

Mr David Davidson (North-East Scotland) (Con): It would be helpful if there were some honesty in this chamber and if we started off with the basic truth that the biggest factor in fuel price at the pumps is taxation—it makes up almost 80 per cent of the price. The biggest factor, and therefore the biggest opportunity for change to help people who are struggling—and the minister has already accepted that people, especially in rural Scotland, have no option but to use their road vehicles—is to consider ways of dealing with taxation. We set out our stall on this issue last year. Gordon Brown has made a temporary reduction to cover the period of an election campaign.

I am puzzled as to why the nationalists still work with gallons. I thought that they had reached the new age of the litre. However, perhaps they do not want to go beyond the 10p, because they do not know how they are going to afford that in their spending plans. Will Mr MacAskill confirm that the 10p per gallon is for the UK motorist, or is this just a Scottish device? He did not make that clear.

Mr MacAskill: This matter is reserved, so it will be dealt with at Westminster until such time as it is

returned here.

Mr Davidson: Thank you. So we are talking about something that would never be delivered as long as we have the union—thank God.

Andrew Wilson: Exactly.

Mr Davidson: By that, I mean the SNP pledges, policies and wish list—the cost goes on and on. Money does not grow on trees.

We have dealt with the pledges and how things might be paid for, but we have not yet had an explanation of the taxation policies. Perhaps Andrew Wilson will deal with this—I presume that he is going to wind up the debate. Mr MacAskill talked about the competitiveness of Scottish business, yet most Scottish businesses are not incorporated. Those people pay income tax.

Andrew Wilson: Will the member give way?

Mr Davidson: In a minute. Perhaps the member can deal with my point when he winds up the debate. Can the SNP tell us whether the extra penny for Scotland is a dead policy or another taxation policy on top of the 3p?

Mr MacAskill: Will the member give way?

Mr Davidson: No.

Is the SNP going to use the power to vary income tax by 3p? Those are things that we need to know. We need to know where the basket of taxation is coming from. I am not convinced by some of the measures that the SNP has told us about today. We have heard nothing about other means of support for rural petrol stations. The SNP has told us nothing about how it would support petrol stations in conversion to meet the new vapour recovery requirement. The Executive is not paying out enough money for that—everyone says that. The conversion to allow vapour recovery is a huge drain on the individual suppliers.

I turn briefly to the Liberals—they are only worth a brief comment. George Lyon managed to go through the whole of his speech without telling us what his policy was.

George Lyon: Will the member give way?

Mr Davidson: In other words, the Liberal policy is very simple. The Liberals want to freeze prices—although they have not said whether that is in real terms or will be inflated—for five years, but the truth is that they do not want to say anything that might upset their Labour colleagues.

George Lyon: Take an intervention.

Mr Davidson: Sit down, Mr Lyon.

Let us consider one or two things that the minister said. They were quite revealing. She has

displayed some honesty this morning and I thank her for that. However, I do not know from what figment of her imagination she has produced the figure of £16 billion in cuts. Even No 10, in its wildest estimates, cannot get the total past £11 billion, and even that figure is fictitious. We need to move on.

The minister also talked about LPG.

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

Mr Davidson: No. It is almost impossible to access LPG in the north-east of Scotland. There is a filling station in Laurencekirk, but the next one is above Dyce. The cost of conversion is quite prohibitive. If we want short-term help, particularly for those areas affected by foot-and-mouth disease, the pump prices must be adjusted as quickly as possible. The businesses affected by foot-and-mouth are suffering now—they need immediate help. The Executive cannot postpone action on this much longer.

11:33

Mr Mike Rumbles (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (LD): As all members know, fuel tax is a matter reserved to Westminster. My colleague George Lyon has dealt very effectively with the SNP motion. The point that he made about the SNP abandoning Westminster—I mentioned the same thing in my intervention—was very good. Only three out of six SNP MPs turned up for their own debate. Why were they missing? Because they said it was far more important to be here in the Scottish Parliament.

Mrs Ewing *rose*—

Mr Rumbles: I see that Margaret Ewing is here, but where are the others? It is hypocrisy of the highest degree.

Mrs Ewing: Will the member give way?

Andrew Wilson: Will the member give way?

Mr Rumbles: In a moment.

The most important point that George Lyon emphasised—and which the SNP cannot answer because it has got it completely wrong—is the SNP attack on the farming community at this particular time. It is probably unintentional, but it is stupid. The SNP motion talks about ensuring

“harmonisation of fuel prices with our European competitors”.

What does that mean to the farming community? Does that mean that red diesel at 22p per litre would go up to 79p a litre? It is completely ill thought out.

Andrew Wilson: None of those things will

change. It is the overall price of fuel at the pump that we are dealing with. Perhaps Mr Rumbles will answer the question that George Lyon was unable to answer, which is that if the Liberal Democrat policy—

Mr Rumbles: No. Sit down. The SNP is completely wrong. The members do not understand the terms and implications of their own motion. It would be devastating for farmers in rural Scotland and the fishermen whom they purport to support. It is ridiculous.

I have one more point about the SNP, a point that David Davidson touched on earlier. Is it not interesting that the SNP motion calls for a reduction of “10 pence per gallon”? When did SNP members last pass a service station that prices petrol in gallons? Why use gallons? Because 10p per gallon sounds a lot. It is done for the benefit of the press gallery. In effect, that is a reduction of 2p per litre. It is typical of the SNP: hot air and soundbites.

Talking of hypocrisy, let us turn to the Tory amendment. David Davidson had the nerve to talk about honesty. The Tory amendment calls for

“a derogation of Vehicle Excise Duty for island registered private cars and the extension of such a derogation to designated remote communities in Scotland, identified on a postcode basis.”

What a good idea. That is an issue that the Liberal Democrats will be campaigning on at the forthcoming general election. Is it not a pity that when the Tory chancellor, Kenneth Clarke, had ample opportunity to implement such a provision, he refused to do so? That is rank hypocrisy of the highest order. That attitude fits well into the long tradition of Tory hypocrisy, particularly in relation to the fuel price escalator, which the Tories now tell us they want to get off.

Mr Tosh: As we are talking about honesty and transparency, perhaps Mr Rumbles could explain to the Parliament and to the Scottish electorate why the Liberal Democrats have voted all along against increases in fuel prices and have called instead for a carbon tax.

Mr Rumbles: Yes, I will address that now. We must remember that another Tory chancellor, Norman Lamont, introduced the fuel price escalator. The Scottish Liberal Democrats consistently refused to back those Tory fuel price increases without the derogation for hard-pressed areas of rural Scotland—that is what we are standing up for in particular today.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Please wind up.

Mr Rumbles: What a cheek to hear the Tories pretending to champion the cause of remote and rural Scotland. I have nothing but contempt for that approach in politics. No wonder people are turned

off when they listen to the Tories.

The real issue is the continuously increasing taxation of fuel. The Liberal Democrats are the only main party at Westminster that has a realistic and sensible policy to help rural motorists. We demand a real-terms cap on fuel taxation for the next five years—I hope that David Davidson is listening to that point—and that any extra VAT revenues that the Government receives be redirected to help public transport and reduce taxes for road hauliers. We also want a derogation of vehicle excise duty for all remote areas of rural Scotland.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Please come to a close, Mr Rumbles.

Mr Rumbles: Our policy is absolutely straightforward and clear. We support neither the tabloidism and incompetence of the SNP motion nor the hypocrisy of the Tory amendment.

11:38

Ms Sandra White (Glasgow) (SNP): I heard the word “clear” mentioned. I do not know whether it is as clear as muck, but the Liberal policies and speeches sounded like that to me. I am very pleased that I am a member of the Scottish National Party. It is clear from the speeches given by members of the other political parties that we are the only party that stands up for Scotland.

David Davidson mentioned that the minister was being honest. Mr Davidson was certainly very honest—he said thank goodness for the union—whereas the Labour and Liberal members kid on that they do not really believe in the union until it comes up to a general election. I thank Mr Davidson for being honest. We know where all the other parties come from—Great Britain and that is it. They are not interested in Scotland or how the price of petrol affects the people here.

The minister said that we should be honest. Well, let us be honest. Is the cost of fuel too high? Yes. Is that caused by the tax? Yes. Who is responsible for that? New Labour. I will give an example, which I will quote in litres rather than gallons. In April 2001, diesel costs 77.9p per litre, 77.1 per cent of which is tax. How is that fair?

The minister said that we should consider local issues and the details that affect people's daily lives. Unfortunately, she forgot to mention urban areas, as did many members. I hear a lot about rural areas and rightly so, because they are being crucified by the costs of fuel, but so are the urban areas.

Helen Eadie (Dunfermline East) (Lab): Is it SNP policy that we should apply the cost of transport and fuel to every aspect of taxation policy? If we consider the European situation, we

have the lowest business and income taxes. We need to look at taxation policy in the round. Is Sandra White saying that the £1 billion—

Ms White: Thank you. I let Helen Eadie in for a question, not a speech.

The best taxation is fair taxation. Fuel tax is not a fair tax; it is a punitive tax, which affects everybody. The minister mentioned people's daily lives. I will provide a couple of examples. In urban areas, the minister may not realise—although perhaps she does, as she is the Minister for Transport and Planning—that people travel to work, and they use cars and transport—

Nora Radcliffe (Gordon) (LD): And buses.

Ms White: Yes, they use buses as well. Thank goodness somebody is listening.

They take the money for travel out of their wages. Fuel tax is a punitive tax. People who are on low wages have to pay it. The tax does not discriminate, which is unfair. Take the example of a family on a low income with a small car—

Mr Kerr: Will the member give way?

Ms White: Sorry, but no.

That family may have a small car and a couple of children. They may want to go out for the day, for example, to take their kids swimming. They have to pay high fuel prices, and they are on a small wage.

In housing schemes there are few local shops. Perhaps all there is is a mobile van. Food in those areas is expensive. People who live there have to pay the high cost of food—not just young people, but pensioners—yet the minister tells me that this is fair taxation. I asked for honesty in this debate, and the minister said that she would be honest, but she has not been. Fuel tax affects poorer people, not the folk with lots of money, and the minister does not realise that. The tax takes no account of income, which is why the SNP's motion is fair.

The minister mentioned rural Scotland a lot. Yes, tourism is one of the main employers in rural Scotland. People are not coming to Scotland as a result of high fuel prices. When will the minister realise that and go to Westminster—I see that the minister is shrugging her shoulders, but that will do her no good. People out there are listening and waiting for something to be done. High fuel prices are a disgrace, and they must come down.

11:42

Mr Andy Kerr (East Kilbride) (Lab): Here we are again, sadly. I thought that when Kenny MacAskill left the position of Opposition spokesperson on transport we would see an end

to these puerile, meaningless debates, but we are back with them. He is the I M Jolly of the Scottish Parliament, and the king of crisis. He used the word "crisis" around 12 times in his speech. It was pathetic. The vision of Annabel Goldie and Kenny MacAskill limbo dancing under the petrol pump to get the price lower than anybody else was pretty uninspiring.

Nobody has mentioned the oil companies in this debate, least of all Kenny MacAskill, the friend of the oil companies. The leading four oil companies doubled their profits to £35 billion as a result of the oil crisis, and senior executives of those companies benefited by as much as £10 million in share options. The SNP talks about taking 2p off a litre. What about the price elasticity in the marketplace? We could take that money off, but the oil companies would put the price back up, because they know that the consumer will pay. If we do that, £1 billion will be lost to the Exchequer. That is £1 billion that we want to spend on the real issues identified in the spending review—

Mr MacAskill: Will the member give way?

Mr Kerr: In a minute.

It is not just about what the Scottish Parliament does through the spending review to deliver for rural communities, with measures such as the transport fund and the support that we give to petrol stations in rural areas, but about all the other factors that the SNP bleats about every day.

Sandra White represents a community in which 60 per cent of members do not own a car, yet she wants to levy a tax against them, through general income tax, to the disbenefit of the majority of her community.

Ms White: Andy Kerr says that 60 per cent of residents in the area that I represent do not own a car. His facts and figures are wrong. He should go back and check them. I do not think that people in Kelvin or other areas are particularly interested—

Mr Kerr: I thank Sandra White for that speech. Does she argue with the figure that 52 per cent of the urban population do not own a car? That figure was supplied by the Office for National Statistics. So 52 per cent of the population in urban areas will pay for the SNP's petrol price cut. It is a pathetic and silly policy.

Mrs Margaret Ewing: Will the member give way?

Mr Kerr: No, we had a fairly pathetic contribution earlier.

Let us not forget that this is about the environment. It was about trying to encourage a mixed economy in the delivery of transport services. We cannot ignore our commitment under Kyoto. The Tories introduced the fuel duty

escalator, and Labour removed it. We are reducing carbon emissions dramatically. However, let us relate this issue to America, where petrol is 35 cents per litre and consumption is 1,600 litres per person. In the European Union, the price ranges from 60 cents to 90 cents per litre, and consumption is 500 litres per person, so tax makes a difference. We know that, and that is part of the strategy that we have adopted. It is gas-guzzlers versus fuel efficiency.

The Enterprise and Lifelong Learning Committee's report on fuel prices praised measures that were introduced by the Chancellor of the Exchequer: for example, the across-the-board freeze of fuel duty excise, the 2p per litre cut in excise duty on ultra-low sulphur petrol and the 3p per litre cut on ultra-low sulphur diesel, and the change in the small car engine capacity threshold to 1,549cc to give an estimated 5 million car owners access to the £55 discount on vehicle excise duty. That will make a difference, not just to the environment but to the Scottish economy, which we dearly look after.

Kenny MacAskill goes on about the comparison with Europe. We do not have road tolls to the extent that they do in Europe. It does not cost us £36 in road tolls to travel to London, as it would if we compared with Europe. The Institute for European Environmental Policy's study on transport costs in the UK shows that the costs overall are similar to those in the rest of Europe. We should consider the effect on air quality and the environment. For example, 24,000 premature deaths and 24,000 hospitalisations in the UK can be directly related to vehicle emissions.

I tell Kenny MacAskill that it is easy to argue for a shallow policy for political purposes, but he should live in the real world. Where will the £1 billion come from? Where is the fairness to those in the community who do not own cars in the SNP's policies, which seek to reduce what people pay for their cars, yet levy the cost against those who do not own cars? Why should my mum, who does not own a car, have to pay for the SNP's policies on car ownership? It is unfair and ill thought through. Colleagues, the SNP is not standing up for Scotland; it is misleading and bankrupting Scotland.

11:47

George Lyon: As has been shown in this debate, the SNP's policy, as outlined in the motion, is flawed. The SNP has failed to stand up for Scotland when it really counts at Westminster on this important issue. We find it humorous and ironic that the SNP is demanding to know why the Liberal Democrats did not support the SNP amendment at Westminster, when 50 per cent of the SNP's MPs could not be bothered to make the

journey to support that policy. It takes a bit of believing when Margaret Ewing points the finger at us.

There is an inherent flaw in the SNP's proposal to reduce fuel tax. The SNP cannot say whether the proposed tax cut will reach the motorist or whether it will wind up in the pockets of the multimillion-dollar oil companies. Kenny MacAskill, the friend of the oil companies, is an ironic title.

Mr Tosh: Will the member give way?

Robin Harper (Lothians) (Green): Will the member give way?

George Lyon: Yes, Robin.

Robin Harper: Does George Lyon agree that the Liberal Democrat policy of a freeze on fuel taxation for five years will give the wrong message to those third-world countries that we want to get onside with the Kyoto protocol?

George Lyon: If our policy is sending out the wrong message on Kyoto, what does that say about the SNP policy?

The greatest flaw in the SNP motion is the announcement that it will abolish red diesel. That would destroy the farming industry, the fishing industry and the forestry industry. Let us be under no illusions—

Mr MacAskill: Will the member give way?

George Lyon: Calm down, Kenny, and sit down.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Mr MacAskill, the member is not taking an intervention.

George Lyon: Kenny MacAskill should understand his own policy before putting it on paper.

Let us be under no illusions: fuel is the single biggest cost for the fishing industry. SNP members portray themselves as the champions of the fishing industry. I wonder what the fishing industry will say when it realises that its biggest cost will triple under the SNP's policy. The SNP has made a grave mistake in failing to think through the harmonisation of fuel taxes or motoring costs throughout Europe. As the Minister for Transport and Planning rightly said, harmonising motoring costs throughout Europe would mean a substantial rise in motoring costs in Scotland.

I will quickly move on to the Tories—and it will be quick.

Mrs Ewing: Is that an alteration in the Liberal Democrats' attitude to Europe? Do they no longer believe in cohesion?

George Lyon: If Margaret Ewing thinks that the Liberal Democrats will follow the SNP on

abolishing red diesel for the farming, fishing and forestry industries, she has another think coming.

I welcome the Tories' belated recognition of the need for special measures for rural parts of Scotland. It is a pity that they did not recognise that in 1993, when they introduced the fuel tax escalator. Why did not Norman Lamont or Ken Clarke stand up for rural Scotland and implement some compensatory measures for our rural industries and motorists? That shows hypocrisy.

Mr Tosh: Will Mr Lyon take an intervention on the carbon tax?

George Lyon: Mr Tosh is far too late.

David Davidson needs help not only with his hearing, but with his knowledge of history. As his colleague Annabel Goldie had, he seems to have forgotten the time from 1979 to 1997.

Duncan Hamilton—that Edinburgh-based MSP for the Highlands and Islands—said that he had spent his life following me. Long may that continue.

11:52

Mr Murray Tosh (South of Scotland) (Con):

We have had some interesting insights this morning, not least the love-fest between the Liberals and the SNP about who voted where, why and for whom. My first amusing thought this morning occurred when Kenny MacAskill informed us that he would not be a whingeing Jock, then proceeded to be a whingeing Kenny for 15 minutes. His second entertaining comment was his revelation of the carefully guarded state secret that the purpose of petrol taxation is to raise taxation. That had obviously come as a blinding revelation to him. He felt that that purpose was inappropriate. That is a bit unfair, because in the Parliament's two years, no other member has shown greater dedication to spending the proceeds of taxation. It seems reasonable to consider now and again where some of the money comes from.

Kenny MacAskill said that the SNP's policy is not a short-term fix but a long-term remedy. Mr MacAskill fools nobody about that—probably not even himself. He is fixed only on the short term and the election. He promises cuts that he knows cannot be delivered, because unlike the Conservatives, the Scottish National Party cannot win the general election and cannot deliver on its pledges. [*Interruption.*] That is not to say that Mr MacAskill did not have some pertinent points. In the past three or four years, it has been clear that fuel prices have been high.

Alasdair Morgan (Galloway and Upper Nithsdale) (SNP): Another blinding revelation.

Mr Tosh: Absolutely. When we win the Westminster election, we will deliver a reduction in fuel duty. We will deliver it in litres, and it will be a greater reduction than that which the SNP proposes.

We accept that the level of fuel prices has distorted trade. I will not sign up to the motion that is in Mr MacAskill's name, but I support the idea that, in selected areas, we should be careful to ensure that our fuel prices are not dangerously out of line with those of our competitors. We have debated road haulage costs and that is a fair point.

It is also fair to say that the Executive has responsibility for rural fuel prices. The minister referred to that. When she had finished enumerating her list of the acts of the listening chancellor, she conceded that the Scottish Executive and the Chancellor of the Exchequer were discussing rural fuel prices. I appreciate that the Enterprise and Lifelong Learning Committee's report was published only relatively recently. It is responsible for the Executive to take some time to respond to that.

However, it is important that we say to the Executive that the whole Parliament expects it to speak for Scotland on rural fuel price differentials. That issue has emerged in the Parliament. It is responsible and appropriate to say that we should look for Scottish solutions to Scottish problems. I am grateful that Mr Lyon acknowledged our support for that emerging debate in committees and the Parliament. He was rather more generous than Mr Rumbles—that is another blinding revelation that will astonish nobody.

As we were all re-examining the past and being open and transparent, I asked Mr Rumbles whether he would kindly explain to voters the difference between the petrol tax that Labour and Conservative ministers have imposed and the carbon tax that Liberal ministers would theoretically impose. He said that he would deal with that later, but he did not. Mr Lyon was too late into his speech to deal with the issue, and I am too late into mine. Perhaps the member will have his opportunity on another day.

Mr Rumbles rose—

Mr Tosh: Am I allowed to give way to Mr Rumbles?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You are in your last minute.

Mr Rumbles: What a shame.

Mr Tosh: Mr Rumbles was not in his last minute when he took my intervention. He promised me an answer, then blatantly ignored the point. I asked a question and was promised an answer but was not given one. That answer has repeatedly not been given. None of us should take the moral high

ground. Let us agree that if there is one thing that has emerged from the debate about fuel, it is the injustice done to our rural areas.

Mr Rumbles: Hypocrisy.

Mr Tosh: We all have a stake in the remoter rural areas and all represent electors in those areas. There is a wider feeling in Scotland that an injustice is being done and should be remedied. I applaud the Enterprise and Lifelong Learning Committee's work. I agree with much of what Ken Macintosh said in his excellent speech. *[Interruption.]* I am astonished that, in debate after debate, Mr Rumbles is allowed to shout at members of the SNP and the Conservatives. He never shows some restraint. He does not shout at Labour members, although they like him less than we do. *[Laughter.]*

Justice must be done and be seen to be done on rural fuel. The Enterprise and Lifelong Learning Committee has given ministers a dignified and appropriate way of raising and redressing the issue. I hope that that proposal will be the outcome of two years of debates in the Parliament. I support the amendment that is in Miss Goldie's name.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Before I call Mr Macdonald, I ask all members to listen to other members' speeches. The level of noise in the chamber is becoming excessive.

11:58

The Deputy Minister for Transport and Planning (Lewis Macdonald): The debate has been rather predictable, but it has been good to have the occasional moment of entertainment. Sadly, the Opposition parties have mainly made the usual array of uncoded promises, as if we could have swingeing tax cuts today and no loss of public services tomorrow. That relates to elections to another place. Many members have listened to the Opposition parties simply to find out who can make the rashest promises. Opposition members are no doubt secure in the confidence that they will never have to deliver on them.

The opportunity to invent a crisis was not going to be passed by. Only last week, Simon Hinde warned in the *Scottish Daily Express* that according to the gloomiest forecasts, the price of petrol could rise to more than £3.60 a gallon. He reckoned without the gloominess of Kenny MacAskill. If there is a chance that the cost might rise to £4 a gallon, Kenny will want to be the first to say so.

The Labour party recognises the seriousness and significance of the matter, so we are introducing constructive measures to tackle the issues that face us. Those measures add up to a

strategy for tackling disadvantage in areas that suffer from a low throughput of petrol at the pump or as a result of rural disadvantage. We also want to protect the wider public spending needs of the country as a whole.

Kenny MacAskill told us that his pledges were fully costed. He also said that he recognised that tax cuts might threaten public spending, yet he did not offer a single figure to substantiate his costings. The SNP is an Opposition that promises to do everything and promises that doing everything will cost nothing. To help the SNP out, Sarah Boyack brought forward an estimate of the cost of the SNP's proposals. If 10p off a gallon means roughly 2.5p per litre in the language of 2001, we estimate that that could cost Scottish public services in the region of £65 million. It would be interesting to know where that money would come from.

Richard Lochhead (North-East Scotland) (SNP): The minister represents the Aberdeen Central constituency. Will he tell the chamber why motorists living in Aberdeen, which is the heart of Europe's oil and gas industry, have to pay the highest price for fuel in Europe?

Lewis Macdonald: Motorists in Stornoway would take exception to Richard Lochhead's statement. The Office of Fair Trading continues to investigate the price of oil and petrol in Stornoway.

However, that said, I will respond to Richard Lochhead's intervention. In his motion, Kenny MacAskill proposes

"a harmonisation of fuel prices with our European competitors".

Does Kenny MacAskill mean harmonisation with Norway? That country produces more oil than we do, yet it pays more for petrol than we do.

Mrs Margaret Ewing: Norway is not even in the European Union.

Lewis Macdonald: Norway is one of our European competitors, even if Margaret Ewing chooses not to accept that. The SNP often models its policy prescriptions on Norway. Does Scotland want harmonisation with Norway where, although more oil is produced, petrol costs more and the gross domestic product is higher? Or does it want harmonisation with Greece, where petrol is cheap but people are poor?

Kenny MacAskill may want to answer that.

Mr MacAskill: Has the minister seen the Automobile Association's fuel price report, which details that the price of diesel in Norway is equivalent to 55.76p, as opposed to 78.4p in the United Kingdom—

Lewis Macdonald: I have indeed—

Mr MacAskill: And in Norway, unleaded petrol is 66.48p per litre, as opposed to 84.7p in Scotland's remote areas—

Lewis Macdonald: I have also seen—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Order.

Mr MacAskill: Could he indeed tell us why he does not want us to harmonise at least towards those levels?

Lewis Macdonald *rose*—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Order. Mr Macdonald, I have to stop you for a second. Please wait until the member has finished his intervention before you continue—I presume that Mr MacAskill has now finished.

Lewis Macdonald: I will certainly take your guidance on that, Presiding Officer. No doubt I will have another opportunity to allow Kenny MacAskill to propose his petrol prices.

The fundamental paradox that lies at the heart of SNP policy in this area is that everything about Scotland's economy will be all right in the end because of the infinite value of North sea oil. SNP members appear not to understand that the main driver for the ups and downs of petrol prices is not the level of taxation but the price of crude oil in global markets. That is what drives the price of petrol at the pump. Today, the price of a barrel of Brent crude is \$26.50; six months ago, it was \$35. Perhaps Mr MacAskill noticed how much higher our petrol prices were then. Two years ago, the price was barely \$10—so low, incidentally, that it put thousands of Scottish jobs at risk.

If setting the level of fuel duty on the assumption that prices will be stable or rising would be a mistake, setting the whole of Scotland's revenue and spending plans on the same assumption would be folly. That is the kind of folly which Mr MacAskill's party would have us accept.

Mr Davidson: Will the minister give way?

Lewis Macdonald: I will refer to the Tories. As has been pointed out, they introduced the fuel duty escalator. On the one hand, they wish to compete with the SNP in promising tax cuts that they will never have to make. However, to their credit, their amendment mentions one of the reasonable proposals that the Enterprise and Lifelong Learning Committee report asked the Executive to consider. Sarah Boyack has made it clear that ministers will address those proposals when they respond to the committee's report.

Vehicle excise duty is a reserved matter. It is for the Executive to raise such matters with colleagues in the UK Parliament. We will continue to do so and to take up the matters on which we believe that a real impact can be achieved.

The same is true of extending the availability of liquefied petroleum gas, which is already receiving significant funding support. Stations are opening all over Scotland. For those who are concerned about the tourism industry in the Highlands and Islands, it is worth noting how widely spread LPG is in many of the countries that send tourists to the Highlands and Islands. In fact, one of the reasons why LPG is such a success in Highland Scotland is that it is cheap and available to tourists from Italy, the Netherlands and elsewhere.

The Executive will operate in the real world and will consider the real choices that face it. We will not pretend that we can have lower tax and better services. Instead, we will invest the money that we have in improved infrastructure and transport throughout Scotland, investing record sums in our lifeline services to remote island and mainland communities and making the case for Scotland's transport needs in our dealings with the UK Government. The Executive is determined to use the Parliament's powers to improve the lot of our people, whether they live in rural communities or in urban Scotland.

12:06

Fergus Ewing (Inverness East, Nairn and Lochaber) (SNP): I have not one shred of doubt that the majority of people in Scotland, and especially in the Highlands and Islands and rural Scotland, agree completely with the proposition that the cost of fuel in Scotland is far too high. I say that in all seriousness because I have been disappointed by aspects of the debate, one of which was mentioned by Mr Tosh. The seriousness of the topic was driven home by Sandra White, who pointed out in a straightforward, down-to-earth manner the impact that fuel prices have on those on low incomes.

That point was first forcefully underlined to me after I was elected, when I met two people in my constituency who live in a part of Scotland called the Cabrach, which is about as rural as one can get. It is miles from the nearest stick. The married couple both had to work on very low wages.

Mr Kerr *rose—*

Fergus Ewing: Mr Kerr should sit down, as he had his shot earlier.

The amount of money that those people have to pay for fuel from their weekly earnings is totally unjustifiable. In its impact on those on low incomes, the fuel tax is far more punitive than the poll tax ever was. I am disappointed that not one back-bench Labour MSP in the Parliament has had the guts to speak out on the issue, although I am not surprised, because—

Mr Kerr *rose—*

Fergus Ewing: If Mr Kerr is saying that he will speak out, I will read his press release after the debate. I am having my turn now, so he can sit down on his bahookie.

Labour MSPs—all 56 of them—have copied that example from their models down in Westminster, not one of whom, over four years, has rebelled against Tony Blair. I issue to Labour MSPs a challenge, from which Mr Kerr is excluded. Can they find a random sample of 56 people in Scotland in which a single person does not think that fuel tax is too high? Despite their opinion surveys, focus groups, consultants' reports and the millions of quids of taxpayers' money that they say they are so concerned about but which they blow away on advertising, not one member of a random sample of 56 people would agree with them.

Hugh Henry (Paisley South) (Lab): Will the member give way?

Fergus Ewing: That is because we have a serious problem to address.

I want to discuss how that problem should be dealt with and to tell the Conservatives, who have tried to propose a serious argument, why I believe they are wrong. First, fuel tax is too high. Secondly, as Murray Tosh recognised, we must be able to compete with our European competitors. How on earth can our businesses compete with those in countries such as Greece, where the cost per litre is cheaper by nearly half, at 43.69p as opposed to 78.5p? How can we compete with countries such as Ireland, a close competitor in many fields of business, where the cost is 48p? How can we compete even with Italy, where the cost is slightly higher than that, at 55.87p?

Mr Kerr: Will Fergus Ewing give way?

Fergus Ewing: I do not know whether there is a problem in Tuscany. I do not know whether there are higher prices in Tuscany, as there are in the Highlands and Islands, although I should be very happy to hear an intervention from Mr Alasdair Morrison who, I believe, could probably tell us what the price of fuel in Tuscany is.

Helen Eadie: Will Fergus Ewing give way?

Mr Kerr: Will Fergus Ewing give way?

Fergus Ewing: How can we compete with our competitors if we are saddled with that unfair burden?

Members: Give way.

The Presiding Officer (Sir David Steel): Order. I get the impression that Fergus Ewing does not want to give way, so other members must resume their seats.

Fergus Ewing: I fear that I shall just have to

speak up, Presiding Officer.

The other problem, of course, is that the Conservatives' measure of a one-off cut will not do, because it will not begin to tackle that competitive disadvantage. We must have a level playing field in that regard. One of the very real disadvantages is that 40-tonne trucks coming into the UK can carry 14,080 litres of fuel and can drive for 2,500 miles. The amount of smuggling that goes on costs hundreds of millions of pounds a year, according to the Road Haulage Association, and it is not a problem that affects only businesses.

Mr Kerr *rose—*

Fergus Ewing: Mr Kerr should sit down and learn something.

I have been advised that, in Northern Ireland, it is estimated that as much as half the fuel bought by domestic purchasers may be brought over the border. People whom I have met recently tell me that, at one specific petrol station, they saw one person buying 140 gallons of fuel in a car and in various jerricans. Quite apart from the fact that that must be a huge danger, it is economic madness. The Labour party has made no attempt in the debate to say what the hidden cost of smuggling is, nor has it made any attempt to address the problem of the cost to business.

When I was elected, I made a pledge that I would raise the topic of fuel from time to time, and I hope that I have done so—perhaps not as often as I should have, but I shall try to put that right. I was told by a haulage contractor that he could not continue profitably in an otherwise very successful business unless action was taken to tackle the disgracefully high level of fuel tax.

The most intractable problem is how to deal with the differential that we have suffered in the Highlands and Islands for several decades. Indeed, when I was a member of the Enterprise and Lifelong Learning Committee, I quoted a 1976 editorial from *The Press and Journal* about that. Of course, we welcome any measures that will tackle that problem, but we are far from convinced that there is any real will on the part of the Government to do so.

George Lyon: Will Fergus Ewing give way?

Fergus Ewing: No.

Sarah Boyack's saying that she recognises concerns about high fuel prices should be seen in the context of the fact that the Labour Government has had four years to address the problem. I am afraid that LPG, as has been pointed out by many members, is frankly not the answer. Sarah Boyack could not tell me how many cars in the Highlands take LPG, but all I can say is that I have not seen any and I think that I have seen only one garage in

my constituency where LPG can be purchased. *[Interruption.]* I did not go to Tuscany over Easter.

At Westminster, the SNP has consistently voted on every single occasion for the policy that we support today for a reduction in fuel tax. Our policy has been utterly consistent. It is one of the policies with which I am most familiar, because I wrote it, and it was passed unanimously at conference, irrespective of my persuasive skills, I am sure.

The level of fuel tax hits every business in Scotland and every family in Scotland. I believe that in a few weeks' time, when people have the chance to say who they believe on the issue, they will send the clear message that the SNP stands up for Scotland, while the Labour party has betrayed the interests of Scotland for the past four years and will continue to do so for time immemorial.

Foot-and-mouth Disease

The Presiding Officer (Sir David Steel): The next item of business is a statement by Mr Ross Finnie, which will provide an update on the foot-and-mouth disease outbreak. It would be helpful if members who would like to ask questions of the minister indicated that now.

12:16

The Minister for Environment and Rural Development (Ross Finnie): I want to bring Parliament up to date on the developments on foot-and-mouth disease over the past two weeks and to outline some changes to our control measures designed to respond to the developing disease situation.

By yesterday evening, there had been 175 confirmed cases of foot-and-mouth, with one new case yesterday. Our aim has been to tackle all cases quickly and to dispose of carcasses immediately. In the majority of cases, animals on infected farms have been slaughtered within 24 hours and almost all within 36 hours. The target of culling animals on contiguous premises within 48 hours has not generally been met, in the light of the numbers and distances involved and the severe logistical difficulties, but they have been tackled quickly and effectively. I also decided last week that the cull of susceptible sheep, within the main infected area in Dumfries and Galloway, should be stepped up in order to make sure that the sheep are out of the way before cattle have to be turned out. By the end of today, the great majority of that work will have been completed.

The measures that we have adopted are making progress. At the peak of the epidemic, we were averaging six cases per day in Scotland. In the past four days, that has reduced to an average of 1.25 cases. I cannot say that the difficulties are over: there will continue to be new cases for some time, both in the central infected area and scattered through the Borders and Dumfries and Galloway. Neither can we rule out cases occurring elsewhere. I can say that the epidemic has turned the corner and that there is a real prospect of sustained decline in the incidence of the disease. That will be achieved only if we can deploy sufficient resources to maintain active control measures and if farmers, hauliers, feed merchants and all others associated with farms maintain the strictest biosecurity measures. I cannot stress that too highly.

The factors that have come into play in Scotland over the past few days have been the continuing decline of the disease and the prospect of the release of considerable vet resources as the culls

in Dumfries and Galloway are completed. That, in my opinion, made it sensible to review our control policies. What was right and necessary when the epidemic was increasing and at its height may not necessarily be the case when it is in decline and additional resources become available. We have had to take extremely tough measures in order to get to this stage, and I understand the pain and distress caused for farmers by the need to have their stock taken. No one wants to see more livestock killed than is absolutely necessary.

I have considered a range of alternative control measures, and have excluded none. I made it clear last week that I did not regard vaccination as a necessary or satisfactory alternative control measure in the circumstances that we then faced in Scotland. I remain of that view, given the scientific uncertainty involved in vaccination and the likely long-term difficulties that it would present for a high-quality Scottish livestock industry, which relies on premium pricing and exports. Stamping out through slaughter of affected animals and of those exposed to infection is the correct way to deal with foot-and-mouth disease here in Scotland.

However, the progress that we have made through rigorous culling policies now allows some adjustment. The completion of the cull of sheep in the main infected area will free up significant numbers of vets. In this phase of the disease, it makes sense—and has become possible—to divert the significantly greater resources now available to veterinary surveillance patrolling, which will allow disease to be picked up quickly. We are therefore intensifying veterinary patrols inside and outside the 3km infected areas. However, we cannot control the disease properly without removing the animals at highest risk.

Against that background, the policy in Scotland from midnight tonight will be as follows. First, we will continue to ensure that all susceptible livestock on farms where there are confirmed cases of infection are slaughtered within 24 hours after the farmer's report.

Secondly, we shall continue to slaughter all stock on farms where there is reasonable suspicion of disease, before disease has been proved. That is a vital pre-emptive control measure.

Thirdly, we shall continue to slaughter all stock on farms regarded as having had dangerous contact with the disease, on the basis of clear veterinary assessment.

Fourthly, given the high continuing risk that disease is circulating unseen in sheep, any sheep within 3km of an infected farm will be culled on the ground that they may have been exposed to infection. Over the past few weeks, we have

established time and again that the sheep cull is vital in bringing disease to light and in dealing with it much more quickly than would otherwise have been the case.

Fifthly, on farms that are contiguous to infected premises, sheep and pigs will continue to be taken. Cattle will be culled if there is a firm veterinary view that they are dangerous contacts or are suspected of being infected. In other cases, cattle will not be culled provided that the farmer demonstrates that he or she has—and will maintain—adequate biosecurity measures; has kept his or her cattle wholly separate from any sheep; and is prepared to agree to regular examination of his cattle by veterinary patrols every 48 hours. That measure should significantly reduce the number of cattle that need to be culled. I can well appreciate the concerns of those who have recently had cattle killed under the contiguous cull, and I underline that their sacrifice was essential. Only now that the firebreak is in place in Dumfries and Galloway and new cases have reduced do we have the resources to implement this alternative approach.

Sixthly, we will continue to consider the position of the rare breeds of sheep that appear on the Rare Breeds Survival Trust list. Wherever flocks are infected, they will be culled, as will any such flocks within 3km of an infected place. However, in the latter case—and subject to an individual veterinary assessment—a number of sheep may be retained in order to preserve the genetic material. However, it will need to be demonstrated through serological testing that they are free of disease and that appropriate biosecurity arrangements have been put in place.

However, I regret to say that I am not prepared to agree to exempt hefted sheep from the 3km sheep cull. In light of the way in which such sheep are managed here, the fact that flocks in the Borders may in principle be hefted does not protect them from exposure to disease. As a result, I cannot at this stage take the risk of allowing disease to spread through the Borders hills by letting potentially infected flocks remain. Because of the size and extensive nature of hill sheep farming in the south of Scotland, such a spread could have devastating consequences. I believe that, in the present circumstances, that policy is most likely to contain the disease and protect the majority of sheep flocks.

I believe that those measures will continue to allow us to keep the disease under tight control. They depend on adequate veterinary resources being made available and on a continuing decline in the incidence of disease. If that situation changes, I must reserve the right immediately to step up culling measures on contiguous farms in line with veterinary advice.

With regard to the public health dimension of the epidemic, I emphasise that the transmission of foot-and-mouth disease from animals to humans remains very rare and that the Food Standards Agency continues to advise that the disease does not pose a threat to food safety. Nonetheless, concerns have been expressed about other public health aspects, including the risks that are attached to smoke from pyres and the smell from carcasses and burial sites, and the deposition of dioxins and air and water quality generally. In response, we have issued guidance to relevant health and other interests, to ensure that any risk to public health is minimised. A copy of the guidance will be placed in the Scottish Parliament information centre. That guidance gives sound practical advice on the best way in which to dispose of carcasses, from a public health perspective, including the selection of sites for pyres and burial and the disposal of ash from burned carcasses.

Dumfries and Galloway Council has undertaken monitoring of air quality, and the Scottish Environment Protection Agency is monitoring surface and ground waters around the burial site at Birkshaw. We have closed the larger burn site at Eastriggs and we will close the one at Hoddam on 28 April. Any new site will take full account of the new guidance. All those measures are to be reinforced by additional monitoring arrangements to assess any potential health risk and to ensure that there are no long-term effects on food safety.

The Parliament will be aware that the outbreaks in Jedburgh and Wigtownshire meant that I was not able to relax the restrictions on livestock movements in mainland Scotland from 16 April, as I had hoped. Subject to the present disease position being maintained, however, the following changes will be made from 1 May to reflect the improved position on the one hand and the need for measured caution on the other.

Farmers in the provisionally free area will be permitted to move animals under general licence between farms that are under their own occupancy. There will be no distance qualification and no 21-day movement restriction. The movement of traded stock in the PFA will continue to require an individual licence. Animals will be checked by a vet before they are moved and will be subject to a 21-day standstill period on their arrival at the receiving farm premises. There will no longer be the need to demonstrate welfare problems to qualify in either case.

On the mainland, away-wintered sheep will be allowed to return in batches—that is, within the same load—to crofts and farms, subject to a 21-day rule. Veterinary checks before embarkation and vehicle disinfection will still be required. The movement of away-wintered sheep back to the

islands will also be subject to pre-load vet checks and disinfection but, because of the particular circumstances on the islands, a 21-day standstill will not be applied. The Crofters Commission supply bulls will therefore be able to move to the islands from 1 May. I am also prepared to allow the operation of collection centres in the PFA for fatstock only. That is an initial move. In the islands, those collection centres will be open to both fat and store stock.

In the at-risk area, individual licences will continue to apply and long-distance movement will now be allowed under licence, to ease conditions on ARA farms. There will also no longer be the need to demonstrate welfare problems. However, because of the higher risk of disease in Dumfries and Galloway and the Borders, long-distance movements anywhere in those regions will not be authorised at this stage. That position will be reviewed by mid-May.

I said previously that I would review the policy that prohibits cattle movements to slaughter from the ARA to the PFA. Provided that the disease situation permits, I am minded to allow such movements from the middle of May.

Finally, I have decided to relax the ban on stalking for deer in the ARA, other than in Dumfries and Galloway and the Borders. I will reconsider that position in mid-May.

I emphasise my commitment to removing restrictions as swiftly as possible, provided that I can be sure that, in doing so, I am not putting at risk the progress that we have made to date on dealing with the disease. We need to make progress, but we must be cautious in doing so. That is what the relaxations are designed to achieve.

Animal welfare has been a matter of significant concern to me and to many members. In that context, the Parliament will note that some of the compensation rates paid under the livestock welfare disposal scheme will be reduced from 30 April. That is a Great Britain scheme, which is administered by the Intervention Board and funded by the UK Treasury. The decision has been made in the light of evidence that some of the existing rates have provided a degree of over-compensation and have encouraged unsustainable demand for the scheme. The livestock welfare disposal scheme will remain a last resort to producers, but I believe that the relaxation of movement controls that has been announced today will enable a number of animal welfare problems to be eased without the need for recourse to the welfare scheme. I also hope that the increase in slaughter capacity in Scotland dedicated to the scheme will result in the outstanding genuine welfare cases being acted upon swiftly.

Finally, I will talk briefly about economic impact and recovery issues. Firms have had the opportunity to phone us directly to tell us of the impact on their businesses. That will allow us to assess the economic impact on those businesses. We have also commissioned a major survey to provide hard evidence of economic impacts across all sectors and regions of Scotland. The final impact, of course, cannot be known until the disease has been eradicated and we can assess how quickly markets will recover or might recover.

We have begun to plan for longer-term national strategies to assist industries and businesses to recover from the effects of the disease. It will take a while for us to do that properly. We want to ensure that recovery strategies meet actual needs; I welcome the recovery plan that was presented to us by the Dumfries and Galloway partnership last week. It is important that our work harnesses the contribution of local and national organisations. That is why I have established the farm business steering group in Dumfries and Galloway. I have also written today to the chairman of Quality Meat Scotland to offer a contribution of £180,000 towards a campaign to reassure consumers in Scotland that meat is as safe as ever to eat. We must work now to strengthen awareness of the facts surrounding foot-and-mouth disease and the consumption of meat. Scotland has some of the highest-quality meat available anywhere in the world and we must project that message to Scottish consumers.

On the more immediate question of what farmers should do in relation to subsidy claims for the coming year—and in particular to the fast-approaching deadline of 15 May for the submission of integrated administration and control system forms—we have secured some important concessions from the European Union. While the 15 May date remains for the submission of IACS forms, arrangements have been set in place to allow applicants to change their claims in relation to set-aside and forage areas after 15 May. We are also negotiating with the EU a range of other derogations and concessions, mainly in relation to set-aside land. We will include the details of both in letters to producers. Taken together with the force majeure arrangements already announced, considerable flexibility has now been built into the subsidy arrangements for the 2000 and 2001 years, with the promise of more to come.

In summary, I want to underline to the Parliament that I remain absolutely determined to ensure that foot-and-mouth disease is completely stamped out and that Scotland can, as soon as possible, re-establish its livestock and tourism industries. One thing the disease has taught us is how closely intertwined those elements are in the rural economy. Our objective now is to work with

local communities to rebuild those industries and the prosperity that can in turn be built on them.

The Presiding Officer: There is no chance of calling everybody who would like to be called. I appeal to those who are called to be brief in their questioning.

Fergus Ewing (Inverness East, Nairn and Lochaber) (SNP): I thank the minister for providing us with an advance copy of his statement. The SNP is delighted that the policy of stamping out appears to have been successful and we welcome the minister's statement that the epidemic has turned the corner.

This morning, I was concerned to learn that a number of farmers in New Luce were blockading their farms against a visit by slaughtermen who proposed to carry out a cull. Those farmers had heard an announcement—apparently from Downing Street—on yesterday evening's news that there was to be a relaxation of the rules regarding which animals and farms would be affected by the cull.

Does the minister agree that the announcement of that news by Downing Street in a press release rather than before Parliament was disgraceful? Will he condemn it absolutely? Will he give an assurance that every farmer involved in New Luce will be contacted immediately today to clarify whether, under the new rules, their farms will be affected?

With regard to the economic impact, examples have been given of lay-offs at abattoirs. Is anything being done to help the staff who have lost their jobs?

Can the minister give an assurance that the lack of fodder is not causing severe welfare problems? Will his department take any steps with regard to that important matter?

We welcome the relaxation of the movement restrictions. Can the minister state what work has been undertaken on an application to the European Commission to secure a relaxation of the export ban? If that cannot be done immediately for the whole of Scotland, will he investigate the possibility that the provisionally free area can, as a zone of Scotland—as recognised under the OIE, or office international des épizooties, rules—be subject to a limited lifting of the export ban?

Ross Finnie: I will try to address most of Fergus Ewing's points. As he knows, I am responsible for quite a lot nowadays, but I am not responsible for press releases that emanate from south of the border. Therefore, to borrow a phrase, "You might think that, but I could not possibly say so."

The much more important question—and Mr Ewing is not the only member to have approached

me on the matter today—is the inevitable confusion that the announcement has caused. This is a very difficult decision. We have to come to a view on a dividing line at which point we change the policy. I have announced to the Parliament that the policy will change from midnight tonight. There is no practical way in which I can ask our officials or others to review a raft of other cases—the policy will change from midnight tonight.

I understand that the throughput in some abattoirs has been considerably lower than it was before, but the overall throughput is somewhere in the region of 70 or 80 per cent of previous levels, so the situation for abattoir workers is somewhat mixed across Scotland. We have no particular schemes in relation to that and, with regret, abattoir workers are not the only workers who find themselves caught up in the dispute.

As for fodder, I understand that in certain areas, our office, in collaboration with the National Farmers Union of Scotland and others, has been endeavouring to ensure that we take whatever steps we can to ensure the collection of fodder—which is jolly difficult, particularly in infected areas—and its distribution to address the problem that Mr Ewing raises.

On the European Union export ban, I was in Luxembourg the other day, discussing foot-and-mouth and other matters. Fergus Ewing must bear it in mind that it is not just a simple matter of relaxing a ban. The first thing that the meat trade wants to sort out is the domestic Scottish market. As it happens, although the current line delimiting the provisionally free area is administratively right and is justifiable in veterinary and epidemiological terms, it nevertheless places the vast majority of slaughtering capacity north of the line.

The bigger pressure, of which I am very cognisant and which I wish to address, is the need to establish how animals in the at-risk area immediately south of that line can be brought into the domestic flow of livestock. My priority for Scottish agriculture and for the Scottish meat trade is to address that problem, before deciding in precisely which area we want to open up the export ban. The matter is complex and we must consider it as a whole. Members should be assured that I am cognisant of the desire to open up the export ban and of the need to address the real problems in the meat livestock trade. I hope that my statements of today and of previous weeks indicate that I am always willing to undertake reviews on the basis of evidence.

Alex Johnstone (North-East Scotland) (Con): I thank the minister for the advance copy of his statement. There is much to be welcomed in it and it would be churlish of any of us to do anything other than welcome the changes that have been

announced.

Permitting the movement of livestock from 1 May is an essential measure in restarting the provisionally free area's economy. It is essential that we begin again to move stock other than stock that is going for slaughter. I welcome the fact that that date is being reinforced.

On the movement of traded stock, the minister stated that a 21-day standstill would apply. I seek two assurances. First, will the standstill period cover all stock on the farm to which stock is being moved or will it allow the movement of other stock from the farm during that period? Secondly, has the standstill been introduced as a temporary measure to enable progress through the next stage of the crisis or is it likely that the measure will be in place indefinitely? If it is in place indefinitely, it is likely to have a serious economic impact.

I will briefly ask the minister to reassure me on a number of other issues.

The Presiding Officer: Not too many, I hope.

Alex Johnstone: No.

The minister has stated clearly that there is a danger of the disease moving between sheep and cattle. He is aware that circumstances to date have enabled a degree of control to be maintained between the two species. However, in the areas in which the most recent cases have been recorded, sheep and cattle have traditionally been grazed together or adjacently. Will the minister ensure that guidelines on the appropriate separation of sheep and cattle are issued to farmers who put livestock out to grass to ensure that no crossover of the disease occurs? The potential exists for another explosion of the disease if such measures are not applied.

Finally, is the minister discussing with other members of the Cabinet the steps that need to be taken in Dumfries and Galloway to deal with the economic consequences for marts, hauliers and other agriculture-related businesses? Will he promote in the Cabinet a change of remit for Scottish Enterprise Dumfries and Galloway to enable it to deal with the crisis and supply additional resources? Will the Cabinet consider a formal arrangement by which a special economic zone can be established in the area so that banks and other financial institutions feel able to make the arrangements necessary to deal with businesses differently?

Ross Finnie: I will deal with those points as quickly as I can. I am grateful to Alex Johnstone and the Conservative party for their continuing support for the thrust of our policy.

On the movement of livestock, the question of the 21-day rule is serious and difficult. The rule is

certainly not permanent. A discussion document on the 21-day rule has been issued. I am conscious that having introduced measures, we would not wish to remove them all only to find that we were putting them back in place three days later. In no sense does the 21-day rule represent our final view. We will take full cognisance of the representations that are made. I will continue to adjust the policy as I see fit on the basis of the evidence I have on controlling the disease. In the provisionally free area, all stock on the receiving farm will be covered by the 21-day rule. I hope that that clarifies the position.

Alex Johnstone talked about the movement of cattle into grazing zones that are shared with or were previously occupied by sheep. We have already issued guidance advising farmers that, subject to the availability of fodder, they should keep their cattle indoors. We will repeat the guidance that farmers who put their cattle out to graze must in the first instance, and as far as is humanly possible, keep their cattle away from areas that were previously grazed by sheep. That guidance has been issued and will be repeated.

On the matter of informing my Cabinet colleagues, I repeat that I chair a Cabinet sub-committee that embraces all the disciplines in the Cabinet and which is reviewing the impact of the outbreak. My colleagues are therefore informed regularly during the week. In addition, we meet every Tuesday morning.

It seems to me a little premature to declare Dumfries and Galloway a special zone. The correct policy is for us to assess the impact of foot-and-mouth disease across Scotland and to bring strategies and proposals to the Parliament when we have made that assessment. To take steps in isolation would be premature and might result in the wrong conclusions being drawn.

George Lyon (Argyll and Bute) (LD): I will be brief, as I know that many other MSPs wish to ask questions about this important issue.

The minister was right to say that the effects of the crisis on the tourism and agriculture industries go hand in hand. I am disappointed that the minister with responsibility for tourism has left the chamber, because I want to ask about access. In the provisionally free area and in the islands, is the presumption now that everywhere above the Forth-Clyde line is open, or do risks still remain? Do risk assessments remain in place? It is vital that a loud and clear message goes out from the Parliament about the status of those areas. Many MSPs are aware that there are pockets of resistance to access in the islands and throughout the Highlands. The Executive must state clearly what the position is.

Ross Finnie: I thank George Lyon for his

question.

It is not for me, nor is it for the minister with responsibility for tourism, to make declarations about individual cases and individual circumstances. However, I can say one thing absolutely categorically to those who have chosen individually, collectively or corporately to impose restrictions commensurate with my announcement to the Parliament about the degree of risk: it seems entirely logical that, as I have unwound those measures, tourism businesses, individuals and the persons in charge of tourist areas, such as local authorities—although it would be wrong for me to dictate to local authorities—should pay close heed to the substantial reduction in the measures that we are now employing. Everyone must recognise that our announcements on the degree of risk are based on clear veterinary and epidemiological advice. I hope that those in the provisionally free area will read with care the statement that I made today and will come to the obvious conclusion that we are making a substantial reduction in the degree of controls that we impose. They should take full account of that reduction when they assess the possibility of risk in their areas.

Dr Elaine Murray (Dumfries) (Lab): I, too, welcome the measures that the minister announced. I hope that they will go some way towards preserving what remains of the beef and dairy herds in the south-west of Scotland, which are important to the local economy.

I wish briefly to check on two aspects of the new policy. I draw the minister's attention to a couple of documents on the protection of rare breeds and hefted sheep in England and Wales on the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food's website. Is the minister saying that a similar policy will not apply in Scotland?

In the minister's statement to Parliament on 15 March, he suggested that pigs would be treated in a similar way to cattle. However, the guidance from the Scottish Executive rural affairs department suggests that pigs should be treated in a similar way to sheep and that they will be culled if they are within the 3km zone. Today, there is some media interest in a pet Vietnamese pot-bellied pig, named Porky, which lives within 3km of an outbreak that was reported on 7 March. The case highlights the fact that, although there are not many pigs in Dumfries and Galloway, there seems to be a little confusion about how the policy applies to them.

Ross Finnie: I thank Elaine Murray for her general welcome of my announcement. I share her hope that the measures that I have announced will go some way towards saving the beef and dairy herds in Dumfries and Galloway, just as I hope that the effective completion of the cull in the

centre of the infected area will assist the cattle that must now come out into the open.

On Elaine Murray's question about sheep, I must remind the chamber that there are a number of differences between the policy being operated in Scotland and the one being operated down south, particularly in relation to how we address the sheep situation. We are clear that the disease has progressed through sheep and our veterinarians and epidemiologists are quite clear that sheep cause the biggest problem. Therefore, I can only repeat that, on epidemiological and veterinary advice, I am not at this stage prepared to exempt hefted sheep. The evidence shows that there is still a risk from sheep. To start to create a bank of exemptions would undermine the policy. We must stick to the policy. To do so is difficult and decisions are not easy. The policy is not risk-free.

On the question of pigs, Elaine Murray is right. Our assessment is that the risk among pigs is more akin to the risk among sheep than the risk among cattle. However, I will clarify the position in the case to which she refers.

Alasdair Morgan (Galloway and Upper Nithsdale) (SNP): I want to return to the situation in Glenluce, New Luce and the farms surrounding Airyhemming farm. It is my understanding that, after pressure from farmers, my office and, I assume, other offices, the cull of cattle in those areas was suspended until after the minister's announcement. If the cull can be suspended this morning, I cannot for the life of me understand why it cannot be put off totally. I do not see what difference it makes whether the cull is done now or at midnight. We have telephones in Dumfries and Galloway, so it is possible for the department to get in touch with the local veterinary service and to suspend the cull that is meant to take place on the farms near Glenluce and New Luce.

On a wider point, many of the measures announced today require veterinary judgment. Where will that judgment be made? I presume that the minister knows the circumstances surrounding the situation at Airyhemming farm. The local veterinary judgment was that the animals on Airyhemming farm should not be culled, but that judgment was overridden by a veterinary committee in London.

Farmers in my constituency are asking me what on earth is going on and who is making the decisions. Who will make the judgments on the many issues that the minister has outlined that require individual, sensitive judgment?

Ross Finnie: I will clarify Alasdair Morgan's points, although, if he will forgive me, I will not do so now.

I understand the problem in New Luce and

Glenluce. I am well aware of the difficulties that have been caused by the announcement and by a statement made by a local veterinary officer. We will try to deal with them as sensitively as we possibly can. There are also other cases in which, as I have said before, I am in danger of creating a precedent, but I understand the indication that was given. We will try to deal with that.

On veterinary decisions, I am well aware of the case to which Alasdair Morgan referred, but I am not aware of matters being referred to London. That example may have been slightly exaggerated in the telling. As far as I am concerned, the last resort—with one exception for communication—is our chief vet in Scotland, who has supervised and overseen the execution of our policy. We have tried to liaise with vets in England on policy—they are all part of the state veterinary service—but I was not aware of any liaison on implementation. I will have to check whether the situation is different, but I am not aware of it being so. In the overwhelming number of cases, the final decision reposes in Scotland.

The Presiding Officer: I have already allowed this item of business to run well past the allotted time. We must close now, but there are two questions on the same subject on the business bulletin for this afternoon. I have noted the names of those who have not been called. That is not a guarantee that they will be called this afternoon; it is an aspiration.

12:53

Meeting suspended until 14:30.

14:30

On resuming—

Question Time

SCOTTISH EXECUTIVE

Schools (Information Technology)

1. Bill Butler (Glasgow Anniesland) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive what progress it is making in ensuring that information technology in schools is up to date. (S10-3317)

The Deputy Minister for Education, Europe and External Affairs (Nicol Stephen): In its first year—1999-2000—the national grid for learning programme secured a 25 per cent increase in the number of modern computers in our schools. We have already achieved an internet connection for every secondary school and for more than two thirds of primary schools. We have also announced £40 million of additional funds over the next two financial years to sustain and update information and communications technology provision in our schools. We are committed—in “Working Together for Scotland: A Programme for Government”—to bringing the benefits of fast broadband networking to all our schools.

Bill Butler: I thank the minister for his reply. Can he guarantee that, in keeping IT in schools up to date, the Executive will retain its aims of the pursuit of equality and the elimination of poverty?

Nicol Stephen: I can give a very quick answer to that question: yes, we are committed to those aims. Indeed, one of the key considerations in relation to broadband connection is to ensure that every school in every part of Scotland, including rural areas, has access to such connections. As I said, our commitment is to achieve a roll-out of modern computers to all our schools. We have a target of four computers per classroom in every primary and secondary school in every part of Scotland.

Mr Gil Paterson (Central Scotland) (SNP): Are we also up to date on the implementation of protection mechanisms for child users of the internet? I appreciate that the Executive launched “ClickThinking” to empower users, but what measures will be put in place to protect users—especially child users—from pornography and paedophilia?

Nicol Stephen: Gil Paterson is correct. “ClickThinking” was accepted as an extremely good document when it was published, but IT is a fast-moving area and he and other members have pressed me on this matter several times in the

chamber. We are looking to update the advice; this is a matter on which further action will be required at Scottish and UK levels.

Prisons

2. Alex Neil (Central Scotland) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Executive whether it plans to review its contractual arrangements with Premier Prison Service regarding Bowhouse private prison in Kilmarnock. (S10-3289)

The Deputy First Minister and Minister for Justice (Mr Jim Wallace): There are no plans to review contractual arrangements regarding Kilmarnock prison.

Alex Neil: That is a disappointing reply. Is the minister aware that the chief inspector of prisons, Clive Fairweather, has described Bowhouse prison as an “expensive failure”, that the Scottish Human Rights Centre has expressed concerns about prisoners’ safety in Bowhouse and that, at the recent Scottish Trades Union Congress conference, a resolution was passed unanimously condemning Kilmarnock prison as “morally repugnant”? Is not it time that the minister addressed those concerns?

Mr Wallace: Obviously, I am aware of a number of concerns that have been expressed about Kilmarnock prison. I am also aware of the fact that the chief inspector of prisons has held up some aspects of that prison as examples of good practice. Prisoner safety is clearly an important issue for the Executive and Mr Neil will be aware that there are, on a range of issues, contractual obligations on Premier Prison Service regarding the operation of Kilmarnock prison.

Phil Gallie (South of Scotland) (Con): Does the minister also accept—given his comments about the good points that were made in Clive Fairweather’s report—that it has been recommended that elements of what has been established at Kilmarnock prison should be implemented in the Scottish Prison Service?

Mr Wallace: Mr Gallie is right to reflect on that. It is also fair to say that there were some people in, as it were, the public sector of the prison service who felt that their good practice was being ignored. I take this opportunity to say that there are also very good examples of good practice in the public sector.

Trunk Roads (Management and Maintenance Contracts)

3. Dennis Canavan (Falkirk West): To ask the Scottish Executive when it will reply to my letter of 22 December 2000 to the then Minister for Transport and to subsequent correspondence regarding trunk road management and maintenance contracts. (S10-3310)

The Minister for Transport and Planning (Sarah Boyack): I wrote to Dennis Canavan on 20 April about the new trunk roads maintenance contracts. I am still considering whether further steps can be taken on the pensions of those employees who transfer to the new operating companies under the Transfer of Undertakings (Protection of Employment) Regulations. I will write to Dennis Canavan once I have concluded how to proceed.

Dennis Canavan: Is the minister aware that her reply to me earlier this week does not even mention my letter of 22 December, which means that I have been waiting for 125 days for a reply to a letter? Is not that an unacceptable standard from any Executive? Although the award of the contracts to the private sector is now water under the bridge, will the minister give more urgent consideration to the pension rights of transferred employees, some of whom have spent virtually their entire working lives in public service and deserve a firm ministerial commitment that there will be no reduction in their pension rights?

Sarah Boyack: The letter that I wrote to Mr Canavan last week was intended to reply to the points that he made in his letter in December and other contacts that he has made since. We are looking at the matter with the greatest urgency and, when I have a response to make, I will ensure that those members who have written to me—I have answered the other points that they have made on the trunk roads contracts—will get a reply on this issue.

Convention of Scottish Local Authorities (Meetings)

4. Mr Kenneth Gibson (Glasgow) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Executive when it last met members of the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities and what issues were discussed. (S10-3299)

The Presiding Officer (Sir David Steel): I call Angus MacKay. I am sorry for the delay, but I was distracted for a moment. It is nothing personal.

The Minister for Finance and Local Government (Angus MacKay): No offence taken, Presiding Officer.

I last met a cross-party group from COSLA on 28 March, when I received a briefing on the review of COSLA that is now under way.

Mr Gibson: You must have been distracted by the minister’s scalping, Presiding Officer.

The minister will be aware of a letter that COSLA sent to him some days ago expressing “very great concern” about the guidance for local authorities in Scotland on non-domestic rating and hardship relief for businesses affected by foot-and-

mouth disease. Does he agree with COSLA that the more restrictive—relative to England and Wales—guidance issued by the Executive means that the

“Scottish scheme would be inferior to that south of the border and would fail to support many hard pressed businesses which are affected by the foot and mouth crisis”?

If so, will he amend the guidance immediately?

Angus MacKay: The important point about the guidance and the scheme is that they present the opportunity to give immediate and important relief to hard-pressed businesses that are trying to cope with the consequences of the outbreak of foot-and-mouth disease. Although there are areas in Scotland where foot-and-mouth has impacted more heavily—those are the areas in which the 95 per cent Executive-supported relief scheme will operate—all of Scotland is covered by a rating relief scheme with at least 75 per cent support from the Executive. That represents a comprehensive range of support.

Paul Martin (Glasgow Springburn) (Lab): Will the minister assure me that he will take no lectures from Kenny Gibson or any of his colleagues on improving public services? Can the minister clarify which party was in power on Perth and Kinross Council when, rather than build new schools with a private finance initiative programme, it built a new office complex along with a car park for local councillors?

Angus MacKay: I am happy to reassure Paul Martin on his point about taking lectures from Kenny Gibson. I may invest in a pair of earmuffs for future contributions from Kenny Gibson—I will not be taking lectures from him.

Paul Martin referred to the position taken by Perth and Kinross Council. The council indeed went down the path that he mentioned, which was an extremely hypocritical action, given the statements that the SNP makes in this chamber.

Robin Harper (Lothians) (Green): Was the subject of council waste management plans brought up at the meeting with COSLA? When will the plans be made public?

Angus MacKay: Mr Harper may be aware that local authorities in Scotland are bundled into groups—I think that there are 11 of them—which are working closely with the Scottish Environment Protection Agency to develop a comprehensive waste management strategy for all of Scotland, something that has not previously been successfully implemented. I am sure that, when that review is complete, the Executive will be commended for the thoroughness of its approach and the forward-looking nature of the policy. The matter was not raised at the meeting with COSLA, but it is something in which, as Minister for

Finance and Local Government, I take a close interest.

NHS 24

5. Shona Robison (North-East Scotland) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Executive how much money has been spent to date on work by private consultants on NHS 24. (S1O-3285)

The Minister for Health and Community Care (Susan Deacon): To date, NHS 24 has spent £647,329 on private consultants to provide the detailed technical and specialist support that was necessary to establish NHS 24 and its systems and was unavailable from internal Government sources.

Shona Robison: Does the minister believe that that is the best use of NHS money that could instead have paid for many urgently required operations or for magnetic resonance imaging scanners that would treat thousands of cancer patients every year? Members of the medical profession throughout Scotland have criticised the spending. Does she agree with the Scottish Executive insider who said that they thought that people would be sickened when they saw where their taxes were going?

Susan Deacon: I will put the expenditure and efforts in context. NHS 24 will represent one of the most radical developments in the NHS in Scotland for decades. It will fundamentally transform the extent of people's access to advice, services and support, seven days a week, 24 hours a day. In the next three years, we will spend £36 million on developing the service. We would fail in our duty if we did not employ people with the right skills or use the right support to ensure that the service is developed effectively.

Victim Notification Scheme

6. Phil Gallie (South of Scotland) (Con): To ask the Scottish Executive, further to the answer to question S1W-14302 on 3 April 2000 by Mr Jim Wallace, whether it will amend the victim notification scheme so that victims of sexual abuse and serious assault will be notified when sentences are appealed against and notified of the outcomes of such appeals. (S1O-3288)

The Deputy First Minister and Minister for Justice (Mr Jim Wallace): We gave a commitment in the Scottish strategy for victims to offer all victims of crime better information. As part of that review, consideration will be given to notifying victims of sexual abuse and serious assault of the outcomes of appeals.

Phil Gallie: I welcome the minister's response, and I give him a relevant example. An individual who was convicted of serious sexual assault against two young boys was sentenced to three

and a half years in prison. Unbeknown to his victims, he appealed and his sentence was reduced to 18 months. Nine months later, he was back on the streets. The first that one of the victims knew of that was when he had a face-to-face encounter with him.

Mr Wallace: Mr Gallie has pursued the issue assiduously. The fact that he has had to pursue information through parliamentary questions underlines the need to improve the situation all round. The current arrangements to notify victims when a custodial sentence of four years or more is imposed were introduced in 1997, when that was thought to be the priority. We must make improvements. We are trying to do that.

Commission for Racial Equality

7. Michael Matheson (Central Scotland) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Executive when it last met the Commission for Racial Equality in Scotland. (S10-3283)

The Minister for Social Justice (Jackie Baillie): The Executive has regular meetings with the commission. The most recent meeting took place with the Deputy Minister for Social Justice on 6 March 2001.

Michael Matheson: Is the minister aware of the document entitled "Modernising Local Racial Equality Work", which was published by the CRE? That document will result in the abolition of all the racial equality councils in Scotland. Does she support the work that is conducted by organisations such as the Central Scotland Racial Equality Council, which has an important role in central Scotland in tackling racism, as have the many other racial equality councils in other parts of Scotland? Does she recognise that the councils have a continuing and important role in tackling racism in Scotland, or does she support the CRE's wish to abolish them?

Jackie Baillie: That was a lengthy question, but I will attempt to give Michael Matheson an answer. My understanding is that the CRE is engaged in an exercise not to cut provision but to review the racial equality councils and to make them more effective and efficient. That consultation has directly involved the racial equality councils and their funding partners to ensure that we have the best service for the future. As far as I know, the CRE's review is internal. However, as we are keen for practical action to be taken to tackle racial harassment and violence, my officials are taking an active interest in events.

Mr Keith Raffan (Mid Scotland and Fife) (LD): I accept that the restructuring of the racial equality councils is an internal matter for the CRE, but does the minister agree that there would be serious concerns—not only in Mr Matheson's party

but across the chamber—if restructuring led to the loss of valuable local community services? Those services raise public awareness, provide victim support and, over the years, have built up important community networks.

Jackie Baillie: I have a great deal of sympathy with the point that Keith Raffan has made, but the matter is an internal one for the CRE. However, we are keen to see a structure develop that reflects the fact that we live in a multicultural society and that emphasises that we reject all forms of racial harassment and violence and are engaged in positive publicity and awareness-raising campaigns.

Drug Rehabilitation

8. Robert Brown (Glasgow) (LD): To ask the Scottish Executive what plans it has to review the system of funding for drug rehabilitation in the light of the funding position of the methadone programme in Glasgow. (S10-3297)

The Deputy Minister for Justice (Iain Gray): There are no plans for the Executive to conduct such a review. It is for Glasgow City Council, the agencies involved in delivering all aspects of drug rehabilitation and the greater Glasgow drug action team to determine how to use the additional resources provided by the Executive to develop the methadone programme in Glasgow.

Robert Brown: Is the minister aware that around 40 per cent of Scotland's drug deaths and drug-related hospital admissions are in Glasgow and yet the Greater Glasgow Health Board receives only 21 per cent of Scotland's drugs money? Considerable fears have been expressed, most recently last week in the press and media, about the fact that the funding situation of the methadone programme means that it is full up. Does he agree that that background and those stark figures suggest the need for additional funding, particularly for Glasgow, so that the dreadful drugs outbreak in the city can be dealt with effectively?

Iain Gray: It is important to acknowledge that the debate in Glasgow about the methadone programme and its development is taking place simply because close to £9 million in additional resources is being provided over the next three years and more will come from parts of the £100 million package that is still to be allocated. Although treatment resources in Glasgow have increased by 10 per cent, we acknowledge that that will not be adequate to fund the 7,000 places that the methadone review indicated might be the demand. The agencies that sit around the Glasgow drug action team table must work together to improve the integration of the pathways that people use to move on from the methadone programme. The local council also has

additional resources for rehabilitation. Taken together, all that will create opportunities for others to take up the service that the methadone programme provides.

Ms Sandra White (Glasgow) (SNP): Robert Brown is right to say that extra money should be given to Glasgow. I have a general question, which I hope that the minister can answer. I appreciate that the methadone programme has a stabilising effect, but I am concerned about the long-term use of methadone. Is the Executive putting any measures in place to help long-term methadone users towards long-term rehabilitation?

Iain Gray: I make the point again that we have significantly increased resources for drug treatment and rehabilitation in Glasgow. I expect that a significant proportion of that money will improve integrated working, so that, after being stabilised on the methadone programme, people will have opportunities to move on, particularly into training and employment.

It would be quite wrong for me to tell Glasgow how those strategies should be delivered at a local level. The Glasgow drug action team is planning how it will deliver its programme over the next three years and I look forward to receiving its plans. The current debate is a welcome part of that process.

Hospitals (Delayed Discharges)

9. Scott Barrie (Dunfermline West) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive what progress has been made in reducing the level of delayed discharges in Scotland's hospitals. (S10-3316)

The Deputy Minister for Health and Community Care (Malcolm Chisholm): Latest census results show that 6 per cent fewer people were waiting for discharge in January this year than in September last. That improvement, when winter pressures on the NHS and on social services were at their height, reflects the high priority that we have given to reducing delays.

Scott Barrie: I welcome the fact that delayed discharges appear to be dropping. Does the minister agree that effective collaborative working between the health service and local authorities is essential in that regard? Given that, is he able to endorse initiatives such as that established by Fife Council social work services and the Fife Acute Hospitals NHS Trust, which have established an initial response team and assigned two liaison social workers to the Queen Margaret hospital in my constituency, which has led to a considerable drop in the level of delayed discharges? Should that model be followed in other areas?

Malcolm Chisholm: I agree that there has been excellent work in Fife on joint working. That work

was especially targeted at keeping people at home, but I note that Fife also put some of the additional money into extra nursing home places. Over the winter, we gave £34 million specifically for delayed discharge, over and above what was already the largest increase in the health budget for many years. Fife, like many other areas, has made good use of that money.

Nicola Sturgeon (Glasgow) (SNP): I thank the minister for those comments, but given that one in 10 NHS beds remains blocked; that the latest figures show only a marginal reduction; that the net cost to the NHS of delayed discharges is some £80 million a year; and that the minister's party has been in Government for two years, can he indicate when we might expect a significant reduction in the problem of delayed discharges?

Malcolm Chisholm: We are certainly not complacent, but it is remarkable and possibly unprecedented for delayed discharges to be reduced over the winter. We take that seriously, which is why we have established for the first time a census of those who are waiting in hospital for discharge. The median wait over the winter period declined by 10 days, which is highly significant. There is a long way to go, but Nicola Sturgeon ought to acknowledge the progress that has been made.

Mary Scanlon (Highlands and Islands) (Con): Much is said about delayed discharges of the elderly, and we welcome what the Executive is doing, but does the minister acknowledge the problems in psychiatric hospitals? Patients must wait for four weeks to be put on a list for delayed discharge. Does the minister agree that more than 30 patients waiting in New Craigs hospital in Inverness is too many?

Malcolm Chisholm: Mary Scanlon is right—we attach great importance to the elderly. However, mental health is also a priority for the Executive. While progress has been made on that, I acknowledge that much more must be done. More money has gone into mental health in general over the past year—I think it increased by 7 per cent in the NHS sector—and, while I accept that there is still a lot to do, that progress ought to be acknowledged.

Dr Richard Simpson (Ochil) (Lab): I welcome the unprecedented reduction over the winter, especially against a background of higher activity within the health service. However, will the minister now give consideration not to the numbers involved, but to instituting definite time limit guarantees to people who are affected by delayed discharges? In my constituency, a delay of up to two years can occur. Will he consider giving a guarantee similar to those under the NHS plan for in-patient waiting times?

Malcolm Chisholm: Richard Simpson is right to highlight those who are waiting for the longest period—that is a serious problem. There are sometimes particular reasons why people wait for a long time in hospital and I undertake to consider that issue in detail. We would like to reduce the maximum waiting time for people in hospital.

Public Bodies Review

10. Pauline McNeill (Glasgow Kelvin) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive when it will report on its review of public bodies. (S1O-3309)

The Minister for Finance and Local Government (Angus MacKay): I will be making a statement on the review in June.

Pauline McNeill: I am sure that the Parliament recognises the Executive's commitment to reviewing the quality of democratic accountability. Does the minister agree that the role of public bodies that are funded by the Executive is to deliver the Executive's priorities and that, in their operation, they must be truly accountable to the Parliament? Further, will the minister assure the Parliament that, to ensure that we make a quality decision, there will be a thorough and analytical review of non-departmental public bodies and not simply a numerical review of quangos?

Angus MacKay: Pauline McNeill makes a number of important points. As part of its remit, the review that is being conducted will consider the overall number of quangos or NDPBs in Scotland. It will also seek to address questions of accountability, openness, value for money and effectiveness in the way in which those regimes operate. We want to be sure that, where there is a case for a quango or an NDPB—we should not be ashamed to say that there are solid cases for some of them—those organisations operate, as we would expect them to, to the highest standards.

Beyond that, I take on board the other points that Pauline McNeill made. It is our intention that it should not be a one-off review. Once the review has been completed, we expect the remaining quangos to be subjected to on-going review in the years to come.

Alex Neil (Central Scotland) (SNP): I ask specifically about the review of the Scottish Tourist Board. Will a separate and much earlier ministerial statement be made, in the light of the events of the past 10 days? If so, will that statement be made by the First Minister or by the Minister for Enterprise and Lifelong Learning? If the lunch-time reports that the Scottish Tourist Board has spent £200,000 on a worldwide competition, the first prize in which is a stay at a hotel in Perthshire that is apparently both closed down and up for sale, prove to be accurate, will there be a review of the

senior management of the Scottish Tourist Board?

Angus MacKay: I suspect that, within the next month, the only thing that may be closed down and up for sale is the SNP, after it has had a good cuffing in the general election.

I suspect that Mr Neil is referring to visitscotland. He will have to wait until June for the substance of the report on my review.

Miss Annabel Goldie (West of Scotland) (Con): I know that the minister was rendered mute in his previous attempt to address the chamber on the matter of quangos, and I understand his being a little coy about coming forward with his report. However, I am slightly disappointed that that report is not to be made available until June, because I think that we all expect some fairly radical proposals in it. Is the reason for his coyness something other than the general election?

Angus MacKay: I am not quite sure to what Annabel Goldie is alluding. She should not be too disappointed. We had originally pencilled in a date of 31 May for a report on the review. If that spills over into early or mid-June, I hope that she will be able to hold her interest for the short period that it will take to reach the outcome of the review.

Foot-and-mouth Disease

11. David Mundell (South of Scotland) (Con): To ask the Scottish Executive what specific measures it has introduced to alleviate the economic impact of the foot-and-mouth outbreak in Dumfries and Galloway. (S1O-3286)

The Minister for Environment and Rural Development (Ross Finnie): The Executive has already announced a number of measures and is making available significant resources to help alleviate the immediate hardship and distress that is being experienced by individuals and businesses as a result of the current foot-and-mouth outbreak. As David Mundell will be aware, those measures include support being made available to affected businesses and individuals, including farmers, and the setting up of a local farmer-led steering group to advise on recovery issues that affect agriculture. There are additional resources for visitscotland to tackle misconceptions in key markets about the outbreak, as well as rates relief and help for businesses. Agrimonetary compensation and a welfare slaughter scheme will be brought forward. We appreciate fully that the foot-and-mouth outbreak has had a particular effect on Dumfries and Galloway, and we are ensuring that Dumfries and Galloway is benefiting fully from all the additional help that has been provided.

David Mundell: I thank the minister for that answer. I would not say that I am disappointed

that he responded, but I had hoped that Ms Alexander might respond. I wonder whether Ross Finnie will undertake to clarify some remarks that Ms Alexander made when the £13.5 million measures were announced on 28 March. In that debate, when calls for additional funding for Dumfries and Galloway were made by Mr Finnie's party colleague, George Lyon, Ms Alexander said:

"We will not carve money out of the settlement for Dumfries and Galloway, which we recognise is a special case."—[*Official Report*, 28 March 2001; Vol 11, c 962.]

So far, all the money that has been earmarked for Dumfries and Galloway has come from that announced £13.5 million settlement. When will we see some special-case moneys?

Ross Finnie: As members will know, I have been asked to conduct a number of interesting roles, but answering on behalf of Ms Alexander has never yet been one of them.

Members: Not yet.

Ross Finnie: However, as any loyal member of the coalition knows, one puts oneself at the disposal of the First Minister.

To answer David Mundell's question, I do not think that we need to go into the detail. The important point that he made—I am sure that he knows at least part of the answer to his own question—concerns the impact assessment group, which is assessing the detail of what has happened in Dumfries and Galloway, and Scotland-wide, as a result of the foot-and-mouth outbreak.

The work on that, including the valuable contribution that has been made by the plan for Dumfries and Galloway, is being assessed by the ministerial sub-group, which is covering all that. It is all under consideration. We have made clear from the outset that we recognise the distinction between matters that impact directly on the whole of Scotland, and the specific effect that the outbreak has had on Dumfries and Galloway. It would be premature of me to make any announcement on that group's work. The work is under way and David Mundell knows that we are taking it very seriously.

The Presiding Officer: The question is specifically about Dumfries and Galloway, so I will call only Alasdair Morgan from the list of members who have asked to speak.

Alasdair Morgan (Galloway and Upper Nithsdale) (SNP): Does the minister recognise that there is an urgent short-term need for a fund that can be targeted at individually assessed individuals and companies, especially those who may not pay domestic rates, such as agricultural contractors and others? Does he agree that the last thing that some of those businesses need—

but which is what they are being offered—is a visit by a consultant from Scottish Enterprise?

Ross Finnie: One should be cautious about dismissing that. A number of businesses have had such a visit and have said that it has been helpful in their circumstances, because the individual who was visited by the consultant had no real skill in assembling financial information in a way that would allow a bank or other institution to take a sympathetic view of their circumstances, or to make the appropriate application for relief from taxation to the Inland Revenue and other authorities. I would not dismiss the assistance that that advice has given in a number of individual cases.

The question of immediate relief affects not only those in Dumfries and Galloway. We understand that there are real problems. I repeat: to come to a proper policy consideration and strategy for that we are assembling all the information, which changes because of the changing nature of the disease.

Offending on Bail

12. Richard Lochhead (North-East Scotland) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Executive what plans it has to deter offenders from committing further crimes while on bail. (S10-3291)

The Deputy First Minister and Minister for Justice (Mr Jim Wallace): We are reviewing the effectiveness of the provisions of the Criminal Justice (Scotland) Act 1995, which relate to re-offending while on bail. Those provisions made available tougher or "aggravated" sentences for such offenders.

Richard Lochhead: I thank the minister for his answer. Does he agree that it is very demoralising for the police force and for the victims of crime when the police catch criminals only for the courts to release them time and again?

I wrote to Tayside's chief constable—John Vine, who happens to be in the gallery today—for an example of what is happening in Dundee. He told me that one individual on bail in Dundee recently was

"subject to four separate bail orders for various crimes ... :

- ♦ Vandalism,
- ♦ Breach of Bail Conditions,
- ♦ Breach of Bail Conditions,
- ♦ Assaulting a Police Officer & Breach of the Peace (both committed whilst on bail)".

Does the minister agree that that is unacceptable and that he must introduce plans to address this serious failing in the justice system in Scotland?

Mr Wallace: Commission of any crime is unacceptable. I accept that the victims of crime feel especially aggrieved when the offender is on bail. That is why we are examining the effectiveness of the current provisions, which mean that if a person is convicted of an alleged offence committed while on bail, the court can impose an additional fine of up to £1,000, or an additional six months imprisonment. It is important that the effectiveness of that is examined.

The Presiding Officer: I call Johann Lamont.

Johann Lamont (Glasgow Pollok) (Lab): My question has been answered.

Motorola

13. Bristow Muldoon (Livingston) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive what discussions it has held regarding the future of Motorola in West Lothian. (S10-3314)

The Minister for Enterprise and Lifelong Learning (Ms Wendy Alexander): Motorola's announcement on Tuesday that it is consulting on the closure of the Easter Inch facility is extremely disappointing. As we discussed yesterday, in recent weeks my department and Scottish Enterprise have been in constant contact with the company here and in the United States. The First Minister has also contacted the company, and so have many senior figures in the UK Government, throwing their full weight behind our efforts to save the facility.

Bristow Muldoon: I thank the minister for that response. I advise the minister that this morning, along with my colleagues Mary Mulligan, Robin Cook and Tam Dalyell, I met the local authority and Scottish Enterprise Edinburgh and Lothian to discuss the response to the situation. I say first that the response, as announced in the minister's statement yesterday, was warmly welcomed.

On trying to move forward and maintain the economic impetus of West Lothian, I ask the minister to consider, and give a response on, two specific areas. The first is to build upon the existing concentration of knowledge-based businesses in West Lothian and the proximity of the central belt research-based universities, to promote West Lothian as a centre of excellence for research and development. The second area that—

The Presiding Officer: Order. We must have questions, not a speech.

Bristow Muldoon: I am asking the minister to consider two areas.

The Presiding Officer (Sir David Steel): All right, but please do so briefly.

Bristow Muldoon: Secondly, will the minister

consider the location of further public sector jobs in West Lothian, noting that the area currently has a lower than average share of such jobs in Scotland?

Ms Alexander: Livingston has increasingly become the beneficiary of high-tech research and development jobs, which will continue. The closure will change the position of unemployment in West Lothian. One of the factors that the Executive takes into consideration when it examines job dispersal is local unemployment in that particular community. The expectation that West Lothian's position will change substantially in the coming months will be reflected in our considerations.

Mrs Mary Mulligan (Linlithgow) (Lab): Will the minister assure me that, as part of the discussions on the economic strategy, she will speak to her ministerial colleagues and the local authority to address any gaps in infrastructure provision in West Lothian that might deter other companies moving into the area?

Ms Alexander: Yes.

Fiona Hyslop (Lothians) (SNP): It should be noted that all the high-powered, high-profile contacts by this Government and others failed, unfortunately.

Will the Government reflect on the successful policy and style of the German Government on the issue? Furthermore, in her on-going discussions with Motorola, will the minister urgently press that company to ask its work force to release their contact details? Unfortunately, some of the workers do not have direct contact with the workers forum that has been set up to deal with the questions that the management has directed them to deal with, and they might not be back at the plant for several days. Bearing in mind the fact that the management is unfortunately not recognising the unions, we must ensure that the workers receive the answers that they desperately require.

Ms Alexander: It is true that we failed to save the Bathgate plant. When we entered negotiations, we were determined that Scotland should remain the strategic hub of Motorola's operations, and it was important that we tried to secure the future of the planned research and development facility at Livingston and the planned Dunfermline plant.

On the point about the German Government's approach, over recent months, we have been in the closest negotiations to ensure that there was no competitive undercutting with respect to state aid. Furthermore, when my officials and I meet the company at the beginning of next week, we will—as we have done throughout—stress the Government's commitment to partnership and industrial relations and our desire to see that reflected in the way that companies in Scotland

conduct their activities.

Tourism

14. Mary Scanlon (Highlands and Islands)

(Con): To ask the Scottish Executive what additional action is now being taken to assist the tourism industry. (S10-3296)

The Deputy Minister for Enterprise and Lifelong Learning and Gaelic (Mr Alasdair Morrison): Tourism businesses throughout Scotland will benefit from the £13.5 million emergency package of measures that my colleagues Angus MacKay and Wendy Alexander announced on 28 March. A medium to long-term recovery plan for the industry is in preparation.

Mary Scanlon: The Crofters Union has still not signed up to “The Comeback Code”, because of the issue of open grazing. Forest Enterprise still has “Keep Out” notices up, and throughout the Highlands people have downloaded “Keep Out” posters from the Highland Council website and pasted them on public rights of way. As a member of the Crofters Union, will the minister talk with that union, Forest Enterprise and Highland Council to ensure that we send a clear, unequivocal message to ministers? Furthermore, will he confirm who is responsible for keeping people off public rights of way?

Mr Morrison: I happily put on record that I have been a member of the Crofters Union for some 10 or 12 years. The lead minister on the foot-and-mouth issue, Ross Finnie, and his officials are in daily contact with the Crofters Union and the National Farmers Union of Scotland.

It is a matter of concern that Highland Council signage has been downloaded and used, because that is obviously outwith the council’s control. I will happily follow that matter up with the council to find out the exact extent of the use of unauthorised signage.

Although rights of way are the responsibility of local authorities, I ask private landowners to conduct a risk assessment. If there is no risk, they should take down their signs. I make that plea because informal access to the countryside is an essential and integral part of tourism.

Maureen Macmillan (Highlands and Islands)

(Lab): Many people feel that the access forums should be given more clout so that they can twist the arms of recalcitrant landowners who keep their estates closed for insufficiently good reasons. Will the minister indicate whether there is any way to give such forums more teeth?

Mr Morrison: There is no doubt that the behaviour of private landowners will inform much of the debate surrounding the land reform bill that will be introduced by the Deputy First Minister and

my colleague, Iain Gray. I make the plea to private landowners that there is absolutely no room for selfishness in this matter and that it is their responsibility and duty to take the signs down.

The Presiding Officer: Before we begin First Minister’s question time, I invite members to welcome to the VIP gallery the Leader of the House of Lords, the Rt hon Baroness Jay of Paddington. [*Applause.*]

First Minister's Question Time

SCOTTISH EXECUTIVE

Secretary of State for Scotland (Meetings)

1. Mr John Swinney (North Tayside) (SNP): To ask the First Minister when he next plans to meet the Secretary of State for Scotland and what issues he intends to raise. (S1F-1001)

The First Minister (Henry McLeish): I speak to the Secretary of State for Scotland regularly. We have no immediate plans to meet, but I suspect that I may see a great deal more of her over the next few weeks.

Mr Swinney: The privilege is all the First Minister's.

One of the most important industries in Scotland is tourism, which employs more than 180,000 people. As the First Minister reflects on the catalogue of failures that have been associated with the appointment and non-appointment of the chief executive of visitscotland, is he satisfied that the conduct and performance of the Minister for Enterprise and Lifelong Learning meets the standards that he expects?

The First Minister: I acknowledge that that question contains a number of questions. First, however, I put on record my absolute confidence in the Minister for Enterprise and Lifelong Learning. Anyone who was in the chamber yesterday will have seen an excellent job done in enormously difficult circumstances, which is a tribute to the minister. She is talented and hard working. To anyone who wants to take issue with me over that, I suggest that we would serve Scotland better by dealing with what has happened in tourism this week rather than by scapegoating—the worst form of cynicism—which is what the nationalists want to do.

John Swinney asked a serious question about the process whereby we reached where we are. I share the concerns of the Parliament—and of David McLetchie and John Swinney—over where we are. Let us be in no doubt: visitscotland will have to take a long, hard look at what has happened over the past few weeks. It has been asked to do that, and I reassure members that we intend to pursue that to ensure that the process is significantly improved to serve the interests of the 180,000 workers in an industry that generates £2.5 billion in income every year.

Mr Swinney: If I am not mistaken, that was an attempt to scapegoat visitscotland for the fiasco that has occurred. The deputy minister with responsibility for tourism—who is sitting there with

his Hebridean tan—told the Enterprise and Lifelong Learning Committee, on 27 March, that on matters of tourism:

“I have no doubt about it—that Wendy Alexander and, ultimately, the First Minister are accountable”—[*Official Report, Enterprise and Lifelong Learning Committee, 27 March 2001; c 1704.*]

Is it not true that hundreds of thousands of pounds of public money have been wasted on that failed appointment process? If that had happened in any other organisation, the person who was responsible would have got the sack. Is it not the case that ministers in the Executive are able to evade their responsibility for such situations? If the situation had occurred elsewhere, someone would have lost their job. Is it not time that the First Minister demanded higher standards from his minister and that the minister should be invited to go?

The First Minister: I seek the highest standards of performance from all ministers, whether or not they are in the Cabinet. Aside from the slight concerning his Hebridean tan—about which Mr Morrison will not be too worried; I am sure that he will share it with the people in the Western Isles—let us raise the game for SNP members. Here they are again, calling for the Minister for Enterprise and Lifelong Learning to go. Not satisfied with that, they stoop lower and go for the deputy minister with responsibility for tourism. Let us be clear about the facts of the matter, rather than engaging in the political role-playing at which SNP members are becoming expert.

The search for a new chief executive was conducted by visitscotland. It withdrew the job offer made to Mr Lynch after he revealed on Monday that he was, effectively, going to be the holder of an airline operating licence for Global Supply Systems Ltd. Visitscotland decided that that executive responsibility was incompatible with the role of its chief executive.

That decision was supported by ministers. The SNP rightly made the point about the holder of the post having two jobs and David McLetchie has rightly made the point about ensuring that we had someone who would address the issues facing the industry. We took the right decision, we made it quickly and we made it in the interests of tourism and the country.

Mr Swinney: The Minister for Enterprise and Lifelong Learning announced the search for a chief executive of visitscotland, the Minister for Enterprise and Lifelong Learning approved the appointment and the Minister for Enterprise and Lifelong Learning was at the press conference at which the appointment was paraded to the people of Scotland. However, in the process, the Minister for Enterprise and Lifelong Learning and her officials failed to look at the small print of the

man's contract and his details. Is it not the case that members of the Labour Executive are prepared to accept their salary but not the responsibility, which is what people in Scotland expect them to do?

The First Minister: Nothing could be further from the truth, particularly Mr Swinney's final point. I invite the SNP to both raise its game and get a grip of the facts.

Mr Swinney talks about the fine detail. The executive responsibilities that would fall to Mr Lynch as holder of the airline's operating licence were known to us on Monday 23 April. By early evening, decisive action had been taken in relation to the industry and the country.

For the benefit of John Swinney, I will spell out what an airline operating licence entails. Mr Lynch will be ultimately responsible for the safety and operation of two Boeing 747-400 aeroplanes. One cannot turn that sort of responsibility on and off with some non-executive directorship. Nobody would seriously suggest that that responsibility is compatible with the work load and responsibilities that go with being the chief executive of visitScotland.

I invite John Swinney to criticise the Executive but also to raise his game and, like us, to support tourism, its 180,000 workers and the £2.5 billion that it generates for Scotland every year.

Cabinet (Meetings)

2. David McLetchie (Lothians) (Con): To ask the First Minister when the Scottish Executive's Cabinet will next meet and what issues will be discussed. (S1F-1002)

The First Minister (Henry McLeish): The Cabinet will next meet on 1 May, when it will discuss issues of importance to the people of Scotland.

David McLetchie: I am sure that the Cabinet will be interested to know why Mr Rod Lynch ended up making a shorter visit to Scotland than Mr Alasdair Morrison made to Italy. As even the Labour party-loving *Daily Record* pointed out on Tuesday, the Mr Lynch fiasco was further evidence of

"the most astonishing level of incompetence of almost any Government in the democratic world."

That is a wonderful endorsement for Labour's election campaign.

I will leave aside the red herring that is the issue of the airline licence and ask about the nub of the matter. Why is it that the First Minister or the Minister for Enterprise and Lifelong Learning was prepared to sanction the appointment of Mr Lynch as a part-time chief executive of visitScotland

when they must have known that he had already been appointed as chief executive of an air cargo firm?

The First Minister: I understand that, in politics, facts can be an inconvenience. However, perhaps it would be helpful to David McLetchie if we were to go through some of the facts again.

The first that ministers knew of the executive responsibilities that Mr Lynch would have as the holder of the airline operating licence, which I have explained, was on Monday 23 April. We then investigated the matter, contacted Mr Lynch and made a judgment, because there was never the prospect of anyone taking on the post of chief executive of visitScotland as a part-time job, as David McLetchie suggested. We know that, as with Crawford Beveridge, who was the chief executive of Scottish Enterprise, non-executive directorships can mean something. However, Wendy Alexander, Alasdair Morrison and I would be failing in our duty if, after finding out those facts, we proceeded to take on board someone whose job would compete with one of the most important jobs in Scotland, namely, giving tourism a boost and fighting for our country, the 180,000 tourism workers and, of course, £2.5 billion of income.

David McLetchie: I am delighted that the First Minister wants to get to the facts, as I want to give him one. Only hours before Mr Lynch was dismissed, visitScotland issued a statement. It reads:

"Rod Lynch has accepted the position of CEO and Chairman of GSS. The visitScotland Board are aware of this appointment and have been for some time."

Who in GSS would one expect to hold an airline licence: the office cleaner or the chief executive officer? Has Mr McLeish ever in his life—and in his experience as Minister for Enterprise and Lifelong Learning and as First Minister of Scotland—come across a non-executive chief executive? That is the fundamental question. The fact that Mr Lynch had an executive role was well known to everyone for weeks, and was an integral part of the negotiating process. Frankly, if the First Minister did not know something that visitScotland acknowledges that it had known "for some time", that in itself is incompetent, given the importance attached to the appointment of Mr Lynch. Those are the facts of the matter. Why does not the First Minister acknowledge them instead of trying to scapegoat everybody else and avoid responsibility for the situation?

The First Minister: I think that I have tried not to scapegoat anyone. David McLetchie talks about facts. I say this for the third, fourth, or perhaps fifth time this afternoon: the first that ministers knew of the executive responsibilities that would fall to Mr Lynch, as the holder of the airline's operating

licence, was on Monday 23 April. Like David McLetchie, John Swinney and the other members in the chamber, I know that that was not compatible with the requirements of the important job that we had advertised and to which we had appointed him.

David McLetchie may not like the facts, but, in politics, it is often useful to dwell on them. We believe that we have taken the right decision for Scotland and for the tourism industry. The main challenge now is for everyone to work together to ensure that we can move forward, and move forward quickly.

Karen Gillon (Clydesdale) (Lab): The sad truth of the matter is that more people in Scotland probably now know who Rod Lynch is, than know who John Swinney and David McLetchie are.

Will the First Minister guarantee the chamber that there will be a full investigation as to how this sad event came about and as to how such an appointment could have been made, when the man clearly had a conflict of interest? Most important, could he indicate by when a new chief executive of visitScotland will be in place, in order to support the tourism minister at this vital time?

The First Minister: I share Karen Gillon's disappointment, and that of the Parliament—we have made the points about trying to establish some of the facts. Clearly, this must not happen again. There will be a long, hard look at what has happened, and lessons will have to be learned—and I refer to Mr McLetchie's quote from earlier in the week.

The appointment that now needs to proceed will be the subject of early discussions with the Minister for Enterprise and Lifelong Learning and with the chairman and vice-chairman of visitScotland. The key point—and I think that Karen Gillon respected this—is that we have to move forward. I feel badly let down by the process, as does every member of the Parliament. However, in acknowledging that, there is no point in continuing to talk down the industry and the country. Let us move forward—and I want the support of party leaders for that purpose.

Foot-and-mouth Disease

3. Alex Fergusson (South of Scotland) (Con): I draw members' attention to my entry in the register of members' interests.

To ask the First Minister whether the foot-and-mouth disease outbreak in the south of Scotland is under control. (S1F-1015)

The First Minister (Henry McLeish): As my colleague, the Minister for Environment and Rural Development, made clear in his statement earlier today, we are making good progress in our

continuing efforts to eradicate the disease.

Alex Fergusson: I am sure that the chamber will share the degree of pleasure that I take in the First Minister's confidence, and my fervent hope that that confidence is borne out by events to come.

Given the glimpse of optimism to which the First Minister referred, would he agree to turn his attention, and that of the relevant ministers in his Cabinet, to the urgent need of small businesses throughout Dumfries and Galloway and, increasingly, in the Borders, for access to a survival fund? Such access has often been hinted at, but the idea has never been progressed. Does the First Minister agree that that is the only way to give some of the businesses concerned, particularly those involved in agriculture, a similar glimpse of optimism: that they might be able to survive until the recovery plan, which the First Minister received recently from Dumfries and Galloway Council, kicks in?

The First Minister: I acknowledge the sentiments that have been expressed about the implications of foot-and-mouth disease. I put on record the Parliament's appreciation for the incredible work that is being done by all concerned to tackle the problem, including farmers, the Army, the council and a range of others.

We were very pleased to receive from the representatives of the council and the local community the business plan for a way forward for Dumfries and Galloway. I give a categorical assurance that it is being looked at speedily by Ross Finnie's committee. We hope to make further contact over the next few weeks because we want to provide every possible assistance. I see that Alex Johnstone is shaking his head, but the council has produced a very good plan, involving significant sums of public funds. I have told the convener of the Rural Development Committee on many occasions—he accepts it in good faith—that we want to do what we can.

The brunt of the foot-and-mouth outbreak has been borne in Dumfries and Galloway and the Borders. It is up to Scotland, the Parliament and the Executive to respond, and we shall.

Ian Jenkins (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD): Is the First Minister willing to meet representatives of the Scottish Borders economic development forum, when the time is right and it has a well worked-out recovery plan to put to him?

The First Minister: I always look forward to a meeting with Drew Tulley and his colleagues. The answer to Ian Jenkins's question is yes: we will extend the opportunity that we afforded to Dumfries and Galloway to the Borders community as soon as it wishes to take advantage of it.

Lord James Douglas-Hamilton (Lothians)
(Con): I refer members to my entry in the register of members' interests.

Arising from what the First Minister said, I ask whether the Royal Zoological Society of Scotland will receive temporary assistance in view of the massive loss of income that it has sustained as a result of its voluntary closure to prevent the further spread of foot-and-mouth disease in Scotland?

The First Minister: Lord James raises an important issue, which affects a number of organisations, facilities and institutions in Scotland. Those matters are being considered by the appropriate departments. In relation to the Royal Zoological Society, we will drop him a letter outlining what is being considered.

Crime

4. Hugh Henry (Paisley South) (Lab): To ask the First Minister what factors have led to the fall in recorded crime. (S1F-1020)

The First Minister (Henry McLeish): Many different factors influence figures for recorded crime. I nonetheless welcome the 3 per cent reduction in recorded crime last year. "Working together for Scotland" sets out our comprehensive strategy for a Scotland in which people are safer and feel safer. One part of that strategy was an increase in police numbers. As we announced last week, police numbers have reached 15,149—a record level for Scotland.

Hugh Henry: Does the First Minister agree that for many people in my constituency and throughout Scotland, violent crime and the fear of violent crime are a particular concern? If so, does he welcome the initiative at the end of last year that led to a 44 per cent decrease in the number of murders over a three-month period? Does he also agree that efforts need to be redoubled to ensure that violent crime does not pay? Will he guarantee that steps will be taken to ensure that the justice system supports police efforts?

The First Minister: I am happy to agree with the points that Hugh Henry makes. Despite the fact that there has been a 3 per cent reduction in recorded crime, there are areas that continue to give us cause for concern. The handling of offensive weapons is one, and, of course, the drug menace is still at the heart of every Scottish community. I assure members that, through safer Scotland, we will tackle those problems. I commend the initiative that led to a significant reduction in the number of murders, to which Hugh Henry referred. The matter influences every community. It is a non-partisan issue that should get the support of all members. We must move forward, as there is no place for complacency.

Mrs Lyndsay McIntosh (Central Scotland)
(Con): I honour my obligation to congratulate the Minister for Justice, through the First Minister, on police numbers. On balance, given the increased demands, the lead-in time for training, and the expected levels of retirement, can the First Minister give a commitment that he will maintain those police numbers in years to come?

The First Minister: Politics is all about achieving records, and then being asked to achieve more. The increase in police numbers has been done with solid investment by Jim Wallace's department over the past two years. We are investing heavily, not only in police numbers, but in support infrastructure. I would like to think that we will carry on that investment over the next few years. Indeed, the comprehensive spending review allows us to do so over the next three years. There is a massive commitment on the ground to the police—both to police numbers and to the technology and infrastructure that is absolutely essential in the 21st century.

Multiple Sclerosis

5. Tricia Marwick (Mid Scotland and Fife)
(SNP): To ask the First Minister what proposals the Scottish Executive has to help those affected by multiple sclerosis. (S1F-1008)

The First Minister (Henry McLeish): The Executive expects health boards to keep the care and services provided for MS sufferers under continuous review, taking into account the Scottish needs assessment programme report that was published in November 2000 and any other appropriate guidance. "Our National Health: A plan for action, a plan for change" commits the Executive and the NHS in Scotland to working with support groups to ensure that the needs of people with chronic, enduring conditions like MS are met.

Tricia Marwick: The First Minister is aware that the SNAP report concluded that services for people with MS are inadequate, fragmented and vary from health board area to health board area.

Malcolm Chisholm, in a letter today to the Multiple Sclerosis Society in Scotland, said:

"MS specialist nurses have enormous potential to improve patients' quality of life".

He went on to say:

"They are probably the quickest way to bring a demonstrable improvement for individual patients".

Therefore, will the First Minister consider submissions from the Multiple Sclerosis Society and encourage health boards to provide specialist MS nurses in every health board area in Scotland?

The First Minister: I think that the Parliament would concur with Tricia Marwick that MS is a serious condition, of which the incidence in

Scotland is very alarming indeed.

The Minister for Health and Community Care heard Tricia Marwick's comments. I was quite happy to say to Tricia Marwick during a private discussion prior to question time that there could be further discussion on this matter.

It is vital that issues affecting MS are considered, and the Minister for Health and Community Care is doing that. I am sure that we can fix up some way of considering in more detail the points raised by Tricia Marwick.

Dr Richard Simpson (Ochil) (Lab): I welcome the First Minister's response.

As part of the implementation of "Our National Health: A plan for action, a plan for change", will the First Minister ask his colleagues with responsibility for health and community care to ensure that, as proposed in the plan, high-quality counselling and written information about MS are provided? Sadly, such counselling and information are lacking at present. Will the First Minister ask ministers to establish at least some of the pilots that were recommended in the SNAP report to which he referred?

The First Minister: I am getting approving nods from the Minister for Health and Community Care, who is sitting two seats along from me.

The points raised by Richard Simpson are being dealt with by the Minister for Health and Community Care and by our new plans. I would like to think that we will see some positive progress. While progress is being made, a lot more could be, and will be, done.

Rural Transport

The Presiding Officer (Sir David Steel): We now come to the debate on motion S1M-1868, in the name of Sarah Boyack, on rural transport, and two amendments to the motion. A lot of members wish to speak in the debate, so I am anxious to get started. I invite Sarah Boyack to speak to and to move the motion in her name. [*Interruption.*] We ought to begin.

15:33

The Minister for Transport and Planning (Sarah Boyack): It is important that we debate this issue in Parliament this afternoon. For too long, transport was at the bottom of the previous Government's priorities and rural transport was starved of investment. With the election of a Labour Government in May 1997, we saw new impetus, new investment and new determination to improve rural transport.

The early creation by Labour of the rural transport fund brought new investment of more than £14 million, creating 380 new rural services—mainly bus services, but including some ferry services and support for air services—and supporting 100 new rural community transport projects.

There is a new focus on lifeline services, with investment in new airport terminals at Kirkwall and Stornoway and two new vessels for Caledonian MacBrayne services to the small isles and on the Uig to Tarbert and Lochmaddy service. That investment is all part of our record support for lifeline services, with a record investment of £19 million this year.

Our Labour-Liberal Democrat coalition built on that investment in the spending review by allocating an extra £60 million to enhance transport in the Highlands and Islands. The rural transport fund—which has already backed many crucial initiatives for isolated communities—will expand by £4.5 million over the same period, to £18 million. That is a 33 per cent rise.

Those figures are important, but the real difference is in the impact on individuals and communities throughout rural Scotland. The coalition recognises the importance of vital links to remote and rural communities. That is why we are prioritising those links and providing record levels of support for Highlands and Islands Airports Ltd and Caledonian MacBrayne. The new contract for northern isles services will bring three new vessels, timetable improvements and lower fares.

The new investment in airport terminals at Kirkwall and Stornoway will improve the travelling

experience for all who use those vital airports. The investment will particularly benefit passengers with accessibility problems. Accessibility needs to be improved in the new facilities.

The new instrument landing system at Kirkwall will improve the reliability of flights in and out of Orkney. Record assistance to HIAL—£16.2 million in 2001-02—keeps costs down for users of the company's 10 airports. Without subsidy, 782,500 passengers last year would have had to pay much higher fares and many would not have been able to travel.

The new rural transport fund, which was launched in 1998, aimed at tackling underinvestment in rural transport by improving scheduled services, providing massive support to rural community transport and supporting rural petrol stations that are most vulnerable to closure. The fund is targeted at those who need it most and shows our commitment to social justice, with its emphasis on funding allocations to remoter areas with the most widely dispersed populations. Local authorities with a rural population benefit. The only parts of Scotland without direct benefit are the four city authorities. That testifies to our delivery of social justice.

Rural community transport investment is targeted at those who cannot use conventional public transport or where conventional public transport is uneconomical.

The rural petrol stations grant scheme helps small petrol stations in particular to carry out capital works that they could not otherwise afford. The scheme maintains a network of vital rural petrol stations. Its emphasis has now changed to ensure that we can help to promote the supply of liquefied petroleum gas in rural areas.

More than 350 new and improved bus services are running as a direct result of Executive grants to local authorities. Those are backed up by new powers in the Transport (Scotland) Act 2001. I want to give some sense of the qualitative change that we are beginning to deliver. Recent evaluation shows that a high proportion of the users of those services had no access to a car and that one third would not have been able to travel without them. In the remoter areas, the impact is even more dramatic. Half of all journeys on those services would simply not have been made without our investment. That is clear proof that we are enabling people to move about in rural areas.

Rural community transport initiatives have supported 100 projects throughout rural Scotland. They target remote areas in particular. They also target assistance for people who are not able to use traditional public transport services or for whom scheduled services are not the most efficient way of delivering transport.

The kinds of projects that we have been able to assist have included group hire schemes in Annandale and Ellon, dial-a-bus schemes in Buchan and on Lewis, social car schemes in Badenoch and Strathspey and in Perthshire, the community ferry between Kilchoan and Tobermory, and development officers who help to empower communities to devise and deliver their own solutions to their transport needs.

For rural community transport, our evaluation shows that 75 per cent of journeys would not have been made without the schemes that we support. We are getting people out of their homes, getting them moving and getting them involved and included in the community life that most people just take for granted.

I am keen that we build on the work that has been done so far and I pay tribute to the vital role of the Community Transport Association in actively supporting local groups. I can announce today that I am awarding another £300,000 over the next three years to the CTA to expand its work in rural Scotland. The CTA has proven its worth. We want it to do more. The new money will allow it to employ a second rural worker and support even more groups.

I will give a practical example—the Wigtownshire community transport project. It shows the power of the rural community transport initiative and is a good example of joined-up government. Just over two years ago, I gave a grant to establish the project in Wigtownshire to co-ordinate the considerable resources that were already available in the area and to involve a range of agencies, such as social work services, community health services and voluntary organisations. The project also includes work on a range of initiatives to support people with disabilities, to raise awareness of transport issues for people with disabilities and to identify opportunities for new ways to deliver transport.

Part of the project was a study into the requirements for a car scheme in the Wigtownshire area. It identified the problem of people becoming increasingly isolated and socially excluded because of their inability to obtain transport. The study highlighted the need for a more demand-responsive transport service—different from the approach that we have traditionally taken. As a result of the study, the co-ordination project applied for a further grant to purchase a small multipurpose vehicle to address the more individual needs of the community. Last month, I was delighted to be able to give the go-ahead for a further grant of £26,000 for the purchase and operation of a purpose-built vehicle. The small projects are as critical as some of the big projects.

David Mundell (South of Scotland) (Con): I welcome the project the minister refers to, but is she aware that Stagecoach is withdrawing ordinary public bus services in the Wigtownshire area and considering the closure of the bus depots in Whithorn and Stranraer? That will have a serious effect on bus services in the area. Although the project that the minister refers to is welcome, it must be seen against a backdrop of ordinary public services being withdrawn.

Sarah Boyack: I am aware of the problem that David Mundell identifies. That is why I have had discussions with Russell Brown. I know that Elaine Murray is also very interested in the subject. Russell Brown, the MP for the area, has a meeting arranged with Stagecoach. The issue is Stagecoach's services in that part of the world. David Mundell, as a list MSP, will know that the problems go wider than small individual areas. We have the problem of the deregulated bus market across Scotland. Through our community transport initiatives and our rural transport investment, we are trying to build on the services.

Does Mr Crawford want to correct me on something?

Bruce Crawford (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP): Just to say—

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Mr George Reid): Order. If you are making an intervention, Mr Crawford, on your feet please.

Bruce Crawford: I just wonder what powers and responsibilities Russell Brown has, as an MP, regarding rural transport. Is that not the responsibility of Alasdair Morgan? Is what the minister is talking about not really all to do with Labour presentations before the general election?

Sarah Boyack: Absolutely not. I regularly receive representations from MPs and MSPs. Regardless of their party, I listen to what people tell me about what is happening in rural areas. It is important that such information is fed through, because it is the Scottish Parliament that has the powers to improve rural services and put new investment into them. I thought that Mr Crawford was going to correct me because I had got somebody's name wrong.

The other key area in which we are investing new resources through our grant scheme is rural petrol stations. So far, 19 petrol stations have been assisted with the installation of new tanks or pumps. That has helped to provide four new LPG outlets in the Highlands and Islands. There have been particular benefits in Ardnamurchan and Coll. In Ardnamurchan, two petrol stations closed before the introduction of the scheme, leaving only three to serve the area. All three were very vulnerable and needed major investment to bring them up to European environmental standards.

Where there was not a prospect of a return on that investment for the operator, the rural petrol stations grant scheme has provided the catalyst for partnership with the local enterprise company and the local authority, and for European funding, to allow the operator to replace tanks—one of which was 60 years old—and pumps. That has kept the petrol stations open as a vital resource for locals and tourists alike. Everyone in those communities is very keen on such projects. They regard their rural petrol stations as giving vital local access.

On Coll, the community owns the petrol. We supported it in renewing tanks and pumps. The next nearest petrol station to islanders on Coll is four hours away by boat, in Oban. Our grant scheme has made a real difference in keeping that community viable.

Rural Scotland has benefited not only from the specific support that we have provided through our rural grants: rural areas have also gained from national programmes such as the public transport fund, investment in trunk roads and freight facilities grants to railways. Public transport fund investment has supported projects across Scotland. Benefiting rural Scotland are the Eriskay causeway project, the Sound of Barra integrated transport project in the Western Isles and a new vessel for the Corran ferry in the Highland Council area. Eriskay is one of the most peripheral areas of the UK and the causeway will reduce the isolation of islanders, increase access to employment opportunities, health care and leisure facilities, and reduce travel time and costs.

The causeway to South Uist is expected to be complete in the autumn and improvements to ferry services across the Sound of Barra will be completed next year.

The new Corran ferry will increase capacity for all traffic, particularly coaches and commercial traffic. It will provide improved links with Ardnamurchan, Morvern and Mull and will reduce traffic on fragile local roads. That new vessel is just coming into service.

We have also invested in our trunk roads network. In March, I announced a £680 million investment package over the next three years. It sets out a programme of smart, targeted improvements across Scotland that will make a real difference to local people. Of the 63 schemes that have been announced, a significant number will help to improve strategic road links in rural areas. There are 12 schemes in south-west Scotland, on the A75, A76 and A77. There are major improvements to the A1 and A68 in and around the Scottish Borders. There are seven schemes in the north-east and junction improvements on the A9 at North Kessock and Bankfoot. Further targeted schemes in rural areas

include the upgrading of the A830 between Arisaig and Kinsadel, and the replacement of the main deck of the A87 on the Shiel bridge. The total cost of those schemes amounts to more than £92 million in the next three years alone.

I am looking at bringing forward further schemes later in the year. In particular, we are considering the completion of the A830 route to Mallaig. Tenders have been received for that £11 million project and we are considering what more could be done. We are currently examining options prepared by consultants for a series of improvement works to the A9 north of Helmsdale and will look hard at progressing our top priorities.

Our freight facilities grant is opening up opportunities across rural Scotland. It is particularly worth highlighting the new rail freight opportunities from the central belt to Inverness, Wick and beyond.

We have delivered an awful lot, but there is much more still to do. We cannot turn around the previous lack of priority and underinvestment in one go. However, the Labour-Liberal Democrat coalition is making a real difference to people's lives in rural areas and to rural communities.

I find the suggestion in the SNP amendment that we are complacent outrageous. If my Executive colleagues would give me more money, I would spend it. Government is about tough choices—not just in my portfolio, but across the Executive. I could spend more money in every area of rural transport. Over the next three years, our programme will allow us to do just that. I call on the SNP to acknowledge that we have made progress and that, at least, we have made rural transport a high priority and are keen to do more.

In respect of the Conservative amendment, I am very keen to take forward route action plans across our rural areas. We have yet to present our conclusions on the Enterprise and Lifelong Learning Committee report, but we will do so in due course. It is a constructive and helpful report. In suggesting that I am not keen to accept the Conservative amendment, I would point out that that is not because we do not want to see action on both those issues in the future, but that we need to consider them properly.

We have done a lot, but there is a lot more to do. Our increased funding will deliver more over the next three years. We have a lot of which to be proud.

I move,

That the Parliament welcomes the Executive's commitment to improving transport in rural Scotland, notes the progress that has been made by investing in lifeline air and ferry services, rail and bus services, community transport, petrol stations and roads that serve remote and rural communities, and recognises the vital role that these

record levels of investment play in improving people's lives in rural Scotland.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Bruce Crawford. I will be quite relaxed about time, Mr Crawford.

15:48

Bruce Crawford (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP): Thank you, Presiding Officer.

We welcome the opportunity to debate rural transport in Scotland. That said, I was very disappointed to read the Executive's motion. The Executive says that it is committed, making progress and investing at record levels, but the motion does not give even a hint of a recognition that huge problems still exist with rural transport in Scotland. We heard only a tiny bit from the minister, at the very end of her speech, about some of the problems. If she wants more money in her budget, she could find it from the Barnett squeeze. The levels of expenditure in Scotland on transport over the next three years are due to grow by only 16.1 per cent compared with 23.1 per cent in England—that is a gap of £180 million. She should go see the chancellor.

As far as complacency is concerned, either the Executive does not have a clue about the challenges faced by rural communities or it is beginning to believe its own spin. In the past couple of weeks, I have travelled throughout Scotland to gain first-hand experience of the type of problems that local people face. Let us begin in the north-east, with the town of Elgin, which is a good example of a rural town that could benefit hugely from greater integration and targeted investment.

Elgin sits on the main rail line between Inverness and Aberdeen—a rail line between two of Scotland's cities that serves many rural communities along its route. For a minor level of investment in the Orton loop, improvements at two platforms and some expenditure on modernising signalling, an hourly service could be achieved between Aberdeen and Inverness, taking 25 minutes off the journey, which could transform the service. That would have the benefit of taking the pressure off the A96, which the locals are screaming requires upgrading.

The A96 is bad enough, but the journey south on the A95 to link with the A9 at Aviemore is horrendous. The A95 is in no shape to handle the large number of trucks that travel up it each day. For example, the three major supermarkets in Elgin alone generate 30 trips per day on the route. Elgin also boasts many other national chains and superstores. All their trucks are trundling up and down the A95. Added to that mix is the volume of traffic generated by the whisky industry, which

transports billions of pounds-worth of product on the route.

One notable malt distillery has more than £2.5 billion-worth of product on its site alone. Incredibly, on the outskirts of Elgin town centre there is a redundant rail goods yard that is still in the ownership of Railtrack. Here is a prime example of where we could get goods moving on to rail from an A-class road. Here is an example of where a modal shift could be achieved for real and commitment to rural Scotland demonstrated.

The Deputy Minister for Transport and Planning (Lewis Macdonald): I take the point that Mr Crawford is making. Does he accept that the A95 and A96 were included in the list of investments that were announced only a few weeks ago and that the Orton loop, which he describes as an important rail improvement, is one of the projects that is under consideration in the incremental output statement?

Bruce Crawford: It is time to stop considering, and time to do, because communities are looking forward to growth and movement.

When the Executive delivers the sort of step change that Elgin requires, it will deserve to be congratulated and I will be there to congratulate it. The problem in Elgin is the sort of problem that is being faced by rural towns throughout Scotland. From Wick to Stranraer, from Jedburgh to Portree, rural towns throughout Scotland are full of ambition and opportunity but are being held back from achieving their potential by decades of underinvestment in their transport infrastructure.

Scotland is richer now than at any time in her history, but many parts of rural Scotland are underachieving because successive Governments have failed to invest at the required level, or have erected barriers to progress. Surely no community in Scotland has seen so many barriers to achieving its potential erected as that on the Isle of Skye. Not only did it lose its airport in 1987, incredibly it was saddled with prohibitive costs to cross a private bridge. Furthermore, it costs £22, even offpeak, for two people and a car to travel by CalMac ferry to Mallaig—only to be met with only three trains per day into Glasgow, and one bus. The Executive parties promised to remove the tolls, but failed, and have left Skye with damaging additional costs. When the SNP says it will remove the tolls, it will. We will not let those people down.

And so on to the south-west and the scandalous lack of expenditure on the Euroroute, the A75—a Euroroute on which one can travel from Scotland to Italy and go through only three villages, all of which are in Scotland. Stranraer is the second-busiest port in the UK. Not only is it important to the south-west of Scotland, it is central to Scotland's economic well-being, yet it is starved of

resources while the A5/A55 route from Holyhead gets countless millions. When will the Executive put up the £75 million to bring the A75 up to an appropriate standard? Surely the foot-and-mouth crisis affecting Dumfries and Galloway is enough to make the Executive cough up the required amount. It is time to match the ambition of the people of Dumfries and Galloway. It is time to match the ambition of the ferry companies. Indeed, it is time to match the ambition of the Irish, who are investing heavily in their side of the route. When will the Executive get the job done?

In "Rural Scotland: A New Approach", the Executive says that it

"recognises the concerns of many about inadequate or non-existent public transport; unreliable and expensive lifeline links; and high motoring fuel prices."

The Executive will be judged not on its concerns but on the solutions it finds to help rural communities to build on their economic and social structures. A year ago, in "Rural Scotland: A New Approach", there was enough humility to recognise that problems exist. Nothing much has changed for the people of Scotland in that year, but the Executive's motion would have us believe that all is well. The people of rural Scotland want the Executive to recognise the reality of the situation rather than self-congratulatory pap. I have news for the Executive—neither we nor the people of rural Scotland are fooled. The Executive is living in a fantasy land of complacency, whereas we are prepared to face the hard realities.

I move amendment S1M-1868.1, to leave out from "welcomes" to end and insert:

"recognises the crucial role an integrated and modern transport infrastructure can play in improving economic performance and quality of life in rural areas; expresses deep concern that increases in expenditure on Scotland's transport infrastructure will rise at only half the level planned for England; calls upon the Executive to improve the strategic overview and infrastructure/funding delivery mechanisms, and regrets the complacency demonstrated by the Executive in failing to deliver the solutions needed to meet the very real problems being faced in rural Scotland as a result of inadequate transport provision."

15:56

Mr Murray Tosh (South of Scotland) (Con): I will be grateful if the clock for timing speeches is returned to zero when I reach the fifth minute of my speech.

I say to Bruce Crawford that we knew that the SNP was in considerable difficulty in Inverness, Perth and Galloway. From his early comments about Elgin, it is most gratifying to realise that we are doing rather better in the Moray constituency than we had realised.

It is informative that Bruce Crawford considers people in terms of fantasies. That is the only

conceivable explanation for his suggesting that it is harder and dearer to reach Skye today than ever in its history. People can cross the bridge in seconds, for quite a little bit less than the ferry used to cost. Whether or not people like the Skye bridge, Bruce Crawford's point was absurd—and was perhaps his best.

As members know, I like to be positive when I can be. In framing an amendment to the motion, I saw no reason to belittle Sarah Boyack's efforts to try to improve rural transport. I felt a little less charitable when I realised that she had invented the subsidy to CalMac and HIAL and the concept of spending on transport in rural areas, but I realise that she too must have her initial rhetorical flourish. I acknowledge the good that can be done by the freight facilities grant, the public transport fund and many of the initiatives in the Transport (Scotland) Act 2001. I counsel some caution against supposing that, because of that, all problems are transformed.

Mr Mundell talked about bus services in Galloway. I was most gratified by the mature way in which Sarah Boyack announced that she was discussing the bus problems in Galloway with the member of Parliament for Dumfries. I take it that that means that at last Labour will no longer criticise MSPs dealing in issues for Westminster members—as the obverse is acceptable—or list members dealing with matters in constituency members' areas. If we hear that again, we will tell the minister about Russell Brown and Galloway.

Sarah Boyack: May I make a brief intervention to put information on the record?

Mr Tosh: Yes. We like what is on the record.

Sarah Boyack: Mr Brown was passing on representations from his constituents. I responded to Mr Mundell's points about transport problems in south-west Scotland. I understood that he was making points as a regional list member. I hope that that is a helpful clarification.

Mr Tosh: I am most grateful for that. I take it that whenever we make representations about points that our constituents have raised, there will be no more precious territoriality in the responses that we receive from ministers or from some Labour back benchers. We have established an important milestone today. We have achieved a level playing field. It is a tribute to the fairness and generosity of Sarah Boyack that she is the one minister who has given that clear signal.

We will oppose Sarah Boyack's motion not because of what it contains, but because of what it omits. David Mundell referred to the difficulties in Galloway. In one of the local newspapers for the Borders, I read about the withdrawal of a series of post bus services, because people are not using them. I say that out of sorrow for those who will

lose the services and to make the point that one of the principal reasons why rural bus and train services do not always work is that people prefer to use cars. Cars remain an essential ingredient of any answer to our rural transport strategy. That fact is not included with any conviction in the Executive motion today.

I rather thought that the Executive might accept my amendment. My positive intention in lodging it was to redress the balance between car use and public transport. The fact is that, whether the transport budget is at record levels, that is not the case for road construction. Construction expenditure on roads is very significantly less than it was in the middle and early 1990s.

In an answer that the minister gave me this week on trunk roads expenditure it is clear that, in the middle years of this decade, the major road commitments that she has made—supported by all parties around the chamber—are likely to squeeze out expenditure on rural road priorities, unless there is a very significant further increase in her budget. At this point, I have to say that my support for the minister sometimes knows no bounds. I want to see her with more resources in her budget and I am delighted to hear that she is campaigning for just that.

Des McNulty (Clydebank and Milngavie) (Lab): Does Murray Tosh accept that when his colleague Lord James Douglas-Hamilton and the Conservative Government were spending large amounts of money on road construction in the early and mid-1990s, a large proportion was spent not on rural roads, but on ring roads around the Edinburgh area?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I ask Mr Tosh to begin to wind up.

Mr Tosh: Sometimes Lord James Douglas-Hamilton begins to qualify as the wisest fool in Christendom. He would have been looking after his own constituency and regional interests. However, when he was minister with responsibility for roads, he spent money right across Scotland.

If I can return to the Borders, I can think of little that has been done in the Borders area that compares to the expenditure of the last Government in taking traffic out of places such as Kelso, Melrose and Newton St Boswells. The central Borders area was given an internal roads network that was second to none. Similar progress was made in Ayrshire. The problems are the links outside—in the middle of the Borders there is not really a severe difficulty. The same is true in many other parts of Scotland. The Conservative Government left a programme of work and there is work still to be done. The minister says that she wishes work to be done, but she will not get it done without a commitment to an increased

budget.

The minister is fond of talking about tools in the toolbox, but the one tool that she does not have in her ministerial toolbox is a mechanism to allow local authorities to deal with their local road priorities. Once their priorities reach about £1 million or £2 million, they go beyond the limits of what is practical within their capital consents. If she is able to redress the council roads programme and the rural trunk roads programme, and if she can do something to fulfil the broad commitment on rural fuel prices that she gave in her speech, she will deserve greater support today at 5 o'clock than she will receive. Although I will vote against her, I wish her well in realising those long-term objectives.

I move amendment S1M-868.2, to insert at end:

"also recognises the significance of car transport in rural areas, and urges the Executive to pursue the options outlined in the Enterprise and Lifelong Learning Committee's 4th Report 2001, *Report on the Inquiry into Fuel Prices in Remoter Rural Areas*, to acknowledge the reduction in expenditure on trunk roads construction since the mid-1990s and to ensure that greater resources are made available in coming years for spending on route action plan schemes in rural areas and local authority roads."

16:03

John Farquhar Munro (Ross, Skye and Inverness West) (LD): I am delighted to take part in today's debate and to support the Executive's position. The Scottish Executive has developed and promoted a wide range of policies to address the problems and issues that are associated with rural transport. That has been evident over the past two years. Many of the initiatives have to be welcomed as there is ample evidence to confirm that the funding schemes make a real and significant contribution to many of the transport problems in our rural communities.

It is accepted that dispersed populations and low densities make the effective provision of viable public transport services more problematic. For instance, distances to services are longer and less direct, which, in turn, increases travel times and costs. That creates barriers to employment and employment training and imposes a degree of social exclusion that is quite unacceptable as we progress from the beginning of the 21st century.

In many circumstances, the public transport facilities that are available do not operate to a timetable that is convenient and appropriate to the needs of the travelling public. In many instances, the public transport services seem to disregard the need to establish and adhere to an integrated and co-ordinated transport timetable, which would be an advantage to all concerned.

The Rural Development Committee, which

recently inquired into the impact of changing employment patterns in rural Scotland, found that, of all the issues mentioned at its public meetings and in the consultation responses, transport was the most common. The committee concluded that

"the need for access to transport, and the inadequacy of public transport/the absolute necessity of holding a driving licence"

were some of the biggest barriers to employment in rural areas. The committee recommended that the Executive should tackle the issue as a matter of urgency. I repeat its plea.

The rural transport fund, which was established in 1988 to assist local authorities to support rural transport services and related facilities, has been well received. It is a special fund that can be utilised to support air, rail, bus or ferry services. I am pleased to say that, in the first year, that additional funding allowed Highland Council to approve 40 new transport contracts and 10 enhanced services. Similar schemes were undertaken in Grampian, Argyll and its offshore islands, and the northern isles of Orkney and Shetland. The budget for the rural transport fund is £5.5 million in this financial year.

Rural councils can also benefit from another closely related funding source, the public transport fund, which is accessed on a competitive basis. This year, it will have some £40 million to support transport infrastructure. I mention a few of the developments that have been supported to date, to show members that it is spread around the country: the Ellon park-and-ride, which received £600,000; Alloa transport interchange, which received £300,000; Corran ferry replacement, which received £265,000; the Perth bus and cycle priority route, which received £423,000; and—surprise, surprise—the Eriskay causeway, which came out top of the league with £4.1 million. A lot of good work has been done.

Smaller community transport projects secure funding through the rural transport grant scheme, which assists voluntary groups and organisations to meet the transport needs of the elderly and disabled, youth groups and others with a justifiable social need. However, one of the major support packages is accessed through the freight facilities grant, which we have heard about today. We hope that the grant, which is intended to encourage the transfer of freight from road to rail, will help to reduce the high volume of commercial vehicles on our congested road network. If there is one criticism, it is that applicants to that source of funding are concerned at the delay in approving applications. I understand that that currently extends to something like six months. I ask the Executive to review the process with some urgency.

As I said at the outset, I fully support the

Executive in its attempts to improve all aspects of rural transport and welcome the finance that has been put in place. As those initiatives begin to improve road transport in rural Scotland, they will demonstrate to everybody that we should not lose sight of the concept of an integrated transport system, not only for the Highlands and Islands but for our whole transport system.

16:09

Cathy Jamieson (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (Lab): I welcome Sarah Boyack's statement, especially the announcement that there will be increased resources to enable the Community Transport Association to have a further development worker to ensure that rural community transport projects are supported. I will return to that issue later.

It is important to remember that all the work that the Executive has done on rural transport has been in the wider context of ensuring that social inclusion is at the heart of the agenda in rural development. As the constituency member for Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley, which takes in a significant rural area, I came to the Parliament with high expectations that things would be delivered that would improve the quality of life for people in my constituency. Two years into the Parliament, I can certainly say that, contrary to Bruce Crawford's claim that nothing has been delivered and that a Parliament or a minister will be judged on what has been delivered, the constituents in my area know that the Executive has delivered and will continue to deliver in future.

Money from the public transport fund has gone into supporting some of the rural bus services. There have been improvements to facilities such as bus stations and to the village gateways and traffic-calming measures in some of the villages on the A77. We have seen a significant input into trying to take some of the heavy coal and timber freight, which has been a problem for some time, off the roads and put it on to rail.

One of the most significant developments has been the amount of money that has been put into a rural community transport scheme in the East Ayrshire coalfield social inclusion partnership area. That scheme will break new ground in bringing together the people in the local community who are going to run and manage the scheme. There is funding from the Scottish Executive and support from Scottish Enterprise Ayrshire. There is also support from the health authorities and from the local authority through the SIP scheme.

Those people are producing a community transport scheme that intends to run two buses and a number of people-carriers, which will be specially adapted for people with disabilities. It will

provide services in those rural areas that have so far not had access to a fully integrated public transport network. The scheme will also meet the specific needs of people in the area, including some of the young folk in the Doon Valley who want to avail themselves of facilities such as youth projects in the Cumnock area. Until now, people who suffer from disabilities have had opportunities through dial-a-bus and other schemes. They will now find it much easier to get access to resources that will allow them to carry out their business.

It is also important to note that there is still work to be done. The minister would be surprised if I did not make some reference to further improvements that I would like in the constituency in due course. I particularly hope that she will give some consideration to further work on the A77. I can see Murray Tosh mouthing the name Maybole—that is certainly one place that I was going to mention. I would also like the minister to consider some of the problems that are being experienced because of the increased traffic on the A70, which is not a trunk road at the moment, although I think that a strong case could be made for it to become one. I am sure that the minister will give some consideration to those points.

I do not want to seem ungrateful for what has been received. There is no doubt that the minister has delivered a huge amount in terms of rural transport, not just in my constituency but, as we have heard from John Farquhar Munro and will no doubt hear from others, right across Scotland. That is the important thing. We must have a strategy that looks at all the communities in Scotland. Yes, I want to represent my constituents and ensure that they get the best out of the situation, but I recognise that there are other areas that require input. I am prepared to continue to work with the minister and the Executive to ensure that that is delivered.

16:13

Irene McGugan (North-East Scotland) (SNP):

I want to highlight some difficulties experienced by residents in rural Aberdeenshire. On 29 February this year, Stagecoach Bluebird made a number of service changes. Translated, that means that, with minimal notice, it withdrew buses from dozens of routes. It was readily conceded by the company that that move was driven predominantly by financial necessity. In the company's own words, it was

"unable to absorb solely through the pricing mechanism, significant increases to key areas of cost, e.g. fuel".

I do not want to rehearse the arguments put forward in the chamber this morning, but the implications of high fuel prices in rural areas have to be acknowledged and addressed by the Executive.

Just three days before the revised timetable was imposed, Aberdeenshire Council stepped in to reinstate 25 per cent of the withdrawn services, initially for three months. That represents about 350 journeys out of almost 1,400 threatened routes. I requested a meeting with the minister, in my capacity as a regional list MSP for the north-east of Scotland, to discuss those sudden and drastic cuts in bus services in Aberdeenshire. In her response, several weeks later, she said that she did not think that a meeting would be productive, but advised that the rural transport fund had provided £14.6 million in new investment over three years, and that £10.7 million had been paid to local authorities for new services. That is very welcome, but it is not an awful lot when divided among 32 local authorities over three years, because the costs are substantial.

Aberdeenshire Council is very clear that sustaining commercial bus services, which were scheduled for withdrawal, has placed an additional financial burden of nearly £300,000 per annum; that is £5,000 a week. The council's available budget for supporting socially necessary bus services is already stretched as a result of previous cuts in the commercial bus network. It is not possible to accommodate the sheer volume of the further cuts within the finite budget that is available to the council for supporting local bus services. Those are its words, not mine.

The council's infrastructure services committee agreed that a comprehensive review of all supported bus services should be undertaken, with a view to containing expenditure within available budgets during the coming year. The council has advised me that the costs involved make it inevitable that some rationalisation of supported bus services will be required to keep costs within budgets. We are all too well aware that rationalisation is invariably a euphemism for cuts.

Through its local transport strategy, the council is also seeking to increase the role and usage of public transport; it aims to increase public transport's share of the total travel market by 10 per cent within 10 years, which is in line with the Government's target. It is very difficult to persuade people to switch to public transport if there is no public transport to use and when from 1987 to 1999 the cost of bus and coach fares rose by 47 per cent in real terms, as the 2000 "Scottish Transport Statistics" confirm.

Residents of many households without access to a car, such as the disabled, elderly and young people, depend on public transport to improve their accessibility to essential services and facilities, such as jobs, shops, further education and medical services. The end result is that bus passengers in rural Aberdeenshire face an

uncertain and probably bleak future, and the hardship of living in a rural area with inadequate or non-existent bus services. The Executive's policies need to address and resolve problems such as those.

16:17

Maureen Macmillan (Highlands and Islands (Lab)): I am grateful to the Executive for instigating this debate, as it has given members an opportunity to reflect on what is being done to improve rural transport services. I say that unashamedly, because I believe that the Executive has a good-news story to tell on this issue. Of course, there will be many examples of improvement still being needed, given that local transport was almost wiped out during the Tory years, but improvement is certainly being made in public transport provision in rural areas, thanks to increased investment by the Scottish Executive.

The figures are not insignificant. The rural transport fund will expand to £18 million, of which £14 million is for local authorities to promote rural public transport services, and there has also been a substantial increase in funding for the rural community transport scheme.

I welcome especially the minister's announcement today of £300,000 for the CTA to improve local initiatives. The Executive is empowering remote rural communities to make transport decisions for themselves. For example, the Sutherland Partnership runs a dial-a-bus scheme in Strathspey, from Aviemore and Grantown to Elgin. A network of community cars brings people to services that they would otherwise be unable to access. On 26 March, the Minister for Transport and Planning announced that 31 rural community transport projects would benefit from additional funding, including a total of 18 in the Highlands and Islands area.

Local transport is important in rural areas; so is long-distance transport, whether for passengers or freight. Great challenges lie ahead in maximising the benefits to rural communities of rail, ferry and air services, which I know the Executive is already addressing.

One issue has arisen in the past week that I want to mention today. The Invergordon to Kirkwall freight ferry, the *Contender*, has been withdrawn as a result of the decision by Streamline Shipping to concentrate on its Orkney to Aberdeen service. The crew of 18, mostly from Orkney, received redundancy notices on Monday and found out yesterday, through the media, that the service will cease today. The loss of the service would have an impact, especially on the economy of Easter Ross, and I am anxious that the Executive give the issue urgent attention. The

Deputy First Minister has met the operating company, but Streamline Shipping has now withdrawn from the talks.

I would be grateful if the Executive could continue to explore any options that would sustain the service for the future. The crew have given a first-class service to livestock farmers in Orkney, especially during the foot-and-mouth crisis, and they have asked questions about recent events. For example, they wish to know why Scottish Executive rural affairs department gave a livestock licence to P&O at this point in the crisis when the Contender, with its dedicated livestock hold, was being supported by the department for that task. Furthermore, they believe that P&O, which receives a subsidy for passenger traffic, is carrying out a predatory freight pricing policy that has led to unfair competition. Finally, the crew have raised concerns with me about safety aspects of the Baltic Champ, which Streamline will use to run Orkney cargo to Aberdeen, not to Invergordon.

Many believe that the Invergordon service would be viable if it were properly promoted and marketed by a company that was committed to it, and I urge the Executive to help us find such a company.

16:21

Mr Duncan Hamilton (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): It will come as no surprise to any member—or to the Minister for Transport and Planning—that I wish to concentrate on Caledonian MacBrayne, about which I have pestered the minister so much that she must think she has a stalker.

I want to emphasise three points, the second of which is so serious that I hope the minister will return to it in his summing-up. First, the CalMac routes have been put out to tender, which has caused much debate inside and outside the chamber. Although we should praise the fact that the routes will now be tendered as one whole network, we should bear in mind that a number of aspects of the CalMac operation are not of a sufficiently high standard. In particular, I refer to public accountability and the way that CalMac engages—or does not engage—with local communities on issues such as timetabling or service provision.

I am particularly concerned about two aspects of the tender process, the first of which is the issue of the operator of last resort. I have been advised in this regard by Professor Neil Kay of Strathclyde University and Captain Sandy Ferguson, who was CalMac's last marine superintendent. The point of concern that they have raised—and to which I can find no answer—is that the nature of a tender process means that CalMac might lose; no matter whether the routes are tendered as one network or

as several networks, the prospect remains that a private operator might take over the running of those routes from CalMac. If that happens and if a service is subsequently stopped, or if the private contractor is found to be in breach of contract—if a service is interrupted for any reason—there must be an operator of last resort. Until now, the Executive has told us—and the minister has made it clear—that that operator would be vesco, the vessel holding company that will be set up.

We must be crystal clear about why any such operator of last resort should be properly run. Most important, if there is a breakdown, communities—particularly the island communities—need to know that they will not simply be cut adrift and that there will be a safety net to allow them to continue their daily lives. An operator of last resort is necessary for the simple reason that any private contractor running those routes would be more able to abuse its contractual position. Furthermore, any third party that was considering coming in could demand a lot more if it knew that there was no such operator. The importance of an operator of last resort in the public sector is accepted right across the industry.

Professor Kay and Captain Ferguson have been advised that vesco would not have the capacity to step in and, indeed, would not receive the Maritime and Coastguard Agency certification that will be required if it is to become an operator of last resort. If that is true, it is massively worrying; unlike the situation with the Strategic Rail Authority, the water industry and the gas industry, the fact that there is no operator of last resort on these routes could hurt communities badly. I ask the minister to be clear in his summing-up about vesco's precise position, whether it would be an operator of last resort and—crucially—whether it would receive MCA certification.

There has been some cross-party unity about fares. John Farquhar Munro, who spoke earlier, has been campaigning for opening up the ferry fare review to include the prospect of a pilot project on road-equivalent tariffs, but the Executive has ruled that out. The constraints of the recent sea fares review made it clear that revenue neutrality had to be preserved and the minister said that RETs could not be considered. I ask the minister to reconsider that decision, as Highland Council, Western Isles Council, Argyll and Bute Council, the Scottish National Party and members of the Liberal Democrats—people in the Executive's coalition—are asking for the pilot project. Such a project would not need to be an absolute commitment to introducing RETs on every route; it would be a commitment to consider where RETs could be beneficial. If they were found to be beneficial, and if they gave Scottish islanders a degree of equality that they do not have at present in the context of a debate on rural

transport, that would be a significant step forward.

16:26

David Mundell (South of Scotland) (Con): I am pleased to learn that my local MP takes such an interest in me as a bus passenger, although I have not seen him on the bus often—perhaps because I sit up at the back, in the seats that are reserved for list members.

Unlike my colleague, Murray Tosh, I do not want to detract from what has been achieved. I acknowledge that things have been achieved. However, the point that I raised earlier about Dumfries and Galloway reflects the reality. In such an area—especially in the Machars and Wigtownshire, one of the remotest parts of Scotland—public bus services are being withdrawn. Bus services between Dumfries and Galloway and the major cities in the central belt are being withdrawn. There are difficulties that need to be acknowledged and addressed.

Another significant issue that affects the roads network in rural areas—Dumfries and Galloway is just one such area—is the level of maintenance that has been afforded to minor roads. I have raised that issue with the minister and I know that it is a matter for the local authorities. However, we should reflect on the arrangement in England and Wales whereby, in effect, there is an inspectorate to monitor minor roads and to acknowledge that, in certain instances, those roads have reached a state beyond which they are no longer acceptable and that work must be carried out. Many roads in Dumfries and Galloway have reached that stage—especially, as the minister knows, because of the forestry there.

Bruce Crawford: Does Mr Mundell agree that, in view of the fact that there is a backlog of £1,500 million-worth of road repairs to be done in Scotland, it is not enough for the Executive to provide local authorities with an insignificant additional £70 million to deal with road problems?

David Mundell: Yes.

I am a convert to bus travel, although I admit that that was not initially at my own behest. However, the bus service that is available in rural areas is much better than people usually think it is. There is generally an excellent service throughout Dumfries and Galloway and I am able to travel from Moffat to Edinburgh for £3.75, which is an excellent deal. The difficulty with that bus service is that it goes not only through Dumfries and Galloway, but through South Lanarkshire, Midlothian, the Borders and the city of Edinburgh, and there are still difficulties in getting councils to co-ordinate the provision of such a service. In relation to the work that was done on the Transport (Scotland) Act 2001, the minister must

consider the importance of such co-ordination. There is still the problem that one can arrive by train at Lockerbie station at 3.40 pm only to find that the bus to Moffat has left five minutes earlier. Integration and co-ordination are just not being addressed in the network.

I offer to give up my personal copy of the Annandale and Eskdale bus timetable to the minister for her perusal. However, Des McNulty is speaking next, which will amount to pretty much the same thing. The timetable shows that timings are erratic. People can understand buses coming at three minutes past the hour every hour and following a given route, but, unfortunately, the system does not seem to be able to deliver that. Rural bus services have an enormous amount to offer and we should all use them more.

An initiative that I applaud is the cycle way that runs through Dumfries and Galloway. It was good that the capital was received to set up that cycle way, but it is a pity that no money is available to maintain it.

16:30

Des McNulty (Clydebank and Milngavie) (Lab): I thought that David Mundell was reading out the bus timetable for Moffat, but perhaps he was saying something more profound.

I welcome the emphasis on transport inclusiveness and sustainability in the policy's underlying thrust. As a member who does not represent a rural area, there is a risk that I may be seen as intervening in a private party as members highlight the various requirements of the parts of Scotland that they represent. However, it is important that we focus on inclusion and ensuring that people can get around Scotland and that we consider the contribution that transport infrastructure can play in ensuring the social and economic sustainability of rural areas. In that context, it is essential that we are clear about the criteria for decision making on capital and resource investment in all kinds of transport provision. Maureen Macmillan's point about the requirement for local involvement is important.

Everyone realises that unlimited resources are not available to be spent on rural transport. We must ensure that the resources that are available are spent in the best possible way. I listened with interest to Irene McGugan's speech and I have much sympathy with what she said about the requirement for access to public transport in Aberdeenshire. However, I have heard Mr MacAskill and Mr Crawford talking endlessly about the great emphasis that the SNP places on road building and on investing in roads, as distinct from other forms of transport investment. If the SNP wants a balance between investment in roads and

other forms of transport investment, it must say where that balance will be. The SNP cannot simply keep presenting an ever-lengthening shopping list.

Fiona McLeod (West of Scotland) (SNP): Mr McNulty talks about achieving balance, but does he realise that the much-vaunted £18 million investment, which represents a rise of 33 per cent for the rural transport fund, brings that fund to less than 1 per cent of the total transport budget?

Des McNulty: There is a requirement for expenditure on rural transport. That is being addressed positively, as John Farquhar Munro pointed out. The issue is how we can get the best return for that investment and what criteria we will propose. That is especially the case when subsidies are being provided, as is the case with Caledonian MacBrayne. Will the solution to the situation with the ferries deliver economic effectiveness and inclusiveness, which it needs to do?

Mr Hamilton: Is Des McNulty aware of the Scottish Office research that found that, if fares on Caledonian MacBrayne routes were reduced, a greater profit would be made on the routes and that there would be economic spin-offs in the places where the ferries landed and left?

Des McNulty: I am also aware that the nationalists, when arguing for a reduction in ferry fares, are considering calling for the introduction of road-equivalent tariffs that could be introduced on a cost-neutral basis. I do not see the logic of that position. The SNP, as far as I understand, has made no commitment to the retention of Caledonian MacBrayne in public ownership. Perhaps that is different.

It is important to ensure that the investment that has been made in rural transport provides the economic sustainability and transport inclusiveness that those who live in rural areas require. It is equally important, particularly in the context of the issues currently affecting tourism, for rural Scotland to be adequately accessible to people from other parts of Scotland and from around the world. Transport is a vital element in the economic development of rural areas and it is important for us to be spending the money on it that we are.

16:35

Mr Andrew Welsh (Angus) (SNP): Des McNulty mentioned local involvement and making the best use of scarce resources. We all know what has to be done; the real problem is getting it done.

Rural areas dominate the geography of Scotland, and this debate should be all about

meeting their needs on a long-term, sustainable basis. The long-standing problems of rural transport are clear: a low population, geographical isolation and passenger journeys in rural areas involving more miles and more time than in urban areas—along with lower vehicle and staff utilisation rates.

Without a social subsidy system, higher rural journey costs would simply be passed on in higher passenger fares, and services would cease to exist. The end product of current policy has been a spiral of decline, as rural dwellers either reduce their travel or use private cars, which further reduces the economic base of rural transport.

Conventional approaches to rural transport are not viable. We must therefore search for more innovative solutions that are tailor-made for Scotland's rural areas and which properly address the problems on a sustainable, long-term basis.

There are alternatives, and I recommend to the Government the European Union research project entitled "Rural access to transport services", otherwise known as the VIRGIL project, which examines practical solutions to be found throughout Europe. The report points to the development of demand-responsive services, which aim to adapt itineraries and timetables to suit particular transport demands. It proposes integration of goods and passenger transport, where vehicles are suitable for that, which would make services that were initially conceived for goods vehicles available to regular passengers, and vice versa.

The report recommends the integration of special services across agencies, which would allow services that were owned or hired by sector-specific agencies—health, social welfare or corporate transport, for example—to transport regular passengers or passengers from other agencies.

Scotland would be well placed for the use of telematics, which is also highlighted in the report. It uses information technology to let travellers access transport services, directly or indirectly, and to obtain information and apply technology effectively to run the operations themselves, perhaps using special operating software.

Sarah Boyack: That is precisely what we are trying to achieve through the rural transport fund and the community transport fund. The evaluation that I discussed threw up many of the issues to which Mr Welsh has referred. That is precisely the type of agenda that we aim to follow. Furthermore, with our new public transport information, which will apply across Scotland, we are keen to do more in that regard.

Mr Welsh: I am trying to be positive. I am saying that such proposals should form part of a proper,

comprehensive system, instead of a bitty approach.

I commend the example of Finland to the minister. It has already introduced a number of such schemes in its rural areas. In the municipality of Siilinjärvi, in eastern Finland, a single accessible minibus, which is reserved for day centre use for four hours a day, is then used for a dial-a-ride service for public users. The dial-a-ride facility serves different areas on different days of the week. Three of the areas concerned are served by minibus, and two areas, with minor demand, are served by taxis. Bookings are made by telephoning the travel dispatch centre, which amalgamates the bookings to produce routes and timetables. The vehicle drivers are informed via a vehicle data terminal, which is provided through a mobile phone connected to a small computer terminal.

Helen Eadie (Dunfermline East) (Lab): Will the member take an intervention?

Mr Welsh: Forgive me—I am short of time.

Those are all easily accessible technologies, which have been harnessed to solve specifically rural problems. I would like to be able to report the same use of technology on a wide scale in rural Scotland.

By providing a demand-responsive service and maximising the use of telematics, the scheme's introduction has resulted in a considerable increase in the public transport service in the municipality. In two areas, the service has expanded from a three-month service to a round-the-year service, and has spread into parts of the municipality that had never previously been covered by such a service. I should love to be able to report a similar situation in Scotland, and there are examples from elsewhere from which we can learn.

The greatest users of the scheme are elderly people and disabled people, who should be a policy priority for Scotland. There is clear evidence that a real difference can be made to improving rural transport. As a new democracy, Scotland should be leading the way in providing cutting-edge solutions that are specific to the needs of our rural communities. Not only must Scotland learn from best practice elsewhere; we should seek out specifically Scottish solutions to Scottish situations.

The Executive has the opportunity not only to replicate the measures that are working in other European countries, but to pioneer pilot projects providing low-cost, accessible and efficient transport systems that serve the whole nation and deliver for our rural areas. Imagination, innovation, practicality and urgency have to be at the heart of any long-term solution. If the Executive does not

do it, we will.

16:40

Nora Radcliffe (Gordon) (LD): Many members have made detailed comments about matters in their own areas. I will do a general round-up of how I see the issue. We are at the end of decades of erosion of the share of the budget going to transport and transport infrastructure. There is no point in apportioning blame or cavilling about that—it is a fact of life and we have to face up to it. Our ability to invest in the infrastructure is inhibited by the long erosion of maintenance over decades, which will soak up much of the money for capital projects that we might have liked to begin.

However, I think that we have turned a corner. We have bottomed out on the theft of resources from what is, after all, a means to an end—without a transport infrastructure there is no point in providing jobs, leisure opportunities or services that people cannot access. Transport services and infrastructure are essential for the economy and economic development. I think that we have realised that we cannot go on for ever eroding the share of the budget that we give to transport. It will take a long time to redress the balance, particularly as that will require money to be clawed back from competing priorities that do not want to relax their hold on that money.

We can be proud of what the Scottish Parliament has achieved in the two years for which it has existed. The funds that have been mentioned—the rural transport fund, the public transport fund and community transport grants—have provided a good way of using limited resources in a flexible and targeted way and finding local solutions to local problems. The success of that approach is demonstrated by the range of projects that have been mentioned, such as a causeway for more than £4 million and support for a volunteer car scheme.

There is an awful lot to do. We have turned a corner and are moving in the right direction. We can take pride in what has been done, but what has come out of the debate is how much more there is still to do. We are moving in the right direction and should continue to do so.

16:43

Mr Tosh: It is difficult to respond to a debate that has ranged so widely. The closing speakers can reflect on a debate in which most participants raised issues that were important to their own regions or constituencies and in which there was surprisingly little dialogue and debate across the chamber. Frankly, I was surprised that neither minister attempted to intervene in Duncan Hamilton's speech on CalMac, as I thought that he

raised points that should have received a response by intervention. I hope that the deputy minister will give some hints of the Executive's views on those points.

I will make one further local point—it is local to Lord James Douglas-Hamilton rather than to me. I understand that the city of Edinburgh bypass was a local authority road and that the project was led by the City of Edinburgh Council, which asked the Government for grant aid and was given it to the extent of 30 per cent. That proves how generous Lord James was in supporting a call for money from a Labour-controlled authority and, generally, in empowering councils to promote capital projects that are now entirely outwith their scope and resources.

In my opening speech, I referred to spending on local roads, which came up once or twice during the debate. I had intended to say during my speech that I recognised that there had been an increase of around £70 million in this year's budget, although the minister rather spoiled that increase some months later by saying that councils could use that money to offset the cost to them of maintaining their roads in a less economic fashion than had hitherto been possible. However, a little progress has been made.

The point that the Conservatives want to make today, which David Mundell raised during his speech, is that if members of the Scottish Parliament are genuine about trying to move the agenda on and to do something substantive with the resources that we have been given, we must examine areas of life and of administration that have not featured in the past. One such area is the maintenance of the local authority road network, which Bruce Crawford mentioned and where there is a substantial backlog.

I know from the way in which the Executive handles its own budgeting that it is considering both its resource bases and the maintenance of its asset base, which is important. However, the Executive must empower local authorities to do precisely the same with their asset bases as part of the same strategy.

Many local authority roads function as trunk roads. Cathy Jamieson mentioned the A70, and it appears to me that that road ought to be a trunk road; there are many similar roads. There are also roads of only local importance in urban and rural areas that must be maintained and which have only so much life left.

We all know that that issue is ticking away and must be addressed. Ministers have not acknowledged any responsibility for those roads. I do not expect them to turn round and give the councils £1,500 million next year, as I know that resources are constrained. However, we must

start to think about how councils will deal with maintaining those roads in 10, 20 or 30 years, or the eventual costs will be much greater than they look as if they will be at this stage.

Helen Eadie: Will the member give way?

Mr Tosh: Certainly, if I have time.

Helen Eadie: Is not there a slight sense of shame in the Conservative party ranks when they think back to the 20 years of Tory rule? When they inherited responsibility for road maintenance, local authorities could depend upon being able to maintain their roads and to renew them once every 60 years. At the end of the previous Tory Administration, we reached the point where local authorities could renew their roads once every 120 years.

Mr Tosh: Presiding Officer, I had intended returning to you some of the time that I stole in my opening speech, but because of Helen Eadie's intervention, which I should not have taken, I will be unable to, for which I apologise.

Local authorities are spending less now than at the end of the previous Conservative Government. Fewer people are travelling by bus than at the end of the previous Conservative Government. The Labour party criticised Conservatives for privatising the railways during the previous Conservative Government, but that policy has not been reversed—in fact, it has become Labour party policy. While there is a lot of cant about what happened before and what is happening now, there is also a huge amount of continuity, and I should like spending on roads to be restored at least to the level of only four or five years ago. That would be progress.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Patricia Ferguson): Please wind up, Mr Tosh.

Mr Tosh: To be honest, I should like to move on to address the issues that the Parliament is here to address. However, I will wind up now, Presiding Officer.

It is clear that the major area of capital expenditure that the Executive is funding, although it is not directly promoting that expenditure, is the Scottish Parliament building, which is taking a huge chunk out of its resources. We understand that that expenditure is due to come to an end after 2003. I hope that when we reach 2003, we will be able to switch capital expenditure and to invest it in tackling some of the transport issues that we must address.

16:49

Fiona McLeod (West of Scotland) (SNP): This has been an interesting debate, although it has also been relatively quiet, which surprises me,

after this morning's debate on fuel tax.

I would like to examine the facts behind some of the words that we have heard today. We have been criticised for referring to the Executive's motion as complacent, but that is the only word that can sum up the motion. In "Rural Scotland: A New Approach", the Government said:

"We are committed to delivering transport policies that reflect the diverse transport needs of people living in rural areas".

Those are wonderful words, but what is behind them?

During my intervention in Des McNulty's speech, I mentioned that we hear the wonderful words that the rural transport fund has risen by 33 per cent to £18 million. The reality is that the rural transport fund is still less than 1 per cent of the Scottish Executive's transport budget. That is not a commitment to Scotland's rural transport needs.

Des McNulty: Will the member take an intervention?

Fiona McLeod: No, thank you. I will not take an intervention from Des McNulty because he started his speech by saying that he did not want to intrude as a non-rural member—he should not have because he does not know the facts.

I want to talk about the road network that serves Scotland's remote and rural communities. The minister talked about roads this morning and this afternoon. The minister is proud of the trunk road construction programme, but only a quarter of the £120 million is to be spent outwith the central belt. That is not a commitment to serve Scotland's remote and rural communities. Of the 33 projects with a completion date, to be funded from the public transport fund, only around eight are in rural areas.

I want to highlight one of those. The south-east Scotland travel ticket is a great idea. I am in favour of integrated transport, but there will be no train ticket as part of that travel ticket. When will the Borders rail link be built and paid for by the Government?

The minister mentioned that rural petrol stations will be assisted. Page 167 of "The Scottish Budget" says that, between now and 2004, 15 rural petrol stations will be assisted.

Those are the facts behind the words. Those are the reasons why the SNP says that the motion is a complacent motion from a complacent Government.

Look at some of the other facts from the Scottish Executive's budget. Of the hugely expanded budget that the minister talked about, £1,593 million is for capital charges. That £1,593 will not provide a single new road, rail line or bus route.

That is not a commitment to Scotland's rural communities.

What is the debate about? What is the Government about? The minister raised it herself this morning: it is about whether we are dealing with Westminster or standing up for Scotland. When the minister deals with Westminster, how does she say to the Chancellor of the Exchequer that she wants £180.3 million? That £180.3 million would pay to buy the Skye bridge back for the public of Scotland. It would pay to extend the concessionary fares scheme in Scotland to all 16 and 17-year-olds and to all carers of disabled people.

I say to the minister that that is what the debate is about. It is about reality, not rhetoric. It is about standing up for Scotland. It is not about spinning for Westminster, nor is it about—I say this after what we heard this afternoon about Russell Brown—spinning for Westminster MPs with Scottish constituencies on devolved, not reserved, matters.

16:53

The Deputy Minister for Transport and Planning (Lewis Macdonald): It is a pleasure to respond to the debate. I begin by noting that rural transport in Scotland is bouncing back from past neglect. Investment by the Executive is beginning to make a real difference to individuals and communities throughout rural Scotland. We are getting people moving.

The debate has been an important demonstration of the value of the Scottish Parliament and of the Scottish Executive's strategy of providing, as I think was cited by Mr Welsh, Scottish solutions to Scottish problems and an opportunity for our transport policies to make a difference. The debate has also been notable for allowing many members to raise issues of local or regional importance. I am sorry that Murray Tosh felt that there was a deficit of interventions in the debate, but in fact that deficit allowed many concerns to be aired.

If anyone is in any doubt about the difference that the Executive's policies are making, they should remember that, for example, support for lifeline air and ferry services is at record levels. Without that support, the charges for air services to HIAL's 10 airports would treble. Without that support, CalMac's ferries would be running without passengers. Without that support, whole communities would wither and die.

It is worth while reminding members that one quarter of the users of rural community transport schemes for individuals would be housebound without those schemes; that Ardnamurchan might not have a single petrol station without the rural

petrol stations grant scheme—a scheme that matters a great deal to all the communities in which the money is spent; and that more than 350 new and improved bus services would simply not be running without the rural transport fund.

We have invested in rural transport across Scotland. The public transport fund is improving transport interchanges—for example, at Inverness and at Aviemore on the A95—to improve access to surrounding communities and to integrate bus and rail services. The PTF is also assisting Scottish Borders Council with development costs so that it can do the work that it needs to do to achieve, or to make the case for, the reinstatement of a rail link between Edinburgh and the central Borders. A great deal has been done.

Fiona McLeod: The Executive has given a loan of £1.9 million to the Scottish Borders Council; but it is a railway that the Borders need, not a loan to the council.

Lewis Macdonald: What the Borders need—as does every other area in Scotland—is a partnership to achieve the kind of transport developments that we want for the 21st century.

Mr Tosh: Does the minister agree that the Borders would be much better served by Executive investment in building a new railway than by Executive investment in buying a road bridge to Skye that already exists?

Lewis Macdonald: I wondered whether Fiona McLeod was right that buying the road bridge to Skye was her party's top priority, or whether her party intended to appropriate it without further delay.

John Farquhar Munro raised the issue of the freight facilities grant. It is important to note the point that he makes. We have doubled expenditure on that grant, and have secured some notable successes in a modal shift from road to rail. Yes, there are delays in processing the applications, but this is a complex business, because of the need to avoid falling foul of state aid guidelines. It is important to recognise that. All applications are being processed as fast as is possible. We will consider any constructive suggestions for changes to the scheme that would help to speed things up.

A number of members—Irene McGugan and David Mundell among them—talked about the importance of the loss of scheduled bus services in rural areas. It is important to recognise that the Transport (Scotland) Act 2001 has given ministers new powers to amend the grounds for offering public funding support to operators of rural bus services. Ministers intend to use those powers. We are spending £50 million a year on bus fuel duty rebates across Scotland for that type of service.

Irene McGugan mentioned Aberdeenshire Council. That council is reviewing the services that are supported by tender. It will use the new flexibility in the rural transport fund to provide the money that Irene talked about to support some of those services. Aberdeenshire Council is one of the councils that have received significant upratings in its bus grants from central Government. We recognise that issues exist that go beyond the commercial interests of operating companies. I do not think that the Executive will make a commitment—as I think Irene was implying that we should—to bail out every single commercial operation and every single service.

Andrew Welsh raised some interesting European examples of flexible and responsive transport schemes. We would certainly support such examples. Andrew commented that, if we did not do it, his party would. I am pleased to tell him that his party will not have to, because we are already considering whether the regulatory requirements that limit the ability to provide responsive services in rural areas can be amended.

Cathy Jamieson highlighted the importance of Community Transport Association funding, which is very much part of the overall picture. Extra grant support of £300,000 for that has been announced today. We are taking important steps in making transport responsive.

I will move on to discuss CalMac—as I suspect Duncan Hamilton would like me to. He spoke about accountability and openness in that company. His point is recognised by ministers. As Duncan Hamilton and other members will know, the company has recently undertaken a thorough review of its fares policy. It has done so at the request of ministers, in order to establish the degree to which the general public and its customers are aware of the basis of the fares structure. There are some issues connected with that fares structure that the company has taken on board as a result of consultation. That consultation is a step in the right direction, in terms of accountability.

The status of vesco was mentioned. Let me make it clear that vesco would act as a procurer of last resort—that is the distinction which needs to be made. In those unlikely circumstances, vesco would be in a position to use its specialist expertise as the owner of the vessels to bring in an established operator to provide the services.

Mr Hamilton: The minister's comments have taken forward the information in the public domain. Perhaps he will reflect on the fact that if vesco is to be a procurer of services, any third party would be acutely aware of the fact that, as the provider of last resort, it would be in an advantageous position to negotiate a very favourable contract for itself.

Why would it not be better to have vesco, or at least a public agency, responsible—as in every other industry—as an area of last resort? *[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer (Sir David Steel): Order. I ask members to refrain from conversation while the debate is concluded.

Lewis Macdonald: Vesco is a public agency and would operate on that basis. It is important to address the other issue that Duncan Hamilton raised—road equivalent tariff. RET is part of the on-going consultation on the fares basis. The first findings from that consultation clearly demonstrate that RET is not compatible with a revenue-neutral outcome, as we described. In fact, the deficit grant that the Executive provides to CalMac is running at a record level of £19 million.

Mr Hamilton: Will the minister give way?

The Presiding Officer: The minister is in his final minute.

Lewis Macdonald: I will have to move on. I am sure that Mr Hamilton will have an opportunity to raise those matters again.

Maureen Macmillan raised the important matter of today's announcement about the Kirkwall to Invergordon sea freight route. She will know that some days ago, Ross Finnie and Sarah Boyack met Orkney Islands Council to discuss the potential closure of Streamline. It is important to recognise that the service that the company provides will be continued because of support from the Scottish Executive. I know that that does not take on board all the issues that Maureen Macmillan raised today, but I can confirm the Scottish Executive's continued support through the tariff rebate subsidy scheme. It may be that even with an alternative operator or route, the required services will be resumed on the Invergordon route in due course.

Over the past four years, we have seen a fundamental change in the importance attached to rural Scotland. In the Scottish Parliament, a much greater number of members represent rural areas than could be the case in Westminster. It is not about promoting rural areas at the expense of urban areas—as Fiona McLeod seemed to imply—but about recognising that the future success of the whole of Scotland depends on the success of all its parts.

The Executive is taking the lead in turning that fundamental change in attitude into a fundamental change in policy to support rural areas—transport is playing its full part in that change. We are supporting communities and individuals through investment in our lifeline air and ferry services, bus services, community transport and infrastructure. Working together, we can continue to make a

difference and promote sustainable rural communities across Scotland.

The Presiding Officer: I would like to take the opportunity to say a word about question time. This afternoon, during question time, I received an exceptionally large number of billets doux from members asking to be called for supplementary questions. I am always willing to consider such requests before question time, but it is impossible for me to read the billets doux, look at the names on the screen and listen to the questions and answers all at the same time. If members have a special pressing case for asking a question, I ask them to let my office know before question time and not during it.

Decision Time

17:04

The Presiding Officer (Sir David Steel): The first question is, that amendment S1M-1865.1, in the name of Malcolm Chisholm, which seeks to amend motion S1M-1865, in the name of Nicola Sturgeon, on hepatitis C, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

FOR

Aitken, Bill (Glasgow) (Con)
 Alexander, Ms Wendy (Paisley North) (Lab)
 Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Barrie, Scott (Dunfermline West) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Edinburgh Central) (Lab)
 Brankin, Rhona (Midlothian) (Lab)
 Brown, Robert (Glasgow) (LD)
 Butler, Mr Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (Lab)
 Chisholm, Malcolm (Edinburgh North and Leith) (Lab)
 Craigie, Cathie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (Lab)
 Deacon, Susan (Edinburgh East and Musselburgh) (Lab)
 Douglas-Hamilton, Lord James (Lothians) (Con)
 Eadie, Helen (Dunfermline East) (Lab)
 Ferguson, Patricia (Glasgow Maryhill) (Lab)
 Fergusson, Alex (South of Scotland) (Con)
 Finnie, Ross (West of Scotland) (LD)
 Gallie, Phil (South of Scotland) (Con)
 Gillon, Karen (Clydesdale) (Lab)
 Godman, Trish (West Renfrewshire) (Lab)
 Goldie, Miss Annabel (West of Scotland) (Con)
 Gorrie, Donald (Central Scotland) (LD)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Gray, Iain (Edinburgh Pentlands) (Lab)
 Harper, Robin (Lothians) (Green)
 Henry, Hugh (Paisley South) (Lab)
 Home Robertson, Mr John (East Lothian) (Lab)
 Hughes, Janis (Glasgow Rutherglen) (Lab)
 Jackson, Gordon (Glasgow Govan) (Lab)
 Jamieson, Cathy (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (Lab)
 Jenkins, Ian (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD)
 Johnstone, Alex (North-East Scotland) (Con)
 Kerr, Mr Andy (East Kilbride) (Lab)
 Lamont, Johann (Glasgow Pollok) (Lab)
 Macdonald, Lewis (Aberdeen Central) (Lab)
 Macintosh, Mr Kenneth (Eastwood) (Lab)
 MacKay, Angus (Edinburgh South) (Lab)
 MacLean, Kate (Dundee West) (Lab)
 Macmillan, Maureen (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Martin, Paul (Glasgow Springburn) (Lab)
 McAllion, Mr John (Dundee East) (Lab)
 McAveety, Mr Frank (Glasgow Shettleston) (Lab)
 McCabe, Mr Tom (Hamilton South) (Lab)
 McGrigor, Mr Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 McIntosh, Mrs Lyndsay (Central Scotland) (Con)
 McLeish, Henry (Central Fife) (Lab)
 McLetchie, David (Lothians) (Con)
 McMahon, Mr Michael (Hamilton North and Bellshill) (Lab)
 McNeil, Mr Duncan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (Lab)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow Kelvin) (Lab)
 McNulty, Des (Clydebank and Milngavie) (Lab)
 Monteith, Mr Brian (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Morrison, Mr Alasdair (Western Isles) (Lab)

Muldoon, Bristow (Livingston) (Lab)
 Mulligan, Mrs Mary (Linlithgow) (Lab)
 Mundell, David (South of Scotland) (Con)
 Munro, John Farquhar (Ross, Skye and Inverness West) (LD)
 Murray, Dr Elaine (Dumfries) (Lab)
 Oldfather, Irene (Cunninghame South) (Lab)
 Peacock, Peter (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Peattie, Cathy (Falkirk East) (Lab)
 Radcliffe, Nora (Gordon) (LD)
 Raffan, Mr Keith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (LD)
 Robson, Euan (Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (LD)
 Rumbles, Mr Mike (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (LD)
 Scanlon, Mary (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Simpson, Dr Richard (Ochil) (Lab)
 Smith, Elaine (Coatbridge and Chryston) (Lab)
 Smith, Iain (North-East Fife) (LD)
 Smith, Mrs Margaret (Edinburgh West) (LD)
 Stephen, Nicol (Aberdeen South) (LD)
 Stone, Mr Jamie (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD)
 Thomson, Elaine (Aberdeen North) (Lab)
 Tosh, Mr Murray (South of Scotland) (Con)
 Wallace, Ben (North-East Scotland) (Con)
 Watson, Mike (Glasgow Cathcart) (Lab)
 Whitefield, Karen (Airdrie and Shotts) (Lab)
 Wilson, Allan (Cunninghame North) (Lab)
 Young, John (West of Scotland) (Con)

AGAINST

Adam, Brian (North-East Scotland) (SNP)
 Campbell, Colin (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 Canavan, Dennis (Falkirk West)
 Crawford, Bruce (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP)
 Cunningham, Roseanna (Perth) (SNP)
 Elder, Dorothy-Grace (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Ewing, Dr Winnie (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness East, Nairn and Lochaber) (SNP)
 Ewing, Mrs Margaret (Moray) (SNP)
 Fabiani, Linda (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Gibson, Mr Kenneth (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Hamilton, Mr Duncan (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Lothians) (SNP)
 Lochhead, Richard (North-East Scotland) (SNP)
 MacAskill, Mr Kenny (Lothians) (SNP)
 MacDonald, Ms Margo (Lothians) (SNP)
 Marwick, Tricia (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP)
 Matheson, Michael (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 McGugan, Irene (North-East Scotland) (SNP)
 McLeod, Fiona (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 Morgan, Alasdair (Galloway and Upper Nithsdale) (SNP)
 Neil, Alex (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Paterson, Mr Gil (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Reid, Mr George (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP)
 Robison, Shona (North-East Scotland) (SNP)
 Salmond, Mr Alex (Banff and Buchan) (SNP)
 Sheridan, Tommy (Glasgow) (SSP)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Swinney, Mr John (North Tayside) (SNP)
 Welsh, Mr Andrew (Angus) (SNP)
 White, Ms Sandra (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Wilson, Andrew (Central Scotland) (SNP)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 78, Against 32, Abstentions 0.

Amendment agreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The second question is, that motion S1M-1865, in the name of Nicola Sturgeon, on hepatitis C, as amended, be agreed

to.

Motion, as amended, agreed to.

Resolved,

That the Parliament notes the Report produced by the Executive in October 2000 on *Hepatitis C and Heat Treatment of Blood Products for Haemophiliacs in the mid 1980s*; further notes the continuing deliberations of the Health and Community Care Committee on this issue and the recent ruling of the English High Court in the case of a number of NHS patients who have been infected with hepatitis C through blood transfusions, and encourages the Executive to examine constructively the implications of this ruling.

The Presiding Officer: The third question is, that amendment S1M-1866.1, in the name of Miss Annabel Goldie, which seeks to amend motion S1M-1866, in the name of Kenny MacAskill, on the fuel crisis, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

FOR

Aitken, Bill (Glasgow) (Con)
Douglas-Hamilton, Lord James (Lothians) (Con)
Fergusson, Alex (South of Scotland) (Con)
Gallie, Phil (South of Scotland) (Con)
Goldie, Miss Annabel (West of Scotland) (Con)
Johnstone, Alex (North-East Scotland) (Con)
McGrigor, Mr Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
McIntosh, Mrs Lyndsay (Central Scotland) (Con)
McLetchie, David (Lothians) (Con)
Monteith, Mr Brian (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
Mundell, David (South of Scotland) (Con)
Scanlon, Mary (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
Tosh, Mr Murray (South of Scotland) (Con)
Wallace, Ben (North-East Scotland) (Con)
Young, John (West of Scotland) (Con)

AGAINST

Alexander, Ms Wendy (Paisley North) (Lab)
Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
Barrie, Scott (Dunfermline West) (Lab)
Boyack, Sarah (Edinburgh Central) (Lab)
Brankin, Rhona (Midlothian) (Lab)
Brown, Robert (Glasgow) (LD)
Butler, Mr Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (Lab)
Canavan, Dennis (Falkirk West)
Chisholm, Malcolm (Edinburgh North and Leith) (Lab)
Craigie, Cathie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (Lab)
Deacon, Susan (Edinburgh East and Musselburgh) (Lab)
Eadie, Helen (Dunfermline East) (Lab)
Ferguson, Patricia (Glasgow Maryhill) (Lab)
Finnie, Ross (West of Scotland) (LD)
Gillon, Karen (Clydesdale) (Lab)
Godman, Trish (West Renfrewshire) (Lab)
Gorrie, Donald (Central Scotland) (LD)
Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
Gray, Iain (Edinburgh Pentlands) (Lab)
Henry, Hugh (Paisley South) (Lab)
Home Robertson, Mr John (East Lothian) (Lab)
Hughes, Janis (Glasgow Rutherglen) (Lab)
Jackson, Gordon (Glasgow Govan) (Lab)
Jamieson, Cathy (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (Lab)
Jenkins, Ian (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD)
Kerr, Mr Andy (East Kilbride) (Lab)
Lamont, Johann (Glasgow Pollok) (Lab)

Macdonald, Lewis (Aberdeen Central) (Lab)
Macintosh, Mr Kenneth (Eastwood) (Lab)
MacKay, Angus (Edinburgh South) (Lab)
MacLean, Kate (Dundee West) (Lab)
Macmillan, Maureen (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
Martin, Paul (Glasgow Springburn) (Lab)
McAllion, Mr John (Dundee East) (Lab)
McAveety, Mr Frank (Glasgow Shettleston) (Lab)
McCabe, Mr Tom (Hamilton South) (Lab)
McLeish, Henry (Central Fife) (Lab)
McMahon, Mr Michael (Hamilton North and Bellshill) (Lab)
McNeil, Mr Duncan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (Lab)
McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow Kelvin) (Lab)
McNulty, Des (Clydebank and Milngavie) (Lab)
Morrison, Mr Alasdair (Western Isles) (Lab)
Muldoon, Bristow (Livingston) (Lab)
Mulligan, Mrs Mary (Linlithgow) (Lab)
Munro, John Farquhar (Ross, Skye and Inverness West) (LD)
Murray, Dr Elaine (Dumfries) (Lab)
Oldfather, Irene (Cunninghame South) (Lab)
Peacock, Peter (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
Peattie, Cathy (Falkirk East) (Lab)
Radcliffe, Nora (Gordon) (LD)
Raffan, Mr Keith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (LD)
Robson, Euan (Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (LD)
Rumbles, Mr Mike (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (LD)
Sheridan, Tommy (Glasgow) (SSP)
Simpson, Dr Richard (Ochil) (Lab)
Smith, Elaine (Coatbridge and Chryston) (Lab)
Smith, Iain (North-East Fife) (LD)
Smith, Mrs Margaret (Edinburgh West) (LD)
Stephen, Nicol (Aberdeen South) (LD)
Stone, Mr Jamie (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD)
Thomson, Elaine (Aberdeen North) (Lab)
Watson, Mike (Glasgow Cathcart) (Lab)
Whitefield, Karen (Airdrie and Shotts) (Lab)
Wilson, Allan (Cunninghame North) (Lab)

ABSTENTIONS

Adam, Brian (North-East Scotland) (SNP)
Crawford, Bruce (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP)
Cunningham, Roseanna (Perth) (SNP)
Elder, Dorothy-Grace (Glasgow) (SNP)
Ewing, Dr Winnie (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
Ewing, Fergus (Inverness East, Nairn and Lochaber) (SNP)
Ewing, Mrs Margaret (Moray) (SNP)
Fabiani, Linda (Central Scotland) (SNP)
Gibson, Mr Kenneth (Glasgow) (SNP)
Hamilton, Mr Duncan (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
Harper, Robin (Lothians) (SNP)
Hyslop, Fiona (Lothians) (SNP)
Lochhead, Richard (North-East Scotland) (SNP)
MacAskill, Mr Kenny (Lothians) (SNP)
MacDonald, Ms Margo (Lothians) (SNP)
Marwick, Tricia (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP)
Matheson, Michael (Central Scotland) (SNP)
McGugan, Irene (North-East Scotland) (SNP)
McLeod, Fiona (West of Scotland) (SNP)
Morgan, Alasdair (Galloway and Upper Nithsdale) (SNP)
Neil, Alex (Central Scotland) (SNP)
Paterson, Mr Gil (Central Scotland) (SNP)
Reid, Mr George (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP)
Robison, Shona (North-East Scotland) (SNP)
Salmond, Mr Alex (Banff and Buchan) (SNP)
Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow) (SNP)
Swinney, Mr John (North Tayside) (SNP)
Welsh, Mr Andrew (Angus) (SNP)
White, Ms Sandra (Glasgow) (SNP)
Wilson, Andrew (Central Scotland) (SNP)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 15, Against 64, Abstentions 30.

Amendment disagreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The fourth question is, that motion S1M-1866, in the name of Kenny MacAskill, on the fuel crisis, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

FOR

Adam, Brian (North-East Scotland) (SNP)
Campbell, Colin (West of Scotland) (SNP)
Canavan, Dennis (Falkirk West)
Crawford, Bruce (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP)
Cunningham, Roseanna (Perth) (SNP)
Elder, Dorothy-Grace (Glasgow) (SNP)
Ewing, Dr Winnie (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
Ewing, Fergus (Inverness East, Nairn and Lochaber) (SNP)
Ewing, Mrs Margaret (Moray) (SNP)
Fabiani, Linda (Central Scotland) (SNP)
Gibson, Mr Kenneth (Glasgow) (SNP)
Hamilton, Mr Duncan (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
Hyslop, Fiona (Lothians) (SNP)
Lochhead, Richard (North-East Scotland) (SNP)
MacAskill, Mr Kenny (Lothians) (SNP)
MacDonald, Ms Margo (Lothians) (SNP)
Marwick, Tricia (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP)
Matheson, Michael (Central Scotland) (SNP)
McGugan, Irene (North-East Scotland) (SNP)
McLeod, Fiona (West of Scotland) (SNP)
Morgan, Alasdair (Galloway and Upper Nithsdale) (SNP)
Neil, Alex (Central Scotland) (SNP)
Paterson, Mr Gil (Central Scotland) (SNP)
Reid, Mr George (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP)
Robison, Shona (North-East Scotland) (SNP)
Salmond, Mr Alex (Banff and Buchan) (SNP)
Sheridan, Tommy (Glasgow) (SSP)
Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow) (SNP)
Swinney, Mr John (North Tayside) (SNP)
Welsh, Mr Andrew (Angus) (SNP)
White, Ms Sandra (Glasgow) (SNP)
Wilson, Andrew (Central Scotland) (SNP)

AGAINST

Aitken, Bill (Glasgow) (Con)
Alexander, Ms Wendy (Paisley North) (Lab)
Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
Barrie, Scott (Dunfermline West) (Lab)
Boyack, Sarah (Edinburgh Central) (Lab)
Brankin, Rhona (Midlothian) (Lab)
Brown, Robert (Glasgow) (LD)
Butler, Mr Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (Lab)
Chisholm, Malcolm (Edinburgh North and Leith) (Lab)
Craigie, Cathie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (Lab)
Deacon, Susan (Edinburgh East and Musselburgh) (Lab)
Douglas-Hamilton, Lord James (Lothians) (Con)
Eadie, Helen (Dunfermline East) (Lab)
Ferguson, Patricia (Glasgow Maryhill) (Lab)
Fergusson, Alex (South of Scotland) (Con)
Finnie, Ross (West of Scotland) (LD)
Gallie, Phil (South of Scotland) (Con)
Gillon, Karen (Clydesdale) (Lab)
Godman, Trish (West Renfrewshire) (Lab)
Goldie, Miss Annabel (West of Scotland) (Con)
Gorrie, Donald (Central Scotland) (LD)
Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
Gray, Iain (Edinburgh Pentlands) (Lab)

Henry, Hugh (Paisley South) (Lab)
Home Robertson, Mr John (East Lothian) (Lab)
Hughes, Janis (Glasgow Rutherglen) (Lab)
Jackson, Gordon (Glasgow Govan) (Lab)
Jamieson, Cathy (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (Lab)
Jenkins, Ian (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD)
Johnstone, Alex (North-East Scotland) (Con)
Kerr, Mr Andy (East Kilbride) (Lab)
Lamont, Johann (Glasgow Pollok) (Lab)
Macdonald, Lewis (Aberdeen Central) (Lab)
Macintosh, Mr Kenneth (Eastwood) (Lab)
MacKay, Angus (Edinburgh South) (Lab)
MacLean, Kate (Dundee West) (Lab)
Macmillan, Maureen (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
Martin, Paul (Glasgow Springburn) (Lab)
McAllion, Mr John (Dundee East) (Lab)
McAveety, Mr Frank (Glasgow Shettleston) (Lab)
McCabe, Mr Tom (Hamilton South) (Lab)
McGrigor, Mr Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
McIntosh, Mrs Lyndsay (Central Scotland) (Con)
McLeish, Henry (Central Fife) (Lab)
McLetchie, David (Lothians) (Con)
McMahon, Mr Michael (Hamilton North and Bellshill) (Lab)
McNeil, Mr Duncan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (Lab)
McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow Kelvin) (Lab)
McNulty, Des (Clydebank and Milngavie) (Lab)
Monteith, Mr Brian (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
Morrison, Mr Alasdair (Western Isles) (Lab)
Muldoon, Bristow (Livingston) (Lab)
Mulligan, Mrs Mary (Linlithgow) (Lab)
Mundell, David (South of Scotland) (Con)
Munro, John Farquhar (Ross, Skye and Inverness West) (LD)
Murray, Dr Elaine (Dumfries) (Lab)
Oldfather, Irene (Cunninghame South) (Lab)
Peacock, Peter (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
Peattie, Cathy (Falkirk East) (Lab)
Radcliffe, Nora (Gordon) (LD)
Raffan, Mr Keith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (LD)
Robson, Euan (Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (LD)
Rumbles, Mr Mike (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (LD)
Scanlon, Mary (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
Simpson, Dr Richard (Ochil) (Lab)
Smith, Elaine (Coatbridge and Chryston) (Lab)
Smith, Iain (North-East Fife) (LD)
Smith, Mrs Margaret (Edinburgh West) (LD)
Stephen, Nicol (Aberdeen South) (LD)
Stone, Mr Jamie (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD)
Thomson, Elaine (Aberdeen North) (Lab)
Tosh, Mr Murray (South of Scotland) (Con)
Wallace, Ben (North-East Scotland) (Con)
Watson, Mike (Glasgow Cathcart) (Lab)
Whitefield, Karen (Airdrie and Shotts) (Lab)
Wilson, Allan (Cunninghame North) (Lab)
Young, John (West of Scotland) (Con)

ABSTENTIONS

Harper, Robin (Lothians) (Green)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 32, Against 77, Abstentions 1.

Motion disagreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The fifth question is, that amendment S1M-1868.1, in the name of Bruce Crawford, which seeks to amend motion S1M-1868, in the name of Sarah Boyack, on rural transport, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

FOR

Adam, Brian (North-East Scotland) (SNP)
 Campbell, Colin (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 Canavan, Dennis (Falkirk West)
 Crawford, Bruce (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP)
 Cunningham, Roseanna (Perth) (SNP)
 Elder, Dorothy-Grace (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Ewing, Dr Winnie (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness East, Nairn and Lochaber) (SNP)
 Ewing, Mrs Margaret (Moray) (SNP)
 Fabiani, Linda (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Gibson, Mr Kenneth (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Hamilton, Mr Duncan (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Lothians) (SNP)
 Lochhead, Richard (North-East Scotland) (SNP)
 MacAskill, Mr Kenny (Lothians) (SNP)
 MacDonald, Ms Margo (Lothians) (SNP)
 Marwick, Tricia (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP)
 Matheson, Michael (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 McGugan, Irene (North-East Scotland) (SNP)
 McLeod, Fiona (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 Morgan, Alasdair (Galloway and Upper Nithsdale) (SNP)
 Neil, Alex (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Paterson, Mr Gil (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Reid, Mr George (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP)
 Robison, Shona (North-East Scotland) (SNP)
 Salmond, Mr Alex (Banff and Buchan) (SNP)
 Sheridan, Tommy (Glasgow) (SSP)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Swinney, Mr John (North Tayside) (SNP)
 Welsh, Mr Andrew (Angus) (SNP)
 White, Ms Sandra (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Wilson, Andrew (Central Scotland) (SNP)

AGAINST

Aitken, Bill (Glasgow) (Con)
 Alexander, Ms Wendy (Paisley North) (Lab)
 Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Barrie, Scott (Dunfermline West) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Edinburgh Central) (Lab)
 Brankin, Rhona (Midlothian) (Lab)
 Brown, Robert (Glasgow) (LD)
 Butler, Mr Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (Lab)
 Chisholm, Malcolm (Edinburgh North and Leith) (Lab)
 Craigie, Cathie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (Lab)
 Deacon, Susan (Edinburgh East and Musselburgh) (Lab)
 Douglas-Hamilton, Lord James (Lothians) (Con)
 Eadie, Helen (Dunfermline East) (Lab)
 Ferguson, Patricia (Glasgow Maryhill) (Lab)
 Fergusson, Alex (South of Scotland) (Con)
 Finnie, Ross (West of Scotland) (LD)
 Gallie, Phil (South of Scotland) (Con)
 Gillon, Karen (Clydesdale) (Lab)
 Godman, Trish (West Renfrewshire) (Lab)
 Goldie, Miss Annabel (West of Scotland) (Con)
 Gorrie, Donald (Central Scotland) (LD)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Gray, Iain (Edinburgh Pentlands) (Lab)
 Henry, Hugh (Paisley South) (Lab)
 Home Robertson, Mr John (East Lothian) (Lab)
 Hughes, Janis (Glasgow Rutherglen) (Lab)
 Jackson, Gordon (Glasgow Govan) (Lab)
 Jamieson, Cathy (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (Lab)
 Jenkins, Ian (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD)
 Johnstone, Alex (North-East Scotland) (Con)
 Kerr, Mr Andy (East Kilbride) (Lab)
 Lamont, Johann (Glasgow Pollok) (Lab)

Macdonald, Lewis (Aberdeen Central) (Lab)
 Macintosh, Mr Kenneth (Eastwood) (Lab)
 MacKay, Angus (Edinburgh South) (Lab)
 MacLean, Kate (Dundee West) (Lab)
 Macmillan, Maureen (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Martin, Paul (Glasgow Springburn) (Lab)
 McAllion, Mr John (Dundee East) (Lab)
 McAveety, Mr Frank (Glasgow Shettleston) (Lab)
 McCabe, Mr Tom (Hamilton South) (Lab)
 McGrigor, Mr Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 McIntosh, Mrs Lyndsay (Central Scotland) (Con)
 McLeish, Henry (Central Fife) (Lab)
 McLetchie, David (Lothians) (Con)
 McMahan, Mr Michael (Hamilton North and Bellshill) (Lab)
 McNeil, Mr Duncan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (Lab)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow Kelvin) (Lab)
 McNulty, Des (Clydebank and Milngavie) (Lab)
 Monteith, Mr Brian (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Morrison, Mr Alasdair (Western Isles) (Lab)
 Muldoon, Bristow (Livingston) (Lab)
 Mulligan, Mrs Mary (Linlithgow) (Lab)
 Mundell, David (South of Scotland) (Con)
 Munro, John Farquhar (Ross, Skye and Inverness West) (LD)
 Murray, Dr Elaine (Dumfries) (Lab)
 Oldfather, Irene (Cunninghame South) (Lab)
 Peacock, Peter (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Peattie, Cathy (Falkirk East) (Lab)
 Radcliffe, Nora (Gordon) (LD)
 Raffan, Mr Keith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (LD)
 Robson, Euan (Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (LD)
 Rumbles, Mr Mike (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (LD)
 Scanlon, Mary (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Simpson, Dr Richard (Ochil) (Lab)
 Smith, Elaine (Coatbridge and Chryston) (Lab)
 Smith, Iain (North-East Fife) (LD)
 Smith, Mrs Margaret (Edinburgh West) (LD)
 Stephen, Nicol (Aberdeen South) (LD)
 Stone, Mr Jamie (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD)
 Thomson, Elaine (Aberdeen North) (Lab)
 Tosh, Mr Murray (South of Scotland) (Con)
 Wallace, Ben (North-East Scotland) (Con)
 Watson, Mike (Glasgow Cathcart) (Lab)
 Whitefield, Karen (Airdrie and Shotts) (Lab)
 Wilson, Allan (Cunninghame North) (Lab)
 Young, John (West of Scotland) (Con)

ABSTENTIONS

Harper, Robin (Lothians) (Green)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 32, Against 77, Abstentions 1.

Amendment disagreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The sixth question is, that amendment S1M-1868.2, in the name of Mr Murray Tosh, which seeks to amend motion S1M-1868, in the name of Sarah Boyack, on rural transport, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

FOR

Aitken, Bill (Glasgow) (Con)
 Canavan, Dennis (Falkirk West)
 Douglas-Hamilton, Lord James (Lothians) (Con)
 Fergusson, Alex (South of Scotland) (Con)

Gallie, Phil (South of Scotland) (Con)
 Goldie, Miss Annabel (West of Scotland) (Con)
 Johnstone, Alex (North-East Scotland) (Con)
 McGrigor, Mr Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 McIntosh, Mrs Lyndsay (Central Scotland) (Con)
 McLetchie, David (Lothians) (Con)
 Monteith, Mr Brian (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Mundell, David (South of Scotland) (Con)
 Scanlon, Mary (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Tosh, Mr Murray (South of Scotland) (Con)
 Wallace, Ben (North-East Scotland) (Con)

AGAINST

Adam, Brian (North-East Scotland) (SNP)
 Alexander, Ms Wendy (Paisley North) (Lab)
 Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Barrie, Scott (Dunfermline West) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Edinburgh Central) (Lab)
 Brankin, Rhona (Midlothian) (Lab)
 Brown, Robert (Glasgow) (LD)
 Butler, Mr Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (Lab)
 Campbell, Colin (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 Chisholm, Malcolm (Edinburgh North and Leith) (Lab)
 Craigie, Cathie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (Lab)
 Crawford, Bruce (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP)
 Cunningham, Roseanna (Perth) (SNP)
 Deacon, Susan (Edinburgh East and Musselburgh) (Lab)
 Eadie, Helen (Dunfermline East) (Lab)
 Elder, Dorothy-Grace (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Ewing, Dr Winnie (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness East, Nairn and Lochaber) (SNP)
 Ewing, Mrs Margaret (Moray) (SNP)
 Fabiani, Linda (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Ferguson, Patricia (Glasgow Maryhill) (Lab)
 Finnie, Ross (West of Scotland) (LD)
 Gibson, Mr Kenneth (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Gillon, Karen (Clydesdale) (Lab)
 Godman, Trish (West Renfrewshire) (Lab)
 Gorrie, Donald (Central Scotland) (LD)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Gray, Iain (Edinburgh Pentlands) (Lab)
 Hamilton, Mr Duncan (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Henry, Hugh (Paisley South) (Lab)
 Home Robertson, Mr John (East Lothian) (Lab)
 Hughes, Janis (Glasgow Rutherglen) (Lab)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Lothians) (SNP)
 Jackson, Gordon (Glasgow Govan) (Lab)
 Jamieson, Cathy (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (Lab)
 Jenkins, Ian (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD)
 Kerr, Mr Andy (East Kilbride) (Lab)
 Lamont, Johann (Glasgow Pollok) (Lab)
 Lochhead, Richard (North-East Scotland) (SNP)
 MacAskill, Mr Kenny (Lothians) (SNP)
 Macdonald, Lewis (Aberdeen Central) (Lab)
 MacDonald, Ms Margo (Lothians) (SNP)
 Macintosh, Mr Kenneth (Eastwood) (Lab)
 MacKay, Angus (Edinburgh South) (Lab)
 MacLean, Kate (Dundee West) (Lab)
 Macmillan, Maureen (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Martin, Paul (Glasgow Springburn) (Lab)
 Marwick, Tricia (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP)
 Matheson, Michael (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 McAllion, Mr John (Dundee East) (Lab)
 McAveety, Mr Frank (Glasgow Shettleston) (Lab)
 McCabe, Mr Tom (Hamilton South) (Lab)
 McGugan, Irene (North-East Scotland) (SNP)
 McLeish, Henry (Central Fife) (Lab)
 McLeod, Fiona (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 McMahan, Mr Michael (Hamilton North and Bellshill) (Lab)
 McNeil, Mr Duncan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (Lab)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow Kelvin) (Lab)

McNulty, Des (Clydebank and Milngavie) (Lab)
 Morgan, Alasdair (Galloway and Upper Nithsdale) (SNP)
 Morrison, Mr Alasdair (Western Isles) (Lab)
 Muldoon, Bristow (Livingston) (Lab)
 Mulligan, Mrs Mary (Linlithgow) (Lab)
 Munro, John Farquhar (Ross, Skye and Inverness West) (LD)
 Murray, Dr Elaine (Dumfries) (Lab)
 Neil, Alex (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Oldfather, Irene (Cunninghame South) (Lab)
 Paterson, Mr Gil (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Peacock, Peter (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Peattie, Cathy (Falkirk East) (Lab)
 Radcliffe, Nora (Gordon) (LD)
 Raffan, Mr Keith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (LD)
 Reid, Mr George (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP)
 Robison, Shona (North-East Scotland) (SNP)
 Robson, Euan (Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (LD)
 Rumbles, Mr Mike (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (LD)
 Salmond, Mr Alex (Banff and Buchan) (SNP)
 Simpson, Dr Richard (Ochil) (Lab)
 Smith, Elaine (Coatbridge and Chryston) (Lab)
 Smith, Iain (North-East Fife) (LD)
 Smith, Mrs Margaret (Edinburgh West) (LD)
 Stephen, Nicol (Aberdeen South) (LD)
 Stone, Mr Jamie (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Swinney, Mr John (North Tayside) (SNP)
 Thomson, Elaine (Aberdeen North) (Lab)
 Welsh, Mr Andrew (Angus) (SNP)
 White, Ms Sandra (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Whitefield, Karen (Airdrie and Shotts) (Lab)
 Wilson, Allan (Cunninghame North) (Lab)
 Wilson, Andrew (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Young, John (West of Scotland) (Con)

ABSTENTIONS

Harper, Robin (Lothians) (Green)
 Sheridan, Tommy (Glasgow) (SSP)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 15, Against 92, Abstentions 2.

Amendment disagreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The final question is, that motion S1M-1868, in the name of Sarah Boyack, on rural transport, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

FOR

Alexander, Ms Wendy (Paisley North) (Lab)
 Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Barrie, Scott (Dunfermline West) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Edinburgh Central) (Lab)
 Brankin, Rhona (Midlothian) (Lab)
 Brown, Robert (Glasgow) (LD)
 Butler, Mr Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (Lab)
 Canavan, Dennis (Falkirk West)
 Chisholm, Malcolm (Edinburgh North and Leith) (Lab)
 Craigie, Cathie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (Lab)
 Deacon, Susan (Edinburgh East and Musselburgh) (Lab)
 Eadie, Helen (Dunfermline East) (Lab)
 Ferguson, Patricia (Glasgow Maryhill) (Lab)
 Finnie, Ross (West of Scotland) (LD)
 Gillon, Karen (Clydesdale) (Lab)
 Godman, Trish (West Renfrewshire) (Lab)

Gorrie, Donald (Central Scotland) (LD)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Gray, Iain (Edinburgh Pentlands) (Lab)
 Harper, Robin (Lothians) (Green)
 Henry, Hugh (Paisley South) (Lab)
 Home Robertson, Mr John (East Lothian) (Lab)
 Hughes, Janis (Glasgow Rutherglen) (Lab)
 Jackson, Gordon (Glasgow Govan) (Lab)
 Jamieson, Cathy (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (Lab)
 Jenkins, Ian (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD)
 Kerr, Mr Andy (East Kilbride) (Lab)
 Lamont, Johann (Glasgow Pollok) (Lab)
 Macdonald, Lewis (Aberdeen Central) (Lab)
 Macintosh, Mr Kenneth (Eastwood) (Lab)
 MacKay, Angus (Edinburgh South) (Lab)
 MacLean, Kate (Dundee West) (Lab)
 Macmillan, Maureen (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Martin, Paul (Glasgow Springburn) (Lab)
 McAllion, Mr John (Dundee East) (Lab)
 McAveety, Mr Frank (Glasgow Shettleston) (Lab)
 McCabe, Mr Tom (Hamilton South) (Lab)
 McLeish, Henry (Central Fife) (Lab)
 McMahon, Mr Michael (Hamilton North and Bellshill) (Lab)
 McNeil, Mr Duncan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (Lab)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow Kelvin) (Lab)
 McNulty, Des (Clydebank and Milngavie) (Lab)
 Morrison, Mr Alasdair (Western Isles) (Lab)
 Muldoon, Bristow (Livingston) (Lab)
 Mulligan, Mrs Mary (Linlithgow) (Lab)
 Munro, John Farquhar (Ross, Skye and Inverness West) (LD)
 Murray, Dr Elaine (Dumfries) (Lab)
 Oldfather, Irene (Cunninghame South) (Lab)
 Peacock, Peter (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Peattie, Cathy (Falkirk East) (Lab)
 Radcliffe, Nora (Gordon) (LD)
 Raffan, Mr Keith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (LD)
 Robson, Euan (Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (LD)
 Rumbles, Mr Mike (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (LD)
 Simpson, Dr Richard (Ochil) (Lab)
 Smith, Elaine (Coatbridge and Chryston) (Lab)
 Smith, Iain (North-East Fife) (LD)
 Smith, Mrs Margaret (Edinburgh West) (LD)
 Stephen, Nicol (Aberdeen South) (LD)
 Stone, Mr Jamie (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD)
 Thomson, Elaine (Aberdeen North) (Lab)
 Watson, Mike (Glasgow Cathcart) (Lab)
 Whitefield, Karen (Airdrie and Shotts) (Lab)
 Wilson, Allan (Cunninghame North) (Lab)

AGAINST

Adam, Brian (North-East Scotland) (SNP)
 Aitken, Bill (Glasgow) (Con)
 Campbell, Colin (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 Crawford, Bruce (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP)
 Cunningham, Roseanna (Perth) (SNP)
 Douglas-Hamilton, Lord James (Lothians) (Con)
 Elder, Dorothy-Grace (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Ewing, Dr Winnie (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness East, Nairn and Lochaber) (SNP)
 Ewing, Mrs Margaret (Moray) (SNP)
 Fabiani, Linda (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Fergusson, Alex (South of Scotland) (Con)
 Gallie, Phil (South of Scotland) (Con)
 Gibson, Mr Kenneth (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Goldie, Miss Annabel (West of Scotland) (Con)
 Hamilton, Mr Duncan (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Lothians) (SNP)
 Johnstone, Alex (North-East Scotland) (Con)

Lochhead, Richard (North-East Scotland) (SNP)
 MacAskill, Mr Kenny (Lothians) (SNP)
 MacDonald, Ms Margo (Lothians) (SNP)
 Marwick, Tricia (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP)
 Matheson, Michael (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 McGrigor, Mr Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 McGugan, Irene (North-East Scotland) (SNP)
 McIntosh, Mrs Lyndsay (Central Scotland) (Con)
 McLeod, Fiona (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 McLetchie, David (Lothians) (Con)
 Monteith, Mr Brian (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Morgan, Alasdair (Galloway and Upper Nithsdale) (SNP)
 Mundell, David (South of Scotland) (Con)
 Neil, Alex (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Paterson, Mr Gil (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Reid, Mr George (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP)
 Robison, Shona (North-East Scotland) (SNP)
 Salmond, Mr Alex (Banff and Buchan) (SNP)
 Scanlon, Mary (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Swinney, Mr John (North Tayside) (SNP)
 Tosh, Mr Murray (South of Scotland) (Con)
 Wallace, Ben (North-East Scotland) (Con)
 Welsh, Mr Andrew (Angus) (SNP)
 White, Ms Sandra (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Wilson, Andrew (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Young, John (West of Scotland) (Con)

ABSTENTIONS

Sheridan, Tommy (Glasgow) (SSP)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 64, Against 45, Abstentions 1.

Motion agreed to.

That the Parliament welcomes the Executive's commitment to improving transport in rural Scotland, notes the progress that has been made by investing in lifeline air and ferry services, rail and bus services, community transport, petrol stations and roads that serve remote and rural communities, and recognises the vital role that these record levels of investment play in improving people's lives in rural Scotland.

Health Visitors and Community Nurses (Car Travel)

The Presiding Officer (Sir David Steel): This afternoon's members' business is a debate on motion S1M-1736, in the name of Robert Brown, on health visitor and community nurse car travel. It will help if members who would like to participate in the debate press their request-to-speak buttons.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament notes the problems faced by health visitors and community nurses when using their cars on NHS business and believes that there should be national arrangements on this matter and that there should be provision of free car parking badges to such key workers together with an urgent review of their car leasing and mileage arrangements.

17:11

Robert Brown (Glasgow) (LD): A few weeks ago, several other members and I attended a lobby of the Scottish Parliament by the deals on wheels campaign. All members attend many lobbies. At some, we discover interesting things; at others, we do not. However, that lobby quite impressed me. The more detail that I heard, the more that I became annoyed about the way in which bureaucracy and red tape seems to have disguised and covered up the policy objective that should be operated.

As politicians, we often wax lyrical about public policy objectives, targets and delivery, and about world-beating amounts of money and best-ever numbers of staff recruited. However, in the real world, policy objectives are achieved by people, not by statistics on a policy paper. The targets are met and delivery achieved by public sector and other workers. The money is spent successfully or otherwise by front-line staff and on how they do their jobs.

Our debate centres on people—the health visitors and community nurses who, day by day in their professional working lives, give the commitment that makes care in the community a reality and who strive to improve and sustain public health, not by juggling reports or tweaking budgets, but by working with patients.

Health visitors and community nurses are a central part of the national health service in the community and the home. They are highly qualified. An article in tonight's *Glasgow Evening Times* points out that it takes longer to train a health visitor than it does to train a basic doctor. Usually, health visitors and community nurses are attached to a primary health care team. Their care duties centre on the very young and very old—the role for specialist geriatric health visitors is

growing—but they also support at-risk groups such as families who have handicapped children.

It is obvious that travel is a significant issue for people who visit and care for patients in their homes. Rural nurses might have to travel significant distances in areas where public transport is scarce. The distances that health workers in urban areas need to travel are shorter, but the issue is the same. Whether in a city, small village or town, parking near clients, chemists or clinics is a time-wasting problem and a significant expense.

Most commonly, community nurses and health visitors use their personal cars on NHS business, but there is significant scope to encourage the use of bicycles in some areas. The background to the motion is that the relevant arrangements are unhelpful and exploitative. The deals on wheels campaign, which is being run by the nursing sections of the Manufacturing, Science, Finance union—MSF—throughout the United Kingdom, suggests that health visitors and community nurses each subsidise the NHS in that way to the tune of about £700 a year. The Royal College of Nursing says that the average is £1,000 a year for a rural nurse. Those figures are quite significant.

Not all the issues fall within the Scottish Parliament's power. Taxation is a reserved matter. To be practical, we should note that the way in which mileage allowances are fixed through the General Whitley Council has a large UK component. The question of a free parking sticker for community nurses and car leasing arrangements is in the power of health boards, health trusts and the Scottish Parliament. Boards and trusts deal with those matters and the set-up varies substantially throughout Scotland. I am a strong supporter of local decision making in this field, but I am not sure that some decisions on the matter can be justified. The problem is getting worse as hospitals introduce parking charges to tackle the chronic congestion that they suffer. I cannot believe that a free car-parking scheme for those NHS staff will cost NHS trusts or anyone else an amount that will even register on their budget line.

The Deputy Minister for Health and Community Care confirmed recently, in written answer S1O-3168, that local authorities are able to issue parking passes for their staff. I would appreciate it if, in his closing speech, the minister would elaborate on the arrangements for and implications of that decision. It would be a scandal if nonsensical red tape allowed local authorities to charge health trusts for such a facility. Have health trusts approached councils on that matter? Have the local authorities responded helpfully? Can the minister cut through the red tape and issue guidance and direction as required?

Car leasing arrangements are also in the gift of trusts. I understand that that provision varies greatly throughout the country. Those arrangements are interrelated with tax issues, but I think that there would be a strong argument for a Scotland-wide arrangement. The issue of the proportion of insurance and tax that is paid by the NHS needs to be considered, as do the implications of people going on sick leave while in possession of a leased car, and the setting of the mileage levels. Those and many more issues are involved, but surely the Common Services Agency or some similar body could examine a national scheme and consult with trusts. Such a body could also take account of the higher petrol prices in the north of Scotland; a subject that was touched upon in debate this afternoon.

Members will have received the RCN's briefing paper about the lack of progress that has been made with the oil companies on possible petrol card deals. Will the Executive help to bridge the gap that exists between the oil companies and the trusts, in order to produce a workable scheme? The details of the mileage allowance are complex, but they seem to compare unfavourably with MSPs' mileage allowance rates. Such things should not cause hassle in the working lives of our valued NHS staff and I hope that the minister can give us some hope and reassurance about those things.

Let us cut through the red tape and give NHS workers our backing with the words that are spoken in today's debate. It should be possible to sort out these matters reasonably easily, and we should certainly be able to sort out car parking charges and leasing arrangements. I hope that the minister will respond favourably on those points.

17:18

Elaine Thomson (Aberdeen North) (Lab): I thank Robert Brown for securing the debate. Because I am a member of the MSF, I am happy to take part.

Community nurses and health visitors play a key role in the NHS. They undertake valuable work that makes the NHS more accessible to a much wider range of people, in particular older people and people who have disabilities. They take health care to patients and they ensure that the service meets the needs of patients, rather than the other way round. That becomes particularly important in remote and rural areas. Community nurses and health visitors are a key element in social inclusion and are included in the document "Our National Health: A plan for action, a plan for change".

Car usage has become absolutely essential to community nurses and health visitors and although TV programmes give us an image from a

long time ago when they walked about and cycled, such days are long gone. The car is vital in enabling them to carry out their work and their duties.

I am pleased that the MSF has campaigned hard on the issue, along with the deals on wheels campaign that has been run by the Community Practitioners and Health Visitors Association. That campaign has been very successful in bringing the issue to the attention of many different people, including the Scottish Parliament. As Robert Brown mentioned, the CPHVA successfully lobbied the Parliament at the beginning of March.

GPs have long had free car parking stickers to aid their work. The need for that has been recognised and we must consider extending that provision to community nurses and health visitors who, as congestion in our cities grows, are increasingly wasting time on looking for car parking spaces, which could be spent with patients. In addition, they have often to pay for parking or are given parking tickets when appointments with patients have overrun.

Members would probably agree that the time that community nurses and health visitors spend with patients is of paramount importance. Patients can suffer if their nurse or health visitor turns up late or stressed as a result of trying to find a parking space or change for parking. There was an incident in Aberdeen in which a community nurse had to cancel an appointment with a patient because she did not have enough change in her purse to pay the parking fee. As somebody who is always searching for change for parking, I have some sympathy with that nurse. If I miss an appointment, it is not the end of the world, but it is vital that health visitors and community nurses get to their patients.

As Robert Brown mentioned, car leasing arrangements vary considerably from trust to trust; workers in some areas get much better deals than others. It would be only fair to have a national arrangement and equity between trusts. Leasing agreements and low mileage allowances often result in people ending up effectively subsidising the NHS up to the tune of an estimated £700 a year.

I ask that we consider how valuable those workers are in delivering NHS services to Scotland's communities and that they are treated fairly. I urge that a uniform approach be adopted by trusts to ensure that we have equity. As I said, GPs have had free car parking stickers for a long time. Now is the time to consider extending that provision to health visitors and community nurses. Local authorities could do that under existing legislation and it should be considered. I ask also that we consider a national review of mileage allowances.

17:23

Nicola Sturgeon (Glasgow) (SNP): I congratulate Robert Brown on securing the debate. While it raises an important issue, most people in Scotland would find it surprising that such an issue is a problem. Many people would assume that much of what Robert Brown is asking for exists already. As Elaine Thomson said, GPs already have free car parking stickers and most people would assume that that also applies to district nurses and community nurses. In many health trusts, senior health service managers have generous car leasing arrangements, which says something about the priorities of those who run our national health service. Again, that would surprise members of the public.

Health visitors and community nurses are central to the NHS in Scotland. They provide invaluable services to communities. As Elaine Thomson said, many of the Government's social inclusion initiatives are dependent on the community role of health visitors. For a group of people who require to travel as a matter of course in their daily employment, reliance on cars is inevitable, whether they live in rural areas, where long distances are involved, or in cities, where health visitors and nurses must be allowed to travel conveniently between patients.

When one adds the problem of car parking to the mileage problems that Robert Brown mentioned, one can see the problems that those workers face daily. That is something that Elaine Thomson outlined in very real terms. I have only to think of the congestion problems in cities such as Glasgow and Edinburgh to imagine how they affect the daily work of a health visitor who is travelling to visit new mothers, for example, because it is difficult to find somewhere to park. On top of that, the cost of parking must also be considered.

Those concerns have been expressed well in the debate. I want to mention another issue in closing. I know that there are a number of issues involved in hospital car parking charges and that it is not an entirely simple matter, but it gives me great cause for concern. The introduction of hospital car parking charges in Lothian and Fife, which are leading the way in that, adds a burden to those who work in the health service. It cannot be beyond the ability of those who manage the health service to find a way round that problem at least.

In conclusion, I am sure that there are many different ways in which the problems that Robert Brown mentioned can be tackled. As he rightly said, many of the problems have been created by bureaucracy, but none is insurmountable. As I said at the outset, most of them are very simple. I look forward to the minister's response. If we could find

ways of getting round even some of the problems, we would make the daily life of people who provide vital services in our communities throughout Scotland that bit easier. It will be well worth doing that, if we can.

17:26

Cathy Peattie (Falkirk East) (Lab): I start by declaring that I am a member of MSF. I support the motion and I congratulate the CPHVA and MSF on the deals on wheels campaign and on their success in getting the issue debated in Parliament. I also congratulate Robert Brown on securing this evening's debate.

Although there are areas in the motion that the Scottish Parliament cannot deal with, there are also areas that we need to highlight. As Nicola Sturgeon said, we need to find ways round problems and to consider how they can be dealt with. At a time when the health service depends greatly on what is happening at community level and on the services that are carried out by those who work at that level, it seems really weird that the workers themselves must subsidise the service. Health visitors and community nurses play a key role in delivering services locally.

When my mother was terminally ill, she chose to be nursed at home. She was an ex-nurse and she felt that she certainly did not want to die in hospital. We could never have survived as a family if the community nurses and health visitors had not been there to support us. They play a crucial role for families throughout the country. Community care depends on people working at local level. Many vulnerable members of our communities depend on their care. It is therefore absurd that health visitors are currently subsidising the NHS through their travel costs.

A mileage rate of 10p a mile seems to be crazy to me. The smallest voluntary organisation in this country would throw out the suggestion of 10p a mile. I have worked in a voluntary organisation, and we thought that we were hard done by to have a mileage rate of 25p a mile. Health visitors must work up and down the country, visiting elderly people and young mums. With a mileage rate of 10p a mile, they are subsidising their transport. It is crazy. That does not take account of the costs of tax, insurance or wear and tear on the vehicle, and it is important that those things are considered. There must be a realistic mileage rate that is worked out at national level and reviewed regularly.

Will the minister do something to encourage health boards to consider petrol cards? A petrol card scheme could be implemented nationally. If private companies, some of them quite small, can operate such schemes, why cannot the health

service do it? Health boards could also consider ways of securing free parking for NHS staff, perhaps by working with local authorities. It cannot be impossible and it must be done.

The discussion must continue. As I said at the outset, there are things that the Parliament can do. Surely we can consider a realistic national car leasing scheme, which staff can use without having to subsidise it, and which recognises their crucial role in delivering health services. I hope that we can continue this debate and continue to support this very important campaign. Let us see whether we can resolve the issue.

17:29

Mary Scanlon (Highlands and Islands) (Con):

I thank Robert Brown for securing the debate, because the issue needs to be brought to the fore. It has been recognised and various MSPs have done work on it; I count myself as one of many.

I asked parliamentary questions last year about the progress that was made by the joint review of section 24 of the "General Whitley Council Handbook", covering mileage and travel allowances for all NHS staff. I received a reply on 27 November. I asked what further progress had been made and the reply came in a written answer on 20 April:

"The Joint Review is still ongoing."—[*Official Report, Written Answers*, 20 April 2001, vol 11, p 507]

When I phoned the health department today, I asked when the joint review was going to conclude and make recommendations. Of course, I am not allowed to talk to officials and the person on the end of the line said that she could not say anything. I am pleased that, out of frustration at trying to do something, Robert Brown has secured today's debate.

According to the Royal College of Nursing, the General Whitley Council has been considering travel within the NHS since 1988. A debate in this Parliament may be what it takes to get the General Whitley Council to do something; 13 years is rather a long time. As Nicola Sturgeon said, this should not be dealt with within the Parliament simply because there is a bureaucratic problem somewhere else.

John McLaren, of the CPHVA states:

"We have had a very sympathetic hearing"

from MSPs,

"but we would like to see warm words translated into concrete action."

I say to John McLaren that I would like to see the General Whitley Council doing its job and the minister holding it to account for this unacceptable delay.

There is greater emphasis on care at home. Lee Whitehill, of the MSF, said in an e-mail that employees in trusts throughout Scotland are subject to widely varying terms and conditions. Dundee, Edinburgh and now Glasgow have parking permit schemes worked out with local authorities, but other trusts do not. Surely employees who are on the same grade and who do the same job within the NHS are entitled to the same terms and conditions.

As other members have said, why would somebody choose to work in a part of Scotland where it costs them an extra £700 to £1,000 to do their job? Should not we ask that all mileage rates in the public sector be re-examined to ensure greater fairness and equity throughout the system?

Several members have mentioned the agency card. If someone applies for an agency card—I know only about the Highlands, but I assume that the scheme is the same throughout Scotland—they can get one, as long as they have a business account and administration for it. It should not be an administrative problem for the NHS to endorse an agency card for community nurses.

Ministers—I mean of the clergy—in the Highlands can get an agency card to buy petrol and diesel at the UK average price. I see no problem in community nurses having such a card. If one can get a petrol card to heal the sinners, surely one can get a petrol card to heal the sick.

17:33

Karen Whitefield (Airdrie and Shotts) (Lab): I congratulate Robert Brown on bringing this important issue to the Parliament's attention. I also welcome the opportunity to participate in the debate. As an MSF member, I am especially pleased that the campaign is gaining support throughout the Parliament. It is important because it aims to ensure that community nurses and health visitors get a fair deal. As many colleagues have said, they are a vital part of the NHS in Scotland. Without them, the NHS could not do its job as effectively as it does in communities throughout Scotland. I would also like to thank members of the CPHVA and the Community Psychiatric Nurses Association. Without their combined lobbying persistence, the matter would not be being considered today.

I want to concentrate on parking, which several members have already mentioned and which the Parliament itself is able to address. At the moment, community nurses must pay for parking and then claim back those expenses. As well as placing the initial payment on nurses instead of on the NHS, that presents them with the problem of finding suitable parking spaces. The time that they

spend looking for such spaces—we all know how difficult that can be in a city centre—is wasted and would be far better spent caring for patients.

To all intents and purposes, an exemption from parking restrictions would be cost-free and would enable our community nurses and health visitors to spend their time where it is needed most—with patients.

The Scottish Executive is rightly attempting to bring health and care closer to our communities, which means that the use of the car by community nurses and health visitors is not a perk, but an operational tool. NHS trusts and local authorities must recognise that and provide consistent support to NHS staff members who need to use a car. Any such measures must include parking exemptions, consistent car leasing arrangements and a realistic mileage rate.

What practical steps is the Scottish Executive taking to ensure that local authorities and NHS trusts come to an arrangement whereby NHS staff are allowed certain dispensations if they are forced to contravene parking restrictions while delivering care? I am sure that the minister is aware that general practitioners occasionally have to park on double yellow lines; such might well be the case for community practitioners.

I urge the minister to do all that is in his power to ensure that our health visitors and community nurses are valued and that they are properly compensated for their efforts in delivering health care in the community.

17:37

Michael Matheson (Central Scotland) (SNP): Perhaps I, too, should declare an interest, which is included in the register of members' interests.

I congratulate Robert Brown on securing this member's business debate; I attended the Manufacturing, Science, Finance union lobby several weeks ago as well. I want to widen the focus of the debate slightly. The motion concentrates on health visitors and community nurses, who are often attached to primary care teams. Community health care has changed dramatically in the past couple of years with the extension of secondary care provision, particularly the introduction of multidisciplinary area rehabilitation teams. Although health visitors and community nurses play an important role in delivering health care, area rehabilitation teams include therapists such as physiotherapists, occupational therapists and psychologists, who are all affected by the same problems as community nurses and health visitors. If the minister makes a commitment to examine ways in which the system can be changed, I ask him to ensure that any review includes people who are

members of professions allied to medicine or of multidisciplinary teams in the secondary care sector.

Although this point is slightly outwith the focus on the health service, I point out that social workers and community social care staff suffer similar problems because of a dislocation in the car leasing system operated by local authorities. I have suffered from the problem myself; when I left Highland Regional Council, I was offered the opportunity to buy my lease car at an extortionate price that was nowhere near its market value. I then had to buy myself out of the car leasing scheme so that I could go and do the same job in another local authority. In both posts, I was an essential car user; I was doing a job that the local authority was legally obliged to fulfil. As the same difficulties exist in the social care and health care sectors, any attempt to address the problem must be comprehensive.

In the course of the MSF lobby, I was extremely surprised to hear about the car leasing agreements that are provided to senior managers in the health service. Nicola Sturgeon has already touched on this point: senior managers in the health service who are not essential car users are offered extremely generous car leasing arrangements and loans way above the level for clinical staff who are essential car users. There is a need to examine that, to determine whether it is an appropriate use of public money. I was surprised to hear that consultants also receive a generous package involving either a car loan or a car leasing system. They may have to make occasional trips, but they do not strike me as being essential car users.

I recognise the need to ensure that appropriate packages are supplied to maintain the high quality of health care professionals, but I ask the minister to consider the anomalies in the system that have developed over the years because their presence has just been accepted. There is a need to examine the issue comprehensively, to ensure not only that the car leasing system for health visitors and community health nurses is revised, but that the situation for social care staff and other professionals in the health service who are affected is considered.

17:41

Mike Watson (Glasgow Cathcart) (Lab): I, too, am a member of the Manufacturing, Science, Finance union—I am not sure whether that constitutes a declaration of interest.

All members have spoken with one voice in this short debate. That is perhaps not surprising and I hope that the minister will not buck the trend. There is not much to add to what has been said,

as the important elements of the argument have been put across by all parties—that is significant—but there is one important piece of information that I have not heard mentioned. I may not make myself popular among members, but I shall put it on record anyway.

Earlier this month, we received from our allowances office an indication of the new car user rates that MSPs will receive from 1 April. Point 6 of the document states that motor mileage will be reimbursed at 49.3p a mile. Health visitors throughout Scotland receive, on average, between 9p and 13p a mile for using a lease car. If they are offered a lease car and turn it down, they are treated as a casual user and receive the public transport rate of some 23p a mile. I know that negotiations on standard user and regular user allowances have been on-going and have achieved some increases, but the figures are well short of what should be expected for people who, as all members have said, are essential to the delivery of community care. Without them, patients who were unable to travel for their care would be treated much less effectively.

The comparison with doctors has been well made. The amount of time community nurses must spend looking for a parking space, let alone the cost of paying for it, simply because they do not have the facility that doctors have concerns me. Mary Scanlon outlined the differences between the situations in Glasgow, Edinburgh, Dundee and Aberdeen. At the lobby to which many members have referred, it was pointed out that in the city of Aberdeen, community nurses are quite often obliged to travel by public transport. That seriously restricts their ability to visit patients and the amount of time that they can spend with them, which cannot be right.

Neither can it be right, as Michael Matheson said, that someone moving from one health board to another enters a completely different system. Leaving aside the differences between travelling in urban and rural areas, the job should be relatively uniform. Some sort of central scheme should be applied.

I may be wrong—I hope that I am—but it is likely that the minister will say that the Executive gives money to health boards and allows them to determine their priorities. That is all very well in some aspects of health care, but when it comes to the people who are required to deliver that health care, any impediment to their doing their job—any disincentive or anything that lowers their morale or the level of service that they feel able to provide—must be examined seriously. I hope that, as a first step, the minister will undertake to carry out a survey of the situation in Scotland and will then issue guidelines to health boards regarding minimum standards. I hope that he will go further

than that, but that should be the absolute minimum.

The people whom we have been talking about are essential health service workers. They are not being treated with the respect they deserve. I hope that as a result of this debate and debates in the UK Parliament, the Welsh Assembly and so on, their situation will be improved.

17:44

Donald Gorrie (Central Scotland) (LD): Robert Brown and members who have spoken subsequently have covered the detailed, technical issues well. I shall draw out three more general issues that the debate highlights.

The people who voted for us expect us to put things right and, clearly, there are a lot of issues around this debate that are wrong. However, we have no power to put things right; we rely on Malcolm Chisholm to do that. He is an excellent guy and I am quite sure that he will put things right, but there should be a way in which the will of the Parliament can be brought to bear and by which the usual civil service attitude—which is that the matter is for the health board or the Whitley council or whatever—can be avoided. If there is a clear, democratic view, it should be expressed to the relevant people. It is true that health boards and councils are supposed to make their own decisions, but they must be clear about what the informed public, the people involved and their representatives want them to do. We must examine our system of bringing the democratic will to bear on recalcitrant public bodies who act in a foolish manner, as the health boards and the Whitley council are doing.

It is interesting that relatively minor issues often impinge on working people—including MSPs—far harder than the great world picture. We should listen more to employees at all levels. The lobby with which we are dealing today happens to be an extremely well-organised and articulate bunch of people. However, lots of people, particularly in the public sector, are not so well organised. We should listen to them carefully and try to put their minor niggles right—a stone in one's shoe often hurts more than a big event. We should listen more carefully to public sector employees, but not to the top brass, who are able to feather their nests efficiently, as we have heard.

The lesson is that, in all sorts of spheres, we get our public services on the back of sacrifices made by the employees and so we get them on the cheap. Often, that happens because we underpay public sector workers. However, in this case, people who work on a wage that is not huge subsidise the health service by paying more for their car. That is absolutely ridiculous. We should

improve our philosophy to ensure that we pay adequately for our public services by paying the employees adequately and giving them proper conditions of service. We must not deliver services on the cheap on the backs of our employees.

I hope that the minister will reply in detail to the points that people have raised and will promise to put them right.

17:47

Dr Richard Simpson (Ochil) (Lab): I congratulate Robert Brown on securing this debate and declare my membership of the Manufacturing, Science, Finance union.

As everyone has said, there is no doubt that the funding arrangements for health visitors and other community workers are inadequate and that the bureaucracy of the system is overly complex. It is difficult to overestimate the irritation that is caused to clinical staff by the system. MSPs will know how annoying it is to fill in forms on parking costs every month; it is even more annoying for clinicians who are under considerable pressure. Obviously, public funds have to be accounted for, but the system is incredibly bureaucratic.

As a general practitioner, I, too, was employed by two trusts at one point. Every year, I had to fill in two different forms for the two trusts. Do we have a corporate NHS or do we not? If we do, let us have a uniform system throughout the NHS.

Whether public servants of the type we are discussing should have access to some form of red diesel or red petrol is another matter.

There is a lack of uniformity on parking: in some towns, GPs get car permits; in others, they use various emergency doctor badges that do not have legal standing but which are accepted through custom as meaning that doctors can park illegally on double yellow lines and so on, but even they are sometimes subject to charge and cases have gone to court. There is a need for health professionals to have access to a scheme like the orange badge scheme. We should have a national green badge scheme with clear guidelines. People with the green badge should use it appropriately and they should get in trouble if they use it inappropriately.

We will not go into parking at hospitals again today, but the appropriateness of access is an important matter.

Michael Matheson rightly referred to other groups in the community, but let us first consider the model of primary care teams. When I started, there was one multipurpose community nurse/health visitor/midwife. When I retired to come here, there were 30 workers in the primary care team. Some of them came from the primary

care trust, some came from the acute services trust and some came from the local authority. They all needed to have access to patients.

In addition, there were volunteers who transported patients. They, too, had difficulties with parking. We need a scheme whereby the service can work smoothly and efficiently. I hope that, as part of establishing a corporate national identity, we will get such a scheme.

Donald Gorrie was trying to draw out themes. Another one is bureaucracy. The abundance of paperwork that professionals must put up with now at all levels needs to be tackled. That is one small area where we could make a start.

17:51

The Deputy Minister for Health and Community Care (Malcolm Chisholm): I congratulate Robert Brown on securing the debate and on bringing these important matters to our attention.

The Scottish Executive recognises the extremely valuable work of health visitors and nurses in the community and the dedication they show in caring for their patients.

The most effective way of delivering services is often to do so in the patient's home or in the community. That is why we have targeted funding to increase the number of community nurses and have recently announced plans for new public health nurses to address Scotland's health challenges.

We are equally keen to do everything we can to support those key staff in their vital work and to ensure that they do not find themselves out of pocket as a result. We are already taking steps to address the concerns Robert Brown raised and to put in place measures to deal with the difficulties health visitors and nurses face, although I accept that there is still a long way to go to ensure all the progress that members seek.

Let me make it clear from the outset that, where parking charges are unavoidable, there is provision for NHS staff to claim reimbursement from their employers. I assume that that always takes place and would want to know if it did not. More generally, car parking arrangements are essentially a matter for individual local authorities in exercising their responsibilities under the Road Traffic Regulation Act 1984. That will be a disappointment to Donald Gorrie, who wants me to be able to do everything. The statutory power lies in that act. I will explain that in more detail, as Robert Brown asked me to elaborate on the point.

We are keen to encourage concessions for staff while they are carrying out NHS duties in the community, not least because of the problems

Elaine Thomson described, including the time wasted looking for parking spaces. Local authorities already have powers to make traffic regulation orders for a variety of traffic management purposes. That could include the issuing of parking permits for use by community nurses and health visitors when making visits.

The City of Edinburgh Council, for example, issues about 350 such passes to NHS trusts for use by health visitors and community nurses. Those passes allow community nursing staff exemption from certain parking restrictions and enable them to stay for longer periods when certain time restrictions apply.

We want that example of good practice to be adopted throughout Scotland and will write to all local authorities, reminding them that they have the powers to implement similar schemes. In law, the decision rests with local authorities, but we hope that they will react positively and make parking permits available for use by health visitors and community nursing staff throughout the country. We will also ensure that trusts and health boards are advised of those provisions.

Elaine Thomson referred to what happens with general practitioners. I should clarify that point, because GPs do not in fact have any legal exemption from parking restriction, although the British Medical Association issues doctors with "Doctor on call" stickers so that they can be easily identified.

As Mary Scanlon reminded us, a review of car leasing and mileage arrangements is in progress—I am not sure that it has been going on since 1988, but I hear what she says about the time it is taking. A UK working group of Department of Health officials, NHS managers and staff representatives has been looking at how we can simplify and modernise the existing formula for mileage allowances to provide fair reimbursement of staff expenses that are necessarily incurred on NHS business and to reflect wider environmental policies. I cannot give a precise date for the conclusion of the review, but it will be this year.

The Scottish Executive will ensure that the review fully addresses the needs of the service in Scotland, for example in relation to services in rural and remote areas. I would be pleased to receive details of the figure of £700 that has been mentioned so that that information can be fed into the review at this late stage.

As an interim measure, mileage allowances for NHS staff were increased from July last year. Those interim increases are especially beneficial for staff working in the community who currently receive a regular user allowance.

Additionally, in more remote areas such as the

Highlands and Islands, a number of trusts and boards operate petrol card schemes to ensure that they take advantage of average mainland petrol prices. A problem is that some trusts and boards do not take up such schemes; I encourage them to do so.

Those measures demonstrate that the Scottish Executive takes seriously the needs of NHS staff in relation to their working conditions as well as financial matters such as pay and reimbursement. We believe that an investment in staff is an investment in patient care.

We are developing new models of care in our communities and matching our ambitions with targeted additional funds to increase staff numbers in key areas. We recognise that the conditions and provisions for travel reimbursement, too, need to be changed and we have set action in train to ensure that they are. That is just one of the many aspects of pay and terms and conditions of service that need to be reviewed. We are considering all aspects of pay and conditions as part of the UK talks on pay modernisation that are in progress. We are demonstrating by our actions and our investment that we are committed to improving terms and conditions of service for all staff in NHS Scotland in the short and the long term.

I end by thanking members for drawing these matters to the attention of the Parliament. I will watch progress with keen interest and I will certainly intervene where I have the power to do so.

Meeting closed at 17:58.

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