

MEETING OF THE PARLIAMENT

Thursday 2 May 2002

Session 1

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Scottish Parliament

Thursday 2 May 2002

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

Parliament (Powers)

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Mr George Reid): Good morning. The first item of business is a debate on motion S1M-3052, in the name of John Swinney, on the powers of the Scottish Parliament, and one amendment to that motion.

09:30

Mr John Swinney (North Tayside) (SNP): All of us who enter the Scottish Parliament have emerged from different political traditions and different parts of Scotland, with different backgrounds and different political interests. Although we disagree on many political issues, we are united on our core political motivation: each of us comes here with the objective of doing the best for the people we are elected to represent. This morning's debate, on the powers of the Scottish Parliament—an issue that is central to the arguments and concerns of the Scottish National Party—is a reflection of that motivation.

Members of the SNP believe that to do the best for the people we represent, we must establish the Parliament as a normal, independent Parliament that can decide on all the issues that confront the people of Scotland. We believe that we will be able to deliver on the ambitions of the people of Scotland and, in the process, address the social and economic problems of our country only when we have powers over the full range of policy areas. We start from the premise that our politics are based on the ambition of making Scotland the best that Scotland can be. We can achieve that only if we have the normal powers of an independent country.

In 1997, the Scottish people voted overwhelmingly to establish the first democratically elected Scottish Parliament in the history of our country.

Bristow Muldoon (Livingston) (Lab): Does the member acknowledge that in last year's general election, the Scottish people overwhelmingly rejected independence?

Mr Swinney: Undoubtedly, there was a general election last year. It had many outcomes, including the fact that the Labour party continued to govern with a minority of the vote. Labour was rejected at the last general election. I regret that that is the

level of rubbish that Bristow Muldoon has to offer to a serious and mature debate about the politics of Scotland.

In 1997, the Scottish people voted overwhelmingly to establish the first democratically elected Scottish Parliament in our history. It was a truly momentous day and it was an historic step in the right direction, particularly for those of us who cherish the ideal of a free and independent Scotland that plays a full part in the community of nations. I recognise and respect the fact that the SNP was part of a broad national consensus for greater Scottish self-government. Parties across the spectrum joined together with the aim of returning power to the hands of the Scottish people. All of us—whatever party we are from—who campaigned tirelessly for the Parliament did so because we hoped it would improve dramatically the lives of millions of our fellow Scots.

I am proud of the SNP's role in that campaign because establishing the Scottish Parliament was a job worth doing. However, as I look around Scotland today, I can see that it is a job half-done. Of course the Parliament has made a difference—it has shone a light on a range of issues that were camouflaged by remote government from Westminster. Committees have undertaken valuable work in investigating serious issues and producing sound foundations for scrutiny of legislation. Parliament has greatly increased the transparency of the political decision-making process. Positive measures, which would never have reached the surface at Westminster, have been introduced to deal with problems in Scotland.

However, after three years of devolution, we have to be honest with ourselves and with the Scottish people. The Parliament has not made the dramatic difference to the country that most of us—from all parties—had hoped for. Expectations have not been met.

Mr Duncan McNeil (Greenock and Inverclyde) (Lab): John Swinney has said much about the past three years of the Parliament. Is he prepared to apologise to the Scottish people for his behaviour and that of his party over the past three years? They have gret and girmed in the Parliament and talked the Parliament down.

Mr Swinney: Duncan McNeil would know all about greetin and girmen—that is all that he ever does in the Parliament. I will not apologise for holding the Executive to account for failing to deliver on its promises to the people of Scotland—that is our right as the Opposition.

The reactions of the Executive and my party to the Executive's failure to meet the legitimate expectations of the people of Scotland have been very different.

Phil Gallie (South of Scotland) (Con): Mr Swinney suggests that the Parliament does not have full control of its affairs. However, it has full control of issues such as education, health and transport in Scotland. Why has the Parliament not delivered on those issues?

Mr Swinney: The Parliament has not delivered on those expectations because the Executive has pursued a policy programme that has failed to deliver what it promised to the people of Scotland. Far too often, the Parliament carries the blame for the Lib-Lab coalition's failure to deliver what the public expect.

Three years into the life of the Scottish Parliament, politics has become a battle of ambition—a battle between those who believe that the people had a right to have such high expectations in 1997 and those who believe that the people had no such right. We know where the Labour party stands.

In February 2002, Douglas Alexander, the architect of new Labour's election campaign in 1999, wrote:

"The new constitutional arrangements reflect and meet the ambitions of the overwhelming majority of Scottish people."

That says it all. A third of Scottish children grow up in poverty, housing conditions are an affront to a decent society and we have virtually the worst economic growth rate in Europe, but Labour thinks that Scottish ambitions have been met. Our hospital waiting lists are up, waiting times are up and the number of hospital beds is down, but Labour thinks that Scottish ambitions have been met.

Rhona Brankin (Midlothian) (Lab): Do the nationalists still support the penny for Scotland campaign? Yes or no?

Mr Swinney: That must be intervention 4 on the crib sheet. If Rhona Brankin had followed any of the news coverage of the comments that I made yesterday, she would know that I made it clear that the SNP believes in taxation on the progressive principle and that we will set out our specific tax proposals before the Scottish Parliament elections. It will all be crystal clear before the elections—that should address Rhona Brankin's concerns.

Any party that can look around Scotland today and believe that we have reached the limit of our ambitions is not in touch with the ambitions of our country. My ambitions and the SNP's ambitions for Scotland are far higher. We want to create the best Scotland for everyone who lives here. We can create the best Scotland if we equip the Parliament with the full normal powers of independence.

However, even within the current powers of the Parliament there is no doubt that the SNP could create, not the best, but a better Scotland than the one in which we live today. By smarter use of the current powers, the SNP would make real improvements to the national health service. An SNP Government would tackle the fact that it is harder now to get a hospital bed in Scotland than it was before Labour came to power. Since the Lib-Lab coalition was formed in 1999, nearly 700 acute beds have been lost. An SNP Government would build new hospitals not to benefit private shareholders, but to benefit patients. The money that goes to private profit comes directly out of the budget for front-line services.

We could afford that building programme because we would set up a Scottish trust for public investment, which is our not-for-profit alternative to private finance initiatives and which underpinned our proposals in 1999. That approach has been used to resurrect the Railtrack company—a not-for-profit trust is to be set up in its place.

Robert Brown (Glasgow) (LD): Does Mr Swinney agree with Andrew Wilson, who in an SNP paper on economic policy, says:

"Scotland is not in the political shape required at present to have an informed and mature debate about the role of government"

and various other economic matters? What does Mr Wilson mean by that?

Mr Swinney: The quality of Mr Brown's intervention—and of those from the Labour benches—has answered the question that Andrew Wilson poses in his paper. We are interested in a mature debate and we are leading a debate about the future of our country.

David McLetchie (Lothians) (Con): Will the member give way?

Mr Swinney: I will give way, but for the last time, as I must make progress.

David McLetchie: How does all that enthusiasm for not-for-profit organisations translate into the SNP's being supposedly the most pro-enterprise party in Scotland?

Mr Swinney: It translates because we do not want to profiteer with the public purse. We want to ensure that money that should be spent on our hospital wards does not provide the profits of private shareholders.

The SNP's health proposals range beyond hospital construction to proposals to establish a national health inspectorate that would drive up standards in hospitals, to strengthen local health care co-operatives, to provide a new pay package for nurses and to tackle shortages in key specialties.

The SNP would cut class sizes for our youngest children to give them the best start in life. We would target that at some of the most deprived areas to maximise opportunity. In the fight against crime, the SNP has pioneered proposals for drug courts and new measures to tackle sex offenders. In the key matters of education, health and crime, the SNP—through smarter use of the existing powers—would create a better Scotland than the one that the Executive has presided over. However, that is not enough. I do not want just a better Scotland—I want the best Scotland that this country can be. We can achieve that ambition only if we take on the normal powers of a normal independent country.

I will set out exactly why independence is required in four key areas: first, to improve Scotland's economic performance; secondly, to tackle poverty; thirdly, to secure Scotland's rightful place in the international community; and fourthly, to take wise steps to protect our environment.

At the heart of the debate is the need to take decisions to transform our country's economic performance. Scotland's economic growth rate is among the worst in Europe. Yesterday, it was revealed that the Scottish economy grew by barely 0.5 per cent last year. In the past 10 years, it grew by an average of 2.1 per cent a year. In the UK, the rate was 2.4 per cent. In Norway, the rate was 3.8 per cent and in Ireland it was 6.9 per cent.

Poor growth might seem like a topic for academic discussion, but had Scotland grown at the same rate as Ireland in the past 30 years, Scotland's economy would have had at least £67 billion more, which would have generated £27 billion in taxation for investment in our vital public services. Scotland's economic performance is not some abstract matter. It is central to whether we generate sufficient wealth to expand our economy and invest in quality public services. Those who tell us that we have

"never had it so good"

and that the economy is in fine fettle must answer the question why Scotland's economy—in the United Kingdom—has lagged badly behind the performance of other parts of the UK and of many other European countries. The key economic questions for Scotland's policymakers are: how can we raise our appalling economic growth rate? How can we create maximum opportunity for those who are in work and for those who are out of work? How can we grow the tax base to provide first-class public services for the people of Scotland? No answers to those questions can be found by handing control of the economy to London. The responsibility for expanding the Scottish economy is Scottish and we should have the tools to take on that task.

Mr David Davidson (North-East Scotland) (Con): Does Mr Swinney suggest that he will change SNP policy on giving Europe some financial control over our economy? Will he retain all control in Scotland?

Mr Swinney: I want to ensure that an independent Scottish Parliament would manage and direct the Scottish economy and would decide, in Scotland's interest, the matters on which it would co-operate with the European Union. That is a natural and normal position that countless European countries adopt.

Alex Johnstone (North-East Scotland) (Con): Will the member give way?

Mr Swinney: Mr Johnstone will appreciate that I have much more to say.

The Parliament has limited powers to change economic conditions; the existing arrangements encourage us to leave such decisions to others. It is clear that the others are not delivering, so we need to take responsibility and decision-making power. We need independence to transform this country's economic performance from being among the worst to being the best.

With the full powers of independence, we would be able to tackle and overcome Scotland's core economic problems. We would be able to drive down business taxation and therefore stimulate growth. By that measure, we would give companies a competitive advantage, which would encourage indigenous businesses to expand their activities and encourage more people to start new businesses. That boost to competitiveness would encourage more investment in skills development, more priority being given to research and development and greater focus on exporting. That is the kick start that the Scottish economy requires, and it can come only with independence.

We could establish a fund for future generations to manage sensibly the revenues that come from the North sea and invest them for the long-term development of the Scottish economy and Scotland's infrastructure. We can learn again from Norway, where such resources have been locked away in a long-term fund. We could draw down an annual income and use that to benefit key projects to improve the Scottish economy's competitiveness.

We have suffered from an over-valued currency. Therefore, were the exchange rate to be corrected, the SNP would recommend to the people of Scotland that we should join the single currency to secure a currency that is in line with our interests. We suffer from a disastrous transport network. The SNP would invest in transport, free from the present spending squeeze. Taken together, those measures would boost growth, earnings and the tax revenue that is

available for public services. Conversely, low growth and low earnings condemn hundreds of thousands of Scots to poverty and a life on benefits.

The route to getting Scots out of poverty—the second key reason why we need independence—does not lie in the hands of this Parliament with its current powers. The drive to expand our economy must be central to the drive to eradicate poverty. As the economy is growing at a miserly 0.6 per cent and the number of people in unemployment has increased by 14,000 in the past year, it is no wonder that child poverty is also increasing. With the full powers of independence, we would not only start the drive for growth, but rebalance the tax system to reduce the stealth tax burden on the poor. We would also base taxation on the ability to pay. By taking control of benefits, the minimum wage and training policy, we could also start to tackle the endemic poverty in many communities.

On the third key issue, we need the normal powers of an independent Parliament to secure Scotland's rightful place as a participant in international affairs. Many of our interests relate to decisions that are taken in the European Union, where ministers who had a direct say in negotiations at the Council of Ministers would protect the Scottish interest.

Under devolution, Scottish Executive ministers have attended just 11 per cent of the European meetings that they are entitled to attend. If we want to ensure that our distinctive voice is heard, we must be able to influence decisions directly at European level. In the pursuit of peace and co-operation with other countries, Scotland can have a powerful role in emulating the skill of other small countries, such as Ireland and Norway, in acting as brokers of peace in the trouble spots of the world and in helping the process of diplomacy.

The fourth important issue that needs independence is the environment. We can set targets and take valuable steps on recycling and other measures in the Scottish Parliament today, but developing a non-nuclear energy policy through which Scotland becomes a world leader in renewable technology is impossible because energy policy decisions are reserved to Westminster. However enthusiastic we might be about pursuing our international obligations as a clean and green society, we depend on decisions that are taken in London.

It is clear that Brian Wilson—the UK Minister for Industry, Energy and the Environment—is intent on building new nuclear power stations in Scotland. When those plans are produced, the SNP and others throughout Scotland will mount a vigorous campaign to stop that dangerous and expensive scheme. There is a much better way. Instead of being forced to oppose a London

decision to expand nuclear power, an independent Parliament could focus on developing an energy policy to meet Scotland's energy needs. We could make such decisions ourselves. That would mean developing hydrogen power, wind and wave power and other renewable sources. On the Scottish Executive's figures, a renewables target of 50 per cent would be achievable if the powers and the will existed.

At the heart of that debate lies the central question whether we are prepared to accept a culture of political dependency on London or whether we will take charge of our decisions here. We must decide whether we are happy to be aware of the serious problems in Scotland's social and economic fabric, but to leave them for someone else to deal with. We should accept responsibility for those problems and sort them out. That was the challenge that the Scottish people put to us when the Parliament was established. The passage of time has shown that the Parliament does not have the powers to deal with those problems. We can either languish comfortably in our inability to deliver the dramatic change that is sought by the public, or we can take responsibility for making this country the best that it can be.

I have reached the final minute of my address to Parliament, which means that it is no longer possible for the First Minister to intervene during my speech on the powers of the Scottish Parliament. The *Sunday Herald* reported this week that the First Minister said that

"he would prefer to engage in a debate with the Conservatives over public services"

than debate with the SNP the future of Scotland. Of course he would—every political party in the western world would prefer to debate public services with the Conservatives. Such a debate might make the Government's record look respectable. When it comes to real political debate—a debate on the future of our country—the First Minister has nothing to contribute. He tells us to put up or shut up, so we put up and he does not speak up. He demands mature debate, but does not contribute to it.

The SNP has started a serious debate about the future of Scotland, which addresses the question of how we can make this country the best that it can be. I have set out our arguments and my colleagues will do likewise. If the First Minister does not want to participate, we will debate the issue with the people of Scotland.

I move,

That the Parliament notes that the Scottish Executive has not delivered the improvements in public services expected by the Scottish people; believes that the people of Scotland deserve better, and recognises that only with the full powers of independence will the Parliament have the ability

to tackle and overcome Scotland's core economic and social problems.

09:51

The Minister for Parliamentary Business (Patricia Ferguson): The SNP motion that John Swinney has just moved claims that devolution is not delivering "improvements in public services" and that the only solution is independence. It is the same tired old nationalist story that we have heard so often, but it does not reflect reality.

The reality is that devolution is a success story. The Executive has set out a clear statement of its priorities and it is pursuing an ambitious and distinctive programme of legislation that allows us to implement those priorities. We are delivering real change and real achievements on the issues that matter to the people of Scotland.

For example, the Parliament has delivered for pensioners. On 1 July this year—exactly 3 years to the day after the Parliament assumed its powers—free personal care for the elderly will become a reality and will be followed a few months later by free off-peak local bus travel.

Nicola Sturgeon (Glasgow) (SNP): Will the minister give way?

Patricia Ferguson: No thank you. I like to get the introduction in first.

The Parliament has delivered an historic pay deal that will restore the professional status of teachers. We have delivered investment for young people's futures by abolishing tuition fees for students. The Parliament is delivering for people in rural areas who have spent all their lives—as did their parents and grandparents—working on the land for someone else's benefit. Land reform and feudal reform mean that their long held dreams can become reality.

Richard Lochhead (North-East Scotland) (SNP): Will the minister give way?

Patricia Ferguson: Not at the moment.

Let us not forget that devolution was not some strange idea that was foisted upon us by Westminster. On the contrary, the devolution settlement reflects what John Smith famously described as

"the settled will of the Scottish people".

The SNP might not like to hear that repeated, but I think that it bears repeating at this time. Devolution is also built on the hard work that was done over a number of years by the Scottish Constitutional Convention to develop a detailed blueprint for devolution that would command the widest possible support across the public and political spectrum in Scotland. Of course, the SNP did not contribute to that debate.

Alex Neil (Central Scotland) (SNP): I thank the minister very much for taking my intervention. Is she arguing that the current list of reserved powers should be the list of reserved powers for ever and a day? Does she see the day—as did the late Donald Dewar—when some of those reserved powers, even within a unionist framework, should be transferred to this Parliament? If so, which powers would she like to see being transferred?

Patricia Ferguson: Mr Neil is welcome; I am happy to take his intervention.

The powers that we have are the powers that we work with. The SNP seems to want to concentrate on powers that we do not have. We want to work with the powers that we have and deliver with them.

As for the comments of Mr Dewar, I think that Mr Neil is referring to a quote that he and some of his colleagues often use. They quote Mr Dewar as having said that devolution was not an end in itself. He said that, but he went on to say that devolution was only a means of improving the lives of the people of Scotland. That is the position of this Executive.

Before Mr Neil intervened, I talked about the important work that was done by the Scottish Constitutional Convention. I was about to say that the SNP did not contribute to that process.

Alasdair Morgan (Galloway and Upper Nithsdale) (SNP): Will Patricia Ferguson give way?

Patricia Ferguson: No thank you. I will make progress.

I will say for the third time that the SNP did not contribute to that process. I have to say that it is news to some of us that the SNP campaigned hard for devolution, as Mr Swinney claimed. I campaigned for devolution in many parts of the country over a number of years and, in particular, during the referendum campaign. The SNP was conspicuous by its absence from the streets during that campaign and, of course, our Conservative colleagues campaigned vigorously against devolution.

Mr Swinney: I am grateful to the minister for accepting my intervention. She tells us that devolution has been an unrelenting success story. Will she explain why child poverty is increasing?

Patricia Ferguson: I do not accept that.

Mr Swinney: It comes from the Executive's own data.

Patricia Ferguson: The premise that Mr Swinney is putting forward is not the case. Those of us who work daily in constituencies throughout the country know that that is not the case. We see the difference that the policies of this Government

and our colleagues at Westminster are making, and will continue to make, to people's lives throughout the country. However, I do not claim that everything has been done; a lot has still to be done.

Let me remind the Conservatives and the SNP that the devolution settlement received the overwhelming support of the Scottish people in the 1997 referendum.

Mr Kenneth Gibson (Glasgow) (SNP): Will the minister give way?

Patricia Ferguson: No. I want to make progress.

There was no evidence during the referendum in 1997, and there is no evidence now, that any more than a small percentage of Scots want independence. They want the Parliament to make a success of the wide powers that it has been given. That is exactly what the Executive will do.

Mr Swinney paints a picture of gloom and doom.

Fiona Hyslop (Lothians) (SNP): Will the minister take an intervention?

Patricia Ferguson: No. I want to tell the chamber about Mr Swinney's picture of doom and gloom. He claims that we are not delivering improvements in public services. That is not a picture that I recognise. The Executive has no higher priority than delivering first-class public services and, during the Holyrood elections in May next year, we will be more than happy to be judged on that record.

I will turn to what we have done.

Richard Lochhead: I thank the minister for giving way. Can she explain why, in 2002, just about every other western European nation enjoys a much higher standard of living than Scotland, despite their having less resources than Scotland and despite the fact that Scotland has had several Labour Governments?

Patricia Ferguson: Mr Lochhead need only consider predictors of economic growth such as the number of unemployed people. I do not know about Mr Lochhead's constituency, but that certainly matters to people in my constituency.

Mr Gibson: Can the minister tell us which constituency in Norway has higher unemployment than Maryhill?

Patricia Ferguson: Mr Gibson is continuing his habit of lobbying from behind, Presiding Officer. He referred to my constituency; I am the first to argue that unemployment in my constituency, as in many others, has not come down by as much as I want it to, but it has come down significantly since 1997. That is what the people of Scotland recognise.

The First Minister has made it clear that we have five overriding priorities. They are health, education, crime, transport and jobs. Those services bind us together as communities and impact directly on each of our lives. Those are the Executive's priorities for attention and action. Improving the lives of people in Scotland means improving the quality, accessibility and relevance of our public services. Since 1999, we have set about that task by focusing on the key areas of public service that have the greatest impact and in which improvement and effective delivery will make the greatest difference. Those are major public services, which we use and benefit from every day. They are key areas, which affect the lives of the people of Scotland.

We have made steady progress in our councils, our health boards and our police service. Work goes on every day to ensure that there is a nursery place for every 3 and 4-year-old and that our young people increase their success rates in literacy and numeracy. Work is done to ensure that more crime is solved, that more victims are protected, that more of us can get the health care that we need in our local communities and that we are safer when we travel on our roads. Work goes on to ensure that our bus, rail and ferry links work to make our journeys connect. However, there is more to do.

Phil Gallie: Will the minister give way?

Patricia Ferguson: I will not give way just now.

The Executive's response is to sit down with those who deliver services—whatever they are—and ask how we can do better. However, our partnership approach is not a neat trick to absolve us of responsibility. Government has a job to do.

Bruce Crawford (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP) rose—

Patricia Ferguson: I have taken a number of interventions and I need to press on.

Our job is to lay out the direction in which we want to go, identify the priorities, underpin them with legislation, make the best use of resources where necessary to improve delivery and lead the drive to improve standards.

Working together, we are investing in and rebuilding our public services around five key principles. The first is a clear focus on the needs of those who use and those who work in the services. The second is the introduction of national standards on which local excellence can be built, backed by inspection and accountability to ensure quality and continuous improvement across services and throughout the country.

Phil Gallie: The minister tells us that the Executive is putting great investment into many of our public services. Does she accept that the

Executive has signed up totally to public-private partnerships and will she thank the Conservatives for the ideas that go along with PPPs?

Kay Ullrich (West of Scotland) (SNP): Go on: thank the Tories.

Patricia Ferguson: I do not thank the Tories. I do not thank them for ignoring the work forces and the public services for 18 years and I do not thank them for the legacy that they left us, which we must try to improve.

The third of our five key principles is devolution of decision making to those who are best placed to make decisions.

Mr Swinney *rose*—

Patricia Ferguson: I will not take an intervention from Mr Swinney; I am trying to press on.

Devolution of decision making enables doctors, nurses, teachers and head teachers to feel the measure of our confidence in them because we let them make the decisions that they need to make. The last two principles are improvement of conditions and working practices so that skilled staff can spend their time doing what they do best—delivering a quality public service—and the searching out of best value and making decisions that will get the best return for every public pound that we spend.

We are not talking about more targets or new initiatives; we are talking about delivering a service for patients or passengers—not for the system. We are not talking about glossy brochures or review groups; we mean to focus on tackling issues and to act when that will make a difference—

Mr Swinney: That is a massive change of policy.

Roseanna Cunningham (Perth) (SNP): It will save us some money.

Patricia Ferguson: It is a consistent approach and one that the SNP has obviously missed.

We are talking about using technology to free skilled staff from endless paperwork so that they can get on and do the job that they signed up to do. We are talking about nurses being trained to increase their clinical skills so that they can treat patients directly and thus free up doctors to concentrate on those who need their specialist skills. We are talking about speeding up our court system so that police officers do not waste time in court waiting rooms and so that the victims see justice delivered efficiently and fairly.

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

Patricia Ferguson: No.

We are talking about providing resources and modernising conditions so that our teachers can get on with teaching.

The Government's job is to help those who deliver to do their job. That is not our only responsibility and it is not only our responsibility. We have a responsibility to use all the resources that we have—the public's resources—to the greatest effect. People are not really interested in how many billions we spend; they are interested in whether we are making things better in their daily lives. They are interested in whether those billions of pounds are making a difference. They are interested in repairs being made to their children's schools, in improved and modern facilities in their local hospitals or health centres, and in public transport that helps them get to where they want to be.

We will lead the process of best value and quality improvement that we expect from our councils, our health boards, our police service and the independent public bodies. We will focus on the priorities, find the best value for money and deliver real improvement.

Andrew Wilson: Will the minister give way?

Patricia Ferguson: No. I am running out of time.

This summer, we will prepare our national spending plans for the next three years. We will apply the test of the five principles in our preparations and ensure that our resources are used to target improvements in health and education, to reduce crime and to strengthen our transport system and our economy. Those are the areas for which we are responsible to the people of Scotland. We want our resources and our efforts to make a difference for those who need it most.

Improving public services is a big job, and we know that we cannot do it on our own. Politicians make the decisions. We in Government know that some decisions are tough, but our decisions are informed by people who have first-hand experience of public services—the front-line staff and the managers. They have the skills, the expertise and the everyday experience of trying to get the job done and they have something else. They have a special quality: they have made a positive choice to work in public services. They have signed up to work as part of a service that makes a direct impact on the lives of others. They will go the extra mile, put in the extra effort and work the additional hours to ensure not only that the job is done, but that it is done well. Public service staff bring more than skills, talent and expertise to their work every day—they bring commitment. They bring commitment to saving,

improving and building lives. That is a powerful force for good. Our job is to let them deliver, not to talk them down and not to denigrate what has been achieved.

In the short period since the Scottish Executive and Parliament came into being, devolution has made an enormous difference to the governance of Scotland. By the end of the first session, we will have passed more than 50 bills that reflect Scottish policies and Scottish priorities. The legislative programme covers the whole sweep of devolved powers. It has included major legislation on our key priority areas including health, education and criminal justice, not to mention the care of the elderly and the most radical restructuring of the social housing sector in Scotland for a generation. That achievement is all the greater because the vast majority of Scottish bills are tailored to meet Scottish needs and to tackle Scottish problems. One of the first fruits of devolution is an ambitious and wide-ranging programme of homegrown legislation that is tailored to our policies and priorities.

The legislative programme is only the most visible manifestation of the way in which devolution has changed the political landscape in Scotland. The establishment of the Parliament has brought about a massive increase in the process of scrutinising Government and holding it to account. The Parliament provides a forum for real democratic accountability in Scotland. Our devolved institutions are genuinely open and accountable and they are working well.

Yesterday, Mr Swinney said that the politics of grievance would not deliver the kind of Scotland that we all want. What have we heard so far today from Mr Swinney but grievance after grievance after grievance? Mr Swinney and his party have asked the Parliament to spend three hours this morning discussing his party's priority— independence. It is a priority to a minority of people outside the Parliament, but it is the SNP's one priority. The SNP wants us to spend three hours discussing it. Instead, the coalition Executive wants to talk about the issues that matter to the people of Scotland. They sent us here to do that. When we debate, we use their time. Our responsibility is to reflect their concerns.

Now is not the time to embark on further constitutional change.

Alasdair Morgan: Why not?

Patricia Ferguson: Devolution works—that is why not—and is here to stay. The overwhelming majority of Scots have no desire for independence. They want us to make a success of devolution. If they had wanted independence, they would have voted for it in a referendum called a general election. The SNP has had an opportunity

to increase its share of the vote in general election after general election after Scottish Parliament election and has stunningly failed to do so every time.

I invite the Parliament to reject John Swinney's negative and sterile arguments and I confidently predict—*[Interruption.]*

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Order.

Patricia Ferguson: That might have been the SNP members whingeing, but I will give them the benefit of the doubt.

I predict confidently that, in May 2003, the Scottish people will reaffirm their strong and consistent support for devolution as opposed to the false panacea of independence.

I move amendment S1M-3052.1, to leave out from "Scottish Executive" to end and insert:

"devolution settlement is right for Scotland, that wide powers have been devolved to the Scottish Executive and the Parliament and endorsed by Scottish voters in a referendum, that full use is being made of these powers to deliver the policies set out in the Programme for Government, and that these powers can deliver real improvements in the public services and help secure a strong and competitive economy."

10:09

David McLetchie (Lothians) (Con): The SNP's motion is interesting: I detect in it a growing sense of desperation. I seem to recall that, at the Scottish elections and in the early years of the Parliament, independence was the word that dare not speak its name for the SNP.

If I am not mistaken, at the SNP's previous leadership election, Mr Swinney represented the so-called gradualists in the party—the independence-by-stealth brigade—and Alex Neil led the forces of fundamentalism, who spoke of little else but independence. We all know who won that particular battle; but Mr Neil seems to have won the war. As next year's elections loom ever larger on the horizon, the SNP has gone back to the egg, blethering independence, to which it now clings like a child to a comfort blanket. The party ignores the reality that, although Scotland's constitutional position was the defining political issue in Scotland for many years, that was settled for the foreseeable future at the referendum in 1997. My party lost that particular argument, but we immediately made it clear that we accepted the decision of the people in Scotland. We committed ourselves to making the new constitutional settlement work in the interests of the people in Scotland and to representing important strands of Scottish opinion in the Parliament.

Those commitments do not mean that we cannot criticise the workings of the new

Parliament; we have done so on a number of occasions. Although we accepted the broad principle, we are not signed up to every dot and comma of the Scotland Act 1998.

Bill Butler (Glasgow Anniesland) (Lab): Will the member give way?

David McLetchie: Only a fool—and I hope that this is not one coming—would regard that act as the epitome of constitutional perfection.

Bill Butler: I am grateful to the leader of the Conservative and Unionist Party for giving way. He said that his party now accepted the principle of devolution. Why then, in response to a question posed during a radio interview a few months ago, did he say that he would campaign for a no-no vote?

David McLetchie: If Mr Butler reads the transcript of that interview, he will see that I was asked whether I regretted voting the way I did in the referendum. I answered that I did not. I am proud of the way that I voted in the referendum and I am proud that, by putting the other side of the argument, I gave people in Scotland an opportunity to make a democratic decision. That is a very important part of the democratic process. Only a Stalinist would believe that everybody should think the same way.

We are prepared to consider reviewing the powers of the Parliament and, over time, to consider our relationship with Westminster in a rational manner. We start from the premise that any change must be made in a considered way and must involve all sections of Scottish opinion. We should not be in the business of tearing up the Scotland Act 1998 when the ink is barely dry—and I include in that the provisions relating to the size of the Parliament.

Mr Gibson *rose*—

Andrew Wilson: Will the member give way?

David McLetchie: I think that Mr Gibson was first.

Mr Gibson: Mr McLetchie does not believe that change should come in the foreseeable future. Will he define “foreseeable future”? I have three children, aged nine, five and three. In the foreseeable future, they may want the opportunity to vote in an independence referendum. Mr McLetchie has spoken about choice. Will the Tories support calls for an independence referendum in the future? If so, when?

David McLetchie: There is no demand at present for such a referendum. There is no consensus for such a referendum, and no conviction about the need for change. The question of a referendum is largely an irrelevance today, but if, at some future time, opinion were to

change and there were to be a wide consensus that more powers should be sought, of course the matter might have to be put to some further determination. However, that day is so far in the future that I suspect that Mr Gibson will be nursing his grandchildren rather than his children before it comes along.

The SNP has decided to take the opposite approach to ours, partly because it has found it difficult to adapt to devolution. That confirms what many people suspect—that the only beneficiaries if devolution failed would be the nationalists. The nationalists are therefore attempting to convince people in Scotland that the answer to all our problems is to be found in independence, with all the turmoil that that would entail.

Alex Neil: Will the member give way?

David McLetchie: Sorry; I must move on.

The SNP’s attempts serve to highlight the irrelevance of the SNP to the current political debate in Scotland—although I gather that they talk of little else but Scottish independence on the streets of Weatherfield.

People in Scotland want to know how we can improve our hospitals and schools, how we can reduce crime and how we can create greater opportunities for everyone in our society. I have very different ideas from the current Executive about how we should use the existing powers of the Parliament to improve people’s lives, but I will at least give the Executive credit for attempting to come up with solutions within the framework. The frustrating thing about the nationalists is that, instead of engaging in the debate about what we can do, they act like the proverbial Irishman who, when asked how to get somewhere, always says, “I wouldn’t start from here.” We want to engage in a serious debate about the here and now, but the SNP is more interested in talking about some never-never land flowing with milk and honey where the grass is always greener.

Alex Neil: As he is talking about Irishmen, may I ask Mr McLetchie why it is that no Irishman in the Republic of Ireland has ever reapplied for membership of the United Kingdom? If the union is so great and if independence is so bad, why are the Irish delighted to be independent?

David McLetchie: We could debate Irish history for a very long time in the Parliament, but I think that Mr Neil would admit that the identification between the people of Scotland and England, and their links of family, business and culture, are probably far closer than any that ever existed between the people of the UK and Ireland as a whole. I think that he will find significant cultural differences.

The difficult questions for the SNP to answer are

what it would do with extra powers and how such powers would make a difference to people in Scotland. That is where much of the SNP theory falls down. It is much easier to talk in abstract terms about the powers of the Parliament than in concrete terms about what to do with those powers. For one thing, doing the latter would risk exposing the fact that the nationalists do not offer a genuinely different approach from that of the Labour Government and the Lib-Lab Executive, both of which are failing Scotland. In this Parliament, we have seen the often bitter conflict between the Executive parties and the SNP, but there is no fundamental difference in political approach between them. They stand in the same place on the political spectrum. The SNP is simply a more extreme version of what is currently on offer. The nationalists offer people in Scotland a change of country, but they do not, in essence, offer a change in policy or direction.

That all helps to explain the SNP's credibility gap. In recent weeks, we have seen Andrew Wilson rushing round the boardrooms of Scotland telling incredulous businessmen why independence is good for them. We have even seen the preposterous sight of Mr Swinney on the set of "Coronation Street" explaining to bemused actors why independence will not affect their royalties as the programme will still be shown in Scotland, and explaining how independence will improve relations between Scotland and England.

If anything, John Swinney had an easier job than Andrew Wilson—after all, actors are used to suspending disbelief. Andrew Wilson may be persuasive, but he is rather up against it when he tries to rebrand his party as pro-business. That flies in the face of everything that his party has said and done in the past 20 years. Was not it the nationalists who once proclaimed themselves to be the true heirs of the red Clydesiders—not a group renowned for its warm support for the capitalist system? Is not it the SNP that is unremittingly hostile to the concept of using private finance to build new hospitals, schools and prisons? Is not it the SNP that, week in and week out, scorns the concept of partnership with the independent sector to deliver public services? How is that fear and loathing of the private sector, which pours down from the SNP benches, week in and week out, going to endear the SNP and the concept of independence to the Scottish business community? It is simply not going to happen. The policies of the nationalists over the years are hardly designed to appeal to that community.

Andrew Wilson: Will the member give way?

David McLetchie: No, thank you.

The SNP has been firmly wedded to the idea of tax and spend for so long that it is unsurprising that businesses fear that more tax-raising powers

for the Parliament will inevitably mean higher taxes. The cause of every problem over the past 20 years has been put down to a lack of money and the solution has always been for individuals and businesses to hand over more of their hard-earned cash so that politicians can spend it on their behalf.

Mr Swinney: In my speech, I recounted the fact that, over the past 10 years—for most of which the Conservatives were in office—

David McLetchie: No—for most of which Labour was in office.

Alex Johnstone: For less than half of which the Conservatives were in office.

Mr Swinney: Oh okay—by a day! I will grant the Conservatives that.

Over the past 10 years, the economic growth rate of Scotland trailed that of the rest of the UK. If the Conservatives' economic management, their pro-business instincts and all the policies that they delivered while in office were so successful, why is Scotland's economic growth rate so poor in relation to the rest of the UK and our European counterparts?

David McLetchie: In the first part of his question, Mr Swinney has already demonstrated his dodgy arithmetic. In its time in Government, the Conservative party transformed the economy of Scotland for the better. We have been building on that during the past five years.

It is all very well for Mr Wilson to go around greeting Scotland's business leaders as long lost friends, but he really should not be too surprised if they reject his advances. He comes bearing the gift of a promised cut in corporation tax, but businesses will rightly take that with a substantial pinch of salt. It is not as though those business leaders need particularly long memories to be aware of Mr Wilson's party's commitment to higher taxes. At the last Scottish elections, the SNP came up with the campaign for the so-called penny for Scotland, more accurately described as a penalty for being Scots. As yet I have heard no definitive statement from the SNP leadership to say that that policy has been withdrawn. Frankly, that sums up the incoherence of SNP arguments. Before the last elections the nationalists were once again making noises about lowering taxes on business. I recall the SNP's enthusiastic discovery of the Laffer curve—about 20 years after the rest of us. The SNP then promptly undermined that with its pledge to raise personal taxes.

Andrew Wilson: Does Mr McLetchie not realise that his outdated approach to this question does not recognise the fact that business people are also private citizens in the same society, and that they too want good public services, which they do

not want to be beggared through the Tories' approach of profiteering at public expense? Does he not recognise that business people want both a good economy and good public services, and that the only party in the Parliament that offers that is the SNP?

David McLetchie: That is a bizarre interpretation of SNP policy. It is necessary to create wealth before we can have good-quality public services. Mr Wilson does not understand that two thirds of the businesses in this country are sole traders and partnerships, for which personal taxation is business taxation. Mr Wilson is standing to penalise them even more.

The SNP's latest enthusiasm is for the so-called theory of constraints, which supposedly can only be removed if the Scottish Parliament has more powers. That theory ignores the fact that the official policy of the SNP is to achieve so-called independence in Europe. As an independent country, Scotland would be in a far weaker position to do anything about the constraints imposed on our business by excessive European Union intervention. Moreover, it ill becomes the SNP to complain about a one-size-fits-all interest rate policy set in London by the Bank of England when it would sign up like a shot to a one-size-fits-all interest rate policy set in Frankfurt. So much for independence.

In any case, constraints could equally be imposed or retained by a Scottish Government. Removing those constraints requires a Government that is committed to lower taxes and lighter regulation. No one seriously believes that the SNP would ever form such a Government.

Mr Gibson: Will David McLetchie accept an intervention?

David McLetchie: No, thank you. The latest Saul-to-Paul conversion among the SNP ranks is that of Mr Russell. He told us yesterday that the SNP was all in favour of diversity in education and the direct funding of schools by the Scottish Executive. Even pitiable converts to Scottish Tory policy such as Mr Russell are welcome, but that statement defies belief. The acid test for diversity and funding in schools was that of St Mary's Episcopal Primary School. The SNP failed that test miserably, as it fell meekly into line with the desires of Mr Galbraith and Mr McConnell to dragoon that successful school back into local authority control.

If the SNP wants to win new powers for the Parliament, it should overcome the credibility gap that is exemplified by the somersaults of Mr Wilson and Mr Russell. Its members talk about a close relationship between Scotland and England, but they are actually about souring that relationship.

There is far more to being British than having a soap opera in common. We have 400 years of history, our monarchy, our armed services, our common market, our single currency and our ties with family and friends across the UK. Those are the things that we work in partnership to preserve, and which we value. I believe that the majority of people in Scotland value them too. That shows the way ahead. If we want to have a debate about the powers of the Parliament we should hold one in a mature and rational way that engages everyone, not through this vanguard grandstanding from the SNP. I reject the motion.

10:24

Mr Mike Rumbles (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (LD): I welcome the opportunity to address the motion lodged by the SNP. I should say at the outset that the Liberal Democrat group could not disagree more with the views that John Swinney expressed on independence. We feel that the SNP is completely failing the people of Scotland by not operating as an effective Opposition in this devolved Parliament. Why are we debating a hypothetical situation about increasing the powers of the Scottish Parliament when the SNP consistently refuses to debate properly the use of our current powers?

Phil Gallie: Will Mike Rumbles give way on that point?

Mr Rumbles: Not after only 36 seconds; I will give way later.

The SNP does not discuss the level at which the Scottish budget should be set for fear of being found out. It promises tax cuts for businesses through business rates and corporation tax and tax cuts for individuals—with tax relief on do-it-yourself—yet its shadow spending ministers keep racking up the spending promises. Everyone except SNP members seems to know that we cannot get something for nothing. The SNP's answer to its problem of balancing the books seems simply to be that it wants bigger books. It does not add up.

The SNP pretends to be a business-friendly party, yet it decries any use of private funds to help in the delivery of public services.

Shona Robison (North-East Scotland) (SNP): Will Mike Rumbles reflect on his party's inability to balance the books, given the experience of the administration of Scottish Borders Council?

Mr Rumbles: Shona Robison will be aware that it was the independent-led Scottish Borders Council that got into that mess. The council's administration is now led by the Liberal Democrats, and it is putting things right—supported, I should add, by the SNP group leader,

at least until he was removed.

Instead of debating the issues that really matter to people, such as health, education, transport, the environment and jobs, we are having a debate about the only thing that holds the SNP together: independence. I do not often speak positively about what David McLetchie says, but he got it absolutely right when he spoke about the battle between Alex Neil and John Swinney.

Alasdair Morgan: Would Mike Rumbles include in his list of things that people really want to debate the Fur Farming (Prohibition) (Scotland) Bill, which a minister from his party introduced?

Mr Rumbles: As Alasdair Morgan well knows, that measure was blocked from inclusion in a Sewel motion by the SNP. That is why we passed that bill.

We had the debate about independence back in June last year, when only 20 per cent of voters were persuaded. The SNP has a lot of work to do to persuade the other 80 per cent and, quite frankly, I cannot see it doing so.

What has the SNP done since its abysmal performance last June? It has produced two pamphlets, called "Talking Independence" and "Economic Policy And Positioning". Those documents contain some laughable assumptions, of which I would like to highlight a few. I hope that Andrew Wilson is listening.

The SNP wants to "double growth in GDP". Its recipe for achieving that is a simple one:

"Once Policy is focussed properly – growth will look after itself".

Well, that is a master stroke of economics. Even more magically,

"Closer co-operation with countries which all have higher GDP per capita and higher wages than Scotland, can only improve Scottish living standards."

In my view, that is the economic equivalent of telling someone that if they stand next to a beautiful person, they too will become beautiful. It is ridiculous.

Andrew Wilson: Does Mr Rumbles not accept that part of the argument for joining the euro and being part of the European single market—which the Tories now seem to oppose—is that we gain from trade with other countries that are doing well? We trade with them; they grow; they buy our services. Is that not a good thing?

Mr Rumbles: We can have that without independence.

The document "Talking Independence" asked 90 questions about independence. It was long on trivia, telling us that we would still be able to watch "EastEnders"—and we have already heard the

references to "Coronation Street". It was short on detail but long on assumptions.

Mr Swinney: I take Mr Rumbles back to the question of growth. Yesterday, we heard that Scotland's economic growth last year was 0.6 per cent. Would Mr Rumbles care to set a figure for what he considers a desirable level of economic growth for Scotland? How on earth does he intend to reach that level in a devolved Scotland?

Mr Rumbles: A desirable growth figure is as much growth as we could reasonably expect. It would be as ridiculous for me to name a figure as it would be for Mr Swinney to do so. What will markedly improve our position is entry into the euro as soon as practically possible.

I refer back to "Talking Independence", which states that the English would buy from the Scots shares in embassies and military bases. That is fantasy. The problem with the SNP's position on independence is that it appeals to the heart rather than to the head and the Scottish people are too smart for that.

I turn to the Conservatives, on whom I do not want to spend long. The Conservative position on the Parliament has been completely negative. Bill Butler asked David McLetchie whether he regretted the no-no position that the Conservatives took in the referendum. If the referendum were held now, would he vote yes-yes? That is the most important question and David McLetchie has consistently failed to answer it.

We have heard nothing but carping from the Conservatives. I received a leaflet through my letterbox on Monday called "Common Sense". The next heading was "Cutting the Parliament down to size." The trademark negativity of the Conservatives was all over the leaflet. I will leave the Conservatives now, because I do not want to shoot at an open goal all the time.

The motion claims that

"the Scottish Executive has not delivered the improvements in public services expected by the Scottish people".

Let us consider examples of what others have said. The National Union of Students said:

"In its short existence the Scottish Parliament has made significant improvements to the well-being of students and has the potential to do even more."

Kevin Dunion of Friends of the Earth Scotland said:

"When I listen to a news presenter introducing an item on student loans or care for the elderly and explaining that things are different in Scotland I think yes, devolution is doing something for us."

Jim Walker, the president of the National Farmers Union of Scotland, said:

"For the first time, Government has recognised the vital

role of Scottish farmers as being the key to a whole range of other businesses and sectors which make up the rural economy."

Bruce Crawford: Does Mike Rumbles think that it is appropriate that next week the Minister for Environment and Rural Development will try to give back to the UK Government responsibility for the examination of and processes involved in genetically modified crops? Is that taking responsibility? Is that what Liberal Democrat ministers mean by good devolution?

Mr Rumbles: As far as I am aware, that is a load of nonsense that the SNP has stirred up.

Even *The Scotsman*—and I notice that it is listening just now—which is not usually noted for its supportive comments about the Parliament, said:

"Land Reform is flagship legislation which will change the face of Scotland and create a page in history."

For balance, a leader article in *The Herald* said:

"The Liberal Democrats have played a significant part in producing Scottish solutions for Scottish problems, most notably with the graduate endowment package replacing tuition fees, and free personal and nursing care for the elderly."

By working together in the Executive the Labour party and the Liberal Democrats have produced many more initiatives that are impacting directly on people's lives and Patricia Ferguson highlighted those earlier. They include the central heating initiative for the over-65s, the McCrone settlement for our teachers, land reform and the Freedom of Information (Scotland) Bill, which the Conservatives opposed. Far from welcoming those radical and far-reaching reforms, the SNP has often begrudged them and has carped in the vein of the motion before us today.

I turn to the SNP's record on McCrone. The SNP asked the Executive to justify the substantial additional cost to the taxpayer of setting up another so-called independent committee and later called on the McCrone committee to be abandoned. In November 1999, the SNP spokesperson said that the committee was going nowhere fast but, by June 2000, after she had seen the report, she paid tribute to the committee. In February, Mike Russell welcomed the decisive result of the yes ballot by the Educational Institute of Scotland. The SNP moaned about McCrone until it saw the results, at which point it promptly changed sides in the debate.

When the BBC announced its scoop on the possible takeover of Health Care International in Clydebanks by the Executive, Alex Salmond was on the box on College Green outside the House of Commons welcoming the "nationalisation". However, Nicola Sturgeon was referring to it as incompetence on a staggering scale with private

financiers profiteering at the expense of public services.

Many SNP MSPs signed Brian Monteith's motion that called for a joint bid for the Euro 2008 championships with Ireland. However, in January, John Swinney said at First Minister's questions that the SNP would have preferred a single national bid. Is that hypocrisy or is it just incompetence? I believe that John Swinney is honourable, so I put it down to simple SNP incompetence.

The problem for the SNP is that until it gets its act together, especially on its economic policies, it lacks credibility. SNP should stand for "Scotland's Nonsense Party"—the party that promises everything but can provide nothing. While the only thing that holds the SNP together is its dream of nirvana, the Executive parties—the Liberal Democrats and the Labour party—are working together constructively for the good government of Scotland on devolved issues.

The Executive is delivering for Scotland and, rather than carping or moaning about new powers for the Parliament, we are concerned with getting on with our programme of reform. I urge colleagues to reject the SNP motion.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We move to open debate, during which I encourage members to take interventions and engage in dialogue. Speeches can be up to five minutes long.

10:36

Nicola Sturgeon (Glasgow) (SNP): Members in the unionist parties should raise their sights and a good place to start would be by opening their eyes. People throughout Scotland are disappointed by the performance of the Parliament. That should be a matter of concern to each and every one of us. We all have a duty to ask how we can do better with the powers that we have and whether we have all the powers that we need to make a real difference to people's lives. The answers to those questions are fundamental to the future of our public services.

The constitutional debate in Scotland has never been abstract; it has always been about how we can make Scotland a better place in which to live and about how our politicians can better reflect Scottish people's aspirations. The Scottish people want, more than anything else, public services that they can be proud of and a health service that lives up to its founding ethos. The national health service—our most cherished public service—has not improved in the past three years; it has got worse. If Patricia Ferguson does not acknowledge that, I suggest that she gets out more and speaks to people in her constituency who are languishing on NHS waiting lists or to people in rural areas

who cannot access a general practitioner. Those people will tell her that the NHS in Scotland has not improved in the past three years. That is why standing still or ducking the debate in the way that the First Minister has done this morning is simply not an option.

Des McNulty (Clydebank and Milngavie) (Lab): I am interested in having a debate about the future of public services with the SNP, so I wonder why the SNP is using three hours to talk about constitutional issues. Let us have the debate about public services. Nicola Sturgeon is right that that is the debate that people want us to have, but the SNP is not engaging in that debate and that is why people are questioning the Parliament.

Nicola Sturgeon: If Des McNulty had taken a moment to read the motion, he would know that it refers to public services.

The future of public services depends on our ability to transform them, given the powers that we have. We are not even using to the full the powers that we have. For the benefit of Mike Rumbles, I will give an example of that. One of the biggest problems in our health service is a crippling staff shortage. We have not trained adequate numbers and it will take years to put that right. In the meantime, we are losing staff to other countries and are unable to attract staff here. However, if we wanted to, we could use our powers to enhance the UK pay recommendations. That would give Scotland a competitive edge in the health labour market, just as many health authorities south of the border have and are attracting our nurses as a result. The Scottish Executive refuses even to consider that. Our lack of power over social security and the economy affects our ability to improve the health service.

Phil Gallie: Will the member give way?

Nicola Sturgeon: Not just now.

Patricia Ferguson mentioned free personal care. The Parliament decided to implement free personal care as a way of enhancing the benefits that old and vulnerable people in our society receive. However, because we do not have power over social security, we could not prevent London from punishing us for our decision to implement free personal care by taking away the benefits that old people in Scotland already received. London deprived the Parliament of £23 million of our own money.

Robert Brown *rose*—

Nicola Sturgeon: I am happy to take an intervention from Mr Brown on that point.

Robert Brown: Is not it the case that Scotland benefits from the UK Treasury in a disproportionate way as far as social security is concerned and that the amount raised by a UK 1p

on tax is greater than the amount raised by a Scottish 1p on tax? Would not that double whammy be lost if Scotland left the union?

Nicola Sturgeon: The whammy was London taking away £23 million of Scottish taxpayers' money because we had the temerity to introduce a policy that it did not agree with. That was absolutely absurd.

Let me mention another absurd situation. For the past three years, SNP members argued that the NHS was underfunded, whereas Lib-Lab members argued that it was not. Only now that Gordon Brown has admitted that the NHS has been chronically underfunded under Labour are we allowed extra money. In other words, we could not invest the money that we knew the health service needed until London said that it was okay to do so. That situation arose because we do not have the economic or fiscal powers to allow us to make that investment.

Anyone who doubts the need for the Parliament to have the full powers of an independent parliament should ask themselves how we are to lift children out of poverty or improve the health and life chances of everyone in Scotland if we do not have power over our tax and benefits system and the ability to grow our economy.

The Parliament is a job half done. Unless and until we complete that job and take responsibility, we will offer the people of our country second best when they deserve so much more.

10:41

Bristow Muldoon (Livingston) (Lab): Yesterday on "Good Morning Scotland", Brian Taylor reported the messages that John Swinney was giving his party. One message was that

"we should stop externalising our complaints"

and that the SNP should "stop moaning". It is obvious from the SNP's performance so far today that his party has not paid any attention to those messages—in fact, he paid no attention to them, either.

It is "Groundhog Day" again, with one difference: John Swinney plays the central character. He has learned nothing from experience, because the experience of last year's general election should have taught him that the people of Scotland are fed up with constitutional navel gazing. They want MSPs to start getting on with the job of improving people's prospects in life by dealing with issues such as health, education and jobs.

Mr McLetchie, who is no longer in the chamber, commented on Mr Swinney's visit last week to "Coronation Street". Perhaps he was there to look for a career change in preparation for the aftermath of next year's elections. It was obvious

from some newspaper photographs that the actress who plays Sarah-Louise Platt did not have a clue who he was or what his job was. That comes as no surprise given that the same could be said of 90 per cent of the people of Scotland.

Fiona Hyslop: Will the member give way?

Bristow Muldoon: No, thank you. Not just now.

If Mr Swinney is looking for a move into showbiz, I suggest that the ideal role for him would be Victor Meldrew—the early years. I know that the character has been killed off, but there are plenty of precedents for prequels and I can think of no one better to play that role. I apologise to Richard Wilson for that suggestion.

There is no doubt that SNP members are the people to whom John Swinney should be trying to get across the message that they should stop moaning. Their second-favourite subject—moaning about the UK—is topped only by their favourite: his leadership, which they moan about in the coffee room behind the chamber.

We should have a debate about the Parliament's powers. We should also have a debate about the way in which the Executive and the Parliament are already delivering. I will concentrate on transport and health. The Transport (Scotland) Act 2001 was one of the first pieces of legislation to be passed by the Parliament. We have increased resources for transport and are investing in roads and public transport. The Scottish Executive has established the public transport fund and recently published its transport delivery plan, which sets out a number of key priorities for improving transport in Scotland over the next 10 years. Among the benefits for my constituents are funding for a new express bus service between Livingston and Edinburgh and the plans to increase capacity on the rail line. The local authority is increasing resources for and investment in local roads and, from October this year, every pensioner in my constituency will receive free bus services.

Andrew Wilson: All those things are terrific, but does the member acknowledge that the balance of the evidence at yesterday's Transport and the Environment Committee meeting was in favour of the Parliament having control of the railways in Scotland? The question for Bristow Muldoon and the rest of the Labour party is, "If you trust Scotland with control of the roads, why do you not trust it with control of the railways?"

Bristow Muldoon: The Scottish Executive already has significant powers over the railways. I ask Mr Wilson to wait until the Transport and the Environment Committee has finished taking evidence on its inquiry into railways. A range of different views may emerge before we complete that inquiry, but we can improve the railways in

Scotland within the devolution settlement. We do not need independence in order to be able to do so.

The Labour Government at Westminster has made resources available to the Parliament over the next five years that will enable us to build a first-class, world-class health service. Significant improvements are already taking place. The NHS is not perfect—no one says that it is. We can all find fault in certain areas, but the NHS is nowhere near as bad as the SNP or the Tories portray it. SNP members portray the NHS as a failing service because they want to reduce trust in public services to further their political ends, and the Tories want to privatise the NHS.

Fiona Hyslop: Bristow Muldoon is aware from the figures that have been released that 40 per cent of the waiting lists at St John's hospital in Livingston were deferred. Is that a symbol of a flourishing health service? Does he agree that the Parliament should have the power to decide whether it should invest in the health service? Without that power, we have had to wait for three years during which the health service has been neglected. The Parliament could have been, and should have been, investing in the health service, but we did not have—and still do not have—the power to do so.

Bristow Muldoon: That was a disgraceful statement from a member who continually runs down the health service. Ms Hyslop should be well aware of the fact that investment has gone into every GP service in my constituency, allowing the introduction of more services. She should also be aware of the brand-new health centre in West Calder and the new resource centre in Broxburn. Investment is going into the new accident and emergency service at St John's hospital, yet the SNP claims that the accident and emergency unit is going to close. The SNP is a disgrace and its members should stop running down our public services.

The Parliament has substantial powers, which we can use to enhance public services and increase economic prosperity in Scotland. The debate is not about independence; it is about Mr Swinney's attempts to cling on to his leadership. I assure him that, although many on his side of the chamber are already plotting for a successor, many on my side of the chamber hope that he continues in his job as leader of the Opposition for years to come.

10:47

Bill Aitken (Glasgow) (Con): It gives me much pleasure to participate in this debate. It comes as no surprise that independence, which is the *raison d'être* of the SNP, is the subject of the debate,

because the star of Mr Neil—the leader from across the sea—is in the ascendancy and the fundamentalist wing of the SNP is back in control.

I do not for a moment doubt the sincerity of SNP members, but I take serious issue with the practical application of their views. The debate is taking place in a vacuum. Despite Mr Swinney's pretty sharp riposte to Bristow Muldoon, there is simply no support in Scotland for independence. Opinion polls, the general election result and every view that is worth listening to demonstrate clearly and beyond peradventure that the majority of people in Scotland do not seek independence.

Shona Robison *rose*—

Tricia Marwick (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP) *rose*—

Nicola Sturgeon *rose*—

Bill Aitken: I will take an intervention from Shona Robison, who was first.

Shona Robison: Mr Aitken talks about levels of support. In order to refresh our memories, will he kindly remind the chamber of the level of support for the Tories among the Scottish public?

Bill Aitken: The level of support for the Conservative party among the Scottish public is as evidenced in by-elections. I remind Shona Robison that the by-election that took place in Stirling last week went extremely well for us.

Let me move on to address the arguments for and against—

Tricia Marwick: Will the member give way?

Nicola Sturgeon *rose*—

Bill Aitken: I will not take an intervention, as I want to make one or two points.

There is only one argument in favour of independence and I fully concede and acknowledge that it is a potent one. I speak of the argument of emotionalism. Many members of the chamber are patriotic Scots, but arguing for independence solely on the basis of emotionalism is not realistic. The arguments against independence can also be emotional—one's emotional attachment to the union, for example.

There are also wider economic arguments. Perhaps the most potent argument against independence is the performance of the SNP group within the Parliament. At best, the SNP's economic policy is inconsistent to the point of incoherence.

Bruce Crawford: Will the member take an intervention?

Bill Aitken: Let me finish the point first. On every subject, the gut reaction and Pavlovian

response of every SNP spokesperson is to throw more money at the problem. They commit their party to expenditures as if there were no tomorrow. There would indeed be no tomorrow if the SNP were in charge.

Richard Lochhead *rose*—

Bruce Crawford: Will the member give way?

Bill Aitken: I give way to Mr Crawford.

Bruce Crawford: If the union has been so good for Scotland, will the member explain why our economic growth has been slower than the rest of the UK's year in, year out, for the past 30 years?

Bill Aitken: That is a complex argument, which I would take on if time were available. One reason for Scotland's lack of competitiveness is the fact that our colleagues in the Labour party have controlled much of Scotland's economics over the past 50 years. The effects of their control are apparent for all to see.

I want to get back to dealing with the SNP, which throws about theoretical money like metaphorical confetti. Where is the money to come from? Even if one were to accept Mr Swinney's argument about projected growth—which I do not—there would still be a massive deficit. In short, Scotland would become a high-spend, high-tax economy, with the most tangible results being a fall in investment, a flight of capital, a drain in confidence and a haemorrhage of talent as ambitious people voted with their feet. Scotland would become a land fit only for social workers and their clients.

Patricia Ferguson's speech portrayed a picture of contemporary Scotland and of the Executive's performance that few would recognise. However, she raised one argument that is perfectly valid. It is unarguable that the current will of the Scottish people is as defined in the Scotland Act 1998. Frankly, it is nonsense to suggest, as is being suggested, that we should revisit the constitutional position after only three years.

Alex Neil: Will the member give way?

Bill Aitken: I give way to Mr Neil.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Mr Murray Tosh): I will allow this intervention, but I have a long list of people who wish to speak, so I will keep the remaining speeches to about five minutes.

Alex Neil: Is the member aware that the First Minister has been invited by the European Committee of the Regions to submit a report on the future constitution of Europe? Is not that an ideal opportunity for Scotland to assert its position in Europe instead of accepting the regional-provincial position that we have at present?

Bill Aitken: The First Minister need not spend a lot of time on his submission. It is quite clear that the status quo is the position that should be adhered to.

In conclusion, there may well be disappointment with the performance of the Parliament. John Swinney was correct to underline the fact that, in the public mind, the odium for the Executive's actions and follies is directed at the Parliament rather than at the Executive in isolation. I accept that we must look at the problem of perception. However, on any rational judgment, it is far too soon to make any further constitutional changes. The SNP motion should be rejected emphatically.

10:53

Andrew Wilson (Central Scotland) (SNP): I am delighted to take part in the debate. It is interesting to note from Mr Aitken's final comments that he fears higher tax, lower revenues, a reducing tax base, the flight of capital, the flight of business and people voting with their feet. Where has he been for the past 50 years? That is precisely the experience that Scotland has had within the UK. Scotland has had a flight of capital, of talented people and of our potential. The debate is about how we bridge the gap between our mediocre national performance and our unlimited national potential.

The great problem with post-war Scottish politics has been the cosy consensus whereby people from all parties—I repeat, all parties—have focused only on the symptoms of our national decline without trying to attack the guts of the root problem. That is what we must do. That is the responsibility with which the people have charged us.

Although devolution is a step in the right direction, the great tragedy of it is that it gives us no new and effective powers to deal with the issues. Devolution heightens our expectations but dashes them on the rocks of delivery. We want to extend the logic of devolution to its conclusion, which is independence. If we can trust Scotland with half the powers, which is what we have at present, why not trust it with all the powers? The performance of the Scottish economy is at present mediocre.

Helen Eadie (Dunfermline East) (Lab): Will the member take an intervention?

Andrew Wilson: Not at the moment.

Jack McConnell, the absent First Minister, said yesterday that the Scottish economy was "getting better". If Mr McConnell were to look at the growth figures that were announced yesterday, he would see that Scotland's growth is at half the level of the previous quarter, at a third of the long-term

trend rate and at a third of the UK rate. Manufacturing is in meltdown. The construction industry is in recession. Since 1995, we have created one job for every 175 that are created in the United Kingdom. Our employment rate is lower than that of the UK. A total of 51,000 fewer people are employed in Scotland than would be if we kept pace with the rest of the UK. The number of new deal starts is down. For the year to April, unemployment is up by 14,000 and employment is down by 21,000. If that is "getting better", I would not like to see what Mr McConnell might define as "getting worse".

Rhona Brankin *rose*—

Helen Eadie *rose*—

Andrew Wilson: I will take an intervention in one moment. The reality is that, until Labour politicians recognise the harsh reality of life in Scotland, we will not be able to focus on providing a solution.

I give way to Mrs Eadie, who came first.

Helen Eadie: Does Andrew Wilson care to say on which country the SNP would most like to model an independent Scotland? Is it Ireland, which has the highest inflation in the European Union and a high-tax regime?

Andrew Wilson: Helen Eadie makes a super point. It is interesting that all the countries that she might have mentioned—Ireland, Sweden, Portugal, Denmark, Austria, Luxembourg and the Netherlands—are growing faster and have lower unemployment than Scotland. All those countries would be great models. The last model that we would want to copy is the present municipal model of Labour in Scotland.

Rhona Brankin: Will the member take an intervention?

Andrew Wilson: No, thank you.

The reality is that we must focus on turning round our national performance. Incidentally, in another great move yesterday, Mr McConnell said:

"We are fully committed to the challenge of increasing the long-term growth rate of the Scottish economy."

Excellent. Now that, after a month of debating the matter, we are agreed, let us focus on how we get there.

I am willing to say—and I look for a quid pro quo from the other side—that the efforts on the supply side are good and are focused in the right direction. Some of the efforts to upskill Scotland are excellent, but what we must now do is complete the job. Devolution is half done; we must give ourselves all the powers to deliver.

Brian Fitzpatrick (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (Lab) *rose*—

Andrew Wilson: Mr Fitzpatrick can take his seat.

The reality is that there is a hole in the economic bucket, out of which are flowing talent, wages, profit, business investment and our growth rate.

Brian Fitzpatrick *rose*—

Andrew Wilson: I suggest that Mr Fitzpatrick take his seat, otherwise he will get tired.

London and the south-east of England have a number of metropolitan advantages over Scotland. London is the centre of capital, of business and of power. One must go to London to access the sources of capital and the sources of business and marketing expertise. London is the centre of government and the centre of media. It is an international transport hub, which has the volume of wealthy consumers. London has all those things, yet we are locked into the same uniform fiscal regime, which locks in our disadvantages and, as a result, reduces our growth rate.

Britain has the most centralised tax regime in the developed western world. Britain collects more tax centrally than any other regime in the European Union or any other country in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. That must change. Even those members who are obsessed by the idea of being wedded to the British constitution should allow themselves to think about reforming the tax position. Unless Scotland's economy gets a tax advantage, it will not break out of the cycle of low growth. In recent weeks, Tom Farmer, who is one of Scotland's most successful business people, has agreed with that. Only this week, Jim McCall of Clyde Blowers, which is one of Scotland's most successful companies, also agreed with that position.

Scots want the Parliament to take on more control and responsibility. They recognise that our national performance is mediocre and they want it to change. The issue is about trusting ourselves. The Labour party, which has trusted the people of Scotland only with the limited powers that that party can control, wants to use those powers to address only the symptoms of the national decline that it has delivered. I ask: if roads, why not rail? If elderly care, why not pensions? If housing, why not housing benefit? If education, why not the tax powers to fund it?

In a speech in Cork in 1886, Charles Parnell said:

"No man has the right to fix the boundary to the march of a nation; no man has a right to say to his country 'thus far shalt thou go and no further.' We have never attempted to fix the ne plus ultra to the progress of Ireland's nationhood, and we never shall."

The SNP does not want to limit Scotland's

progress, but the Labour party does. I suggest that Scotland's potential is great. It is time to make our performance match it.

10:59

Des McNulty (Clydebank and Milngavie) (Lab): Following that speech, I suggest that Mr Wilson take a leaf out of Duncan Hamilton's book and consider going back to university to attend a postgraduate course in economics.

Every time there is a difficult decision to be made in the chamber and we are required to make up our minds about how we achieve the delivery of service, the SNP either sits on both sides of the argument or sinks into irrelevance by going back to a separatist agenda, which no responsible opinion in Scotland takes seriously and few voters care about. There is a debate in Scotland. As I said to Nicola Sturgeon, it is a debate about how we can deliver better public services. My party stands four-square behind that agenda. We stand, as we always have, for tackling inequality and promoting social justice.

To be fair to the Conservatives, they have a recognisable stance too: that self-interest can act as the driver of economic growth and social change. The expression of Conservative policy has been softened since 1980s Thatcherism, when ministers embraced the philosophy that greed is good and hell mend the consequences. If Iain Duncan Smith has had a genuine conversion—not on the road to Damascus, but while tramping the streets of Easterhouse—that is to be welcomed, but we expect a distinctively Conservative viewpoint to emerge out of that process.

The nationalists have no principles and no policies that unify them other than the shibboleth of constitutional change. John Swinney's comments at the end of his speech gave the game away. The real debate in Scotland is about public services and, in particular, better delivery and better targeting of public services to meet the needs and aspirations of the people of Scotland. Yet every time we have a debate about how to deliver improvements in public services, all the nationalists do is whinge. Nicola Sturgeon is the embodiment of the nationalist whinge. John Swinney has a wee bit to go to beat her.

Alasdair Morgan: We all agree on the need to improve public services, but does the member concede that we will never get the level of public services that we need unless we achieve a much higher level of economic growth than we are achieving at the moment in Scotland?

Des McNulty: I am happy to talk about how we can improve economic growth, because it is an axiom of government that it needs to deliver

improved economic growth to deliver improved public services. What do SNP members' promises contribute to the debate in this Parliament on how to do that? They are incredible promises, ranging from Mr Kenny MacAskill's early promise to spend £900 million on roads, to Mr John Swinney's promise to rebuild Scotland's infrastructure while rejecting the use of private sector capital and expertise, to some of the more bizarre schemes that people such as Mike Russell have come up with, expenditure on which can only be at the expense of mainstream provision. It is mainstream public services that people are interested in, that is, what happens to schools, hospitals and communities and how we can improve the housing stock. Those are the issues.

The nationalists come to us today and spend three hours not talking about those issues. They do not even tell us where they stand on major issues such as taxation. All they are talking about is the powers of the Parliament, when the real debate is how we can use the existing powers of the Parliament to improve the lives of the people of Scotland.

Brian Fitzpatrick: Will the member give way?

Des McNulty: No, I want to carry on. Sorry about that.

The issue is that the party that is based on the politics of identity has an identity crisis. SNP members are confused about where they stand on key issues, and especially on how they would take forward the delivery of public services. Kenny Gibson and Nicola Sturgeon are in favour of the Glasgow housing stock transfer, while Sandra White and Dorothy-Grace Elder have been going around Glasgow hanging on to the coat tails of Tommy Sheridan.

In education, John Swinney's root-and-branch opposition to private finance would have meant no expenditure to overhaul secondary schools in Glasgow. The investment of £200 million to improve education in Scotland's most deprived council area would have been sacrificed, and sacrificed to what? Sacrificed to the internal critics in his own party, whom he needs to square to stay where he is. At the same time, SNP councils—where they exist—are scrambling to get to the front of the queue for the next bit of private finance. Hypocrisy and humbug: that is what we get from the SNP.

Nicola Sturgeon denounced the possible takeover of HCI, but the great promise that it holds is the speeding up of the modernisation of hospital services in Glasgow. The most important issue for my constituents is for them to get better health care, but Nicola says, "No way." The people of Clydebanks will not forget—I will keep reminding them—the attitude of the SNP on that issue.

Fiona McLeod (West of Scotland) (SNP): Will the member give way?

Des McNulty: No.

The next step that those people take is to have Richard Lochhead arguing constantly, week after week, that the north-east is not getting enough health resources. Where does he want to take the resources from? Does he want to take them from my constituency? Does he want to take them from Lanarkshire? Does he want to take them from Ayrshire? Own up. There is a limited amount of money. How is it going to be distributed? More cannot be given in one place without taking it from somewhere else. That is the reality of the financial situation. The SNP is suffering a crisis of identity.

Stewart Stevenson (Banff and Buchan) (SNP): Will the member give way?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: No, the member is over time.

Des McNulty: The SNP needs to grow up and recognise that people want improved public services. To be blunt, the SNP is irrelevant.

11:05

Robert Brown (Glasgow) (LD): We are getting to the nub of the dispute in this debate, which is between the mystical view of Andrew Wilson that there is no limit to the march of a nation and the emphasis on public services and the delivery of good things for Scotland, which is the hallmark of the other side of the argument.

This is an important debate and it deserves to be taken seriously. It is a serious matter when a major party of state tries to pull down the structures of the state and replace them with something else. Of course, there are times when that is necessary—when the state is so far out of touch with public aspirations that such change is needed—but that usually happens at the end of a war or other period of great upheaval. The onus of proof is on the SNP to make the case, at a time when its support in the most recent test of public opinion—the general election—was at 21 per cent of the vote.

The SNP case has two components: an emotional case, which Bill Aitken was right to refer to, which is that Scotland is a nation and should have all the attributes of a normal state; and an economic argument, which is that Scotland will be better off economically with independence. The emotional case is a perfectly reasonable one to make, but behind John Swinney's reasonableness it is fuelled by the claptrap of freedom songs, Bannockburn ceremonies, the SNP whinge and a strongly ambivalent attitude towards England. No doubt that is why Andrew Wilson has made the curious suggestion that people in Scotland should

support England at football and why John Swinney has to look uncomfortable on the set of "Coronation Street".

Also essential to the emotional case is the arrogance common to all nationalist parties that says that all true Scots support independence and the cause of "Scotland's Party" and that everyone else is somewhat lacking in patriotism and public spirit. It is not the normal state for a nation state to be independent. Throughout Europe there are examples of historic nations that are parts of federal structures which work extremely well.

Alex Neil: There is a clear difference between being one of 14 Länder in Germany, where no land dominates the rest, and our position in the United Kingdom, where we are faced by titanic England which, with 85 per cent of the votes in the House of Commons, can overrule at any stage the rest of the UK. There is no comparison between federalism in Germany and the unitary state in the UK.

Robert Brown: That view arises if one takes the dividing point as being solely national identity, but it does not arise if the dividing point is the interests of various parts of the United Kingdom, including the outlying regions of England, Wales, Northern Ireland and Scotland. Another example is Spain, where the situation is different again.

The economic case for the SNP is subsidiary to the emotional case. Andrew Wilson kindly laid it out for us in his recent paper, "Economic Policy and Positioning". It is a revealing document, as Mike Rumbles demonstrated well. Most of it could have been written by Gordon Brown, such as the bits about sustainable investment and interest rates being higher in Europe. Some of it could be supported by many of us who have argued the case for going into the euro. But beyond that, I was hard pushed to identify anything new, beyond a recycling of the tired old "Scotland's oil" campaign.

The SNP says that it will agree a national target for improving Scotland's underlying rate of growth and that we need to attract and create new income and wealth and to grow the tax base to fund better services. Few people in the chamber would disagree with much of that, but the trick is how to do it. The SNP provides two suggestions. The first is that an SNP Government will invite the top 500 UK companies to open separate Scottish headquarters. Bully for them. That is going to happen. We can see the picture.

Andrew Wilson: Will the member give way?

Robert Brown: No, I need to make progress.

Secondly, the SNP says that it will reduce taxes in key growth areas. There might be a case for that, although it is far less relevant than the

approach taken by Liberal Democrats and the Executive of trying to improve the skills base in Scotland. It is, however, part of the yawning chasm at the heart of SNP policy. Tax cuts in one area have to be paid for by tax increases elsewhere, by cuts in public services or by growth.

The SNP argument about growth is somewhat circular. Growth needs independence and independence needs growth. It is an assertion, not something that has been proved. One magic wand of Andrew Wilson's and all will be well. Andrew Wilson said that Scotland is not in the political shape required for an informed and mature debate on those issues. I respectfully suggest to Andrew Wilson that it is the SNP that is not in shape for the debate. I further suggest that the SNP has clearly demonstrated this morning why there is no solid case for independence and why they should go back to the drawing board. I support the amendment.

11:10

Mr Kenny MacAskill (Lothians) (SNP): There comes a time in politics when politicians have to stop looking back to the previous election and start looking forward to the one that is in front of them. They cross that rubicon and there is no demarcation line—it just occurs. It is clear that the 1999 election is behind us and that 2003 beckons. As in political life, so must it be in national life. We must move on.

As a nation we have moved on culturally. Our literature is no longer restricted to the culture of the kailyard, where time was frozen either in 1707 at best or perhaps later in 1745. Our writers have managed to recognise that we are a modern nation in the 21st century, that the kailyard is history. They have moved on to address the needs and wants of our country, warts and all. Numerous authors testify to that: not just Kelman and Welsh but others such as Alan Warner and Laura Hird. They recognise that Scotland has moved on. They have changed and adapted. We must move on.

Politically, we must recognise that Thatcherism is in the past and in the past it must remain. We had 18 hard years of vindictive rule. Nobody can take away from the fact that those years were dreadful, no matter what those on the Conservative benches might say. Margaret Thatcher is now muted and we must also be muted. The question is not "How did we get into this situation?" but "How are we going to get ourselves out of the mess we are in?" The tragedy is that the harking back to the past is not from the SNP but from the Labour party, which, five years and two elections on, puts the blame on one woman and her Government in London. We now recognise that, as we have moved on culturally, so we must move on politically. We have to address

that.

We also have to recognise, as our writers have, that many of our nation's problems were not created by legislation brought in by Margaret Thatcher or any other Westminster Government. They are matters that we have to address. Our problems might have underlying social and economic causes, but the reason that we have a Buckfast culture or a diet of deep-fried Mars bars is not down to any legislation that has been imposed upon us by a Westminster Government. It is down to the failure of every one of us in the nation to address and change matters.

The Finns have done so. They have not just turned around their economy, they have turned around their health service, not by seeking assistance from Russia or Sweden—the Governments that ruled them historically—but by recognising that they would only make Finland a better place by addressing their problems themselves. We must do that.

As we move towards the election, we must also recognise that our powers are not able to deal with the problems that we face. Much has been said about our powers. I noticed what Phil Gallie was saying. Let us analyse matters. At present, we have a Parliament that is in charge of recycling but cannot address packaging. We go from the sublime to the ridiculous. We are in charge of road transport but not rail or aviation, no matter what Phil Gallie might have said.

A recent example is the city of Edinburgh. We are in charge of criminal justice. Imitation firearms are a cause of concern not only for those who live in the city but for the constabulary. When I made inquiries about what action is being taken, I was told that firearms are a reserved matter. How can we be in charge of criminal justice but not that, when 20 years as a criminal defence lawyer tell me that drugs and firearms are fundamental to the cause of serious crime? If we cannot address issues such as drugs and firearms, how can we claim to be in charge of criminal justice in Scotland?

We also worry—and we debated it in Parliament yesterday—about the problem of turning people on to the body politic. We have worries about voting turnout. All parties in the chamber regretted what happened in 2001. We worry about what has happened in France as it goes into an election, in terms of the effect on nations and what can happen if people do not vote.

As we go into the 2003 election, every one of us will be out canvassing for votes individually and collectively for our parties. What message will we give to people when we go to their doors and they ask, "What about tax?" and we say, "Sorry, that's a reserved matter." "What about social security? I'm

bothered about that." "Oh, that's no for us either." "What about foreign affairs and immigration?" "No that either." They are going to say "What's the point of voting for you if you can't address the needs and wants of our nation?"

Pauline McNeill (Glasgow Kelvin) (Lab): Will the member take an intervention?

Mr MacAskill: Those are issues that people will be interested in voting on in the next election. It gives me no pleasure because the turnout will affect all of us and it fundamentally affects the democratic will of our society. We all lose if people fail to vote. That is why we have to stop the whingeing jock culture that Patricia Ferguson was right to comment on. It is up to us to address our problems, not to hark back and put the blame on the Tories, who have been out of power for five years.

Patricia Ferguson: Will the member give way?

Mr MacAskill: I am winding up and do not have time to take an intervention.

David McLetchie—who is no longer in the chamber—went on about the benefits of what has been contributed to Scotland by Britain. I have no doubt that there has been a substantial contribution and we have played our part. However, we must consider what is so great about being British when one third of the people live in poverty, when one third of the children born in this land are facing a life of poverty and despair and when we have endemic crime, drunkenness and drug abuse in a section of the population. We must be ashamed of that.

Other nations discover oil. We are the only country in the world to discover oil and find ourselves getting poorer. When other countries discover oil, they can make the desert bloom. We discovered oil and, under the control of the unionist coalitions, we created an industrial desert in too many parts of our land.

It is time to stop whingeing, time to give the Parliament powers, and time to take control and change things for the better.

11:17

Ben Wallace (North-East Scotland) (Con): I am tempted to say "Here endeth the lesson" when we get such a rant from Mr MacAskill.

We need to talk about the policy that dare not speak its name—the SNP's policy on defence and foreign security. A debate about independence should be a grown-up debate. The first role and duty of a state is to secure itself. However, we do not hear that from the SNP; nor do we ever hear any concrete policies on devolved issues or reserved matters.

We should examine the issue. One of Mr Swinney's problems is that he recognises that the SNP's policy of withdrawal from NATO is against the wishes of the majority of people in the UK and Scotland. All we have to do is go to the ex-Soviet bloc and ask people there what they feel about NATO. Everyone in the countries that are queuing up to join the European Union says that membership of NATO is as important as—if not more important than—membership of the EU.

The SNP's lunatic members—and although their MSPs sit here in suits, we have all met on doorsteps those nutters who have been looking for jobs or something to latch on to—will say that they are all for a Marxist state and that NATO is evil. The reason that they give for not wanting to join NATO is that it is a nuclear alliance, but when the European defence force was proposed, the SNP could not wait to be a part of it, although at least two of its members are members of the nuclear alliance.

Colin Campbell (West of Scotland) (SNP): Will the member give way?

Ben Wallace: No, I will come to you in a minute.

A nation can be a semi-member of NATO without relinquishing nuclear control, as the French were for 50 years.

Richard Lochhead: Will the member give way?

Ben Wallace: As we get closer to home, perhaps we should consider the conventional forces that the SNP has proposed in some of its past pamphlets. Not surprisingly, we do not see those pamphlets any more. We all remember Lieutenant Colonel Crawford, the SNP's military adviser and an SNP candidate in a number of elections. He said that, having got rid of Trident, a good way to guarantee our defence would be to switch to chemical weapons. We all remember that. That was a good one. The SNP's policy on human rights is "Let's have chemical weapons—much cheaper than Trident—and never mind the consequences for jobs".

The Trident issue is important. If you ask the SNP why it objects to Trident, it says that it wants to get rid of nuclear weapons. What would happen if Trident were moved to Newcastle? What would happen if the nuclear weapons that the English decided to keep, as would be their right, were moved just south of the border? Of course, the target area for a nuclear attack would be the same, and Scotland would still be affected if there were any accidents. Would the SNP go to war with the English if it wanted them to move their nuclear weapons further south? The SNP never thinks through such issues.

As for conventional forces, the SNP said in a previous pamphlet that it would keep all Scottish

regiments, but would not have any real foreign policy to back them up. What would the nationalists do about our commitments to Northern Ireland? They are always silent on that point. Would an independent Scotland stop its soldiers taking up their peacekeeping role in Northern Ireland? Many Scottish regiments—indeed, many Scots—believe that it is important to get to the bottom of Northern Ireland's problems, but the SNP would probably just wash its hands of the matter and leave the country.

What would the SNP do about Scotland's peacekeeping duties? What soldiers would it send and where would it send them? If it had no command structure or ability to transport soldiers all over the world, how would the soldiers get to where they were going? Of course, they would probably catch a lift with an English aircraft carrier, but the SNP would not dare mention that.

As any military expert or general knows, the best course of action for a country that shares a similar culture and a common language and territory with another is to form a military alliance with that country. That ensures the country's security and allows both areas to take advantage of the other's assets. Guess what? We have already had such an alliance with England for years and years. Will we have to split ourselves apart so much that we will even have to take a different approach to defence? I believe that our approach up to now has worked to the common good.

Nicola Sturgeon visited Govan when defence contracts and jobs were under threat. The SNP says that it wants both independence and a smaller defence force—which of course would be the inevitable result of independence, because it would not be able to afford anything more than a blow-up boat. However, I guarantee that all the nationalists will be down at Govan, campaigning for aircraft carriers to be built in Scotland when the Ministry of Defence decides to whom it should award the contracts.

Alasdair Morgan rose—

Ben Wallace: The SNP does not tell the people who work in Govan that, under its stewardship of an independent Scotland, they would not have a single job in its defence industry. [*Interruption.*]

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Order.

Ben Wallace: In the end, it is all just hot air and false promises. Big boys' rules mean grown-up politics. An independent Scotland would need foreign and defence policies, which are matters that the SNP is not even prepared to discuss. I therefore support the amendment.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Of course, this is a matter for members, but I think that when speeches are longer than five minutes, it is

reasonable to take at least one intervention.

11:22

Helen Eadie (Dunfermline East) (Lab): Someone once said that socialism is the language of priorities. How true that is. The Labour party's priority both in the Scottish Parliament and at Westminster is to tackle social exclusion, and the efforts of the other parties must be judged against that priority's criteria. However, the nationalists' priorities are navel-gazing and arguing about our constitution. What will that do for social inclusion?

The same question must be asked about the SNP's policy of separation. The Labour party is not afraid of constitutional change where it will bring clear benefits to our people. Although devolution throughout the UK has long been Labour policy, it was based on clear, costed evidence of its benefits. What would separation do for the social inclusion agenda? Rewriting the constitution will do nothing in itself, and the risks of separation appear to far outweigh the unsubstantiated claims for it.

Bruce Crawford: If the member is so concerned about social inclusion, why is child poverty rising? Would it not be more appropriate for Scotland to have all the available powers to deal with such issues?

Helen Eadie: We already have all the powers that we need in that regard, and are dealing with that problem.

The people of Scotland and Britain need stability to deal with such issues. After enduring Tory rule for 20 years—and I use the word “endured” advisedly—we cannot allow chaos to rule for another 20. The SNP's priority of separation would risk that stability. The SNP's pledge to race to separation as quickly as possible, and certainly within the term of the next Scottish Parliament, is irresponsible and misguided. I might have agreed if it had pledged to eradicate poverty as quickly as possible instead. Labour has made social inclusion its priority. We deliver free central heating for the elderly; separation would deliver only constitutional wrangling.

Mr Gibson: Will the member tell us why the level of child poverty is 30 per cent in Scotland but only 2 per cent in Sweden?

Helen Eadie: The UK and the Chancellor of the Exchequer have been delivering more on this issue. Young single parents have come to my home and told me that they have received big awards through the working families tax credit. They have £200 a month extra in their pay packet. Gordon Brown's working families tax credit is doing something for families who receive no money any other way; it is tackling poverty and delivering for Scotland.

Colleagues, the combined strength of the UK economy, guided by Gordon Brown's sound management, has given Scotland far more resources to tackle social exclusion than it would otherwise have had. We have had the best budget in recent years, and it addresses all these issues. I am proud of what Gordon Brown is doing about world debt, poverty and the issues that affect real people.

Spending is rising to record levels. Arguments have raged over whether Scotland subsidises the rest of the UK or vice versa. The latest research suggests that Scotland would be left with a £4 billion deficit after separation, which would do immeasurable damage to Scotland's poorest communities. We would have to say goodbye to the nursery places for all three-year-olds that the Executive has created and to thousands of student places.

Tricia Marwick: If Helen Eadie is so proud of Labour's record—and if she is particularly proud of the Fife chancellor and the Fife MSPs—will she explain why, the day after Gordon Brown's budget, the Labour party lost a seat to the SNP in the Thornton, Stenton and Finglassie council by-election?

Helen Eadie: I was party to that election. *[Laughter.]*

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Order.

Helen Eadie: We fight bravely in Fife. Gordon Brown and my Fife colleagues bear no shame, despite what SNP members might say. Our policies speak for themselves. As for by-elections, we know all about the recent losses that the SNP has suffered. It is supposed to be at its peak, but what about the seat that it lost at the last general election? What about all the seats that it has lost in by-elections? What about Dumfries and Galloway? The SNP is not winning seats all across Scotland. We need only read the national newspapers to see that John Swinney and his colleagues are not riding in on a storm as they claim.

The people of Scotland are listening to Gordon Brown and are seeing how Labour is delivering on housing, central heating and child care across Scotland. While Labour eradicates child poverty, the SNP seeks to eradicate the very UK that gives us the economic strength to increase prosperity. The SNP can draw up as many wish lists of spending on social inclusion as it wants; however, it will first have to prove that separation would somehow give us more, not fewer, resources.

Government needs to be free of distractions to get on with the job of tackling social exclusion. Separation would be the biggest distraction going, and would create a national headache that no one who remained in Scotland would be free of. For

starters, what would happen to North sea oil, the national insurance fund and rail links between Scotland and England?

This Parliament has the powers to tackle social exclusion. Labour has already used them to employ more doctors and nurses and to begin the biggest hospital building programme in the history of the NHS. Voters know that and want a Government that will get on with the job, which is perhaps why SNP support fell at the last election and Labour support increased. The SNP should stop whingeing and instead come up with constructive proposals that will help end social exclusion in Scotland as a priority.

11:29

Alasdair Morgan (Galloway and Upper Nithsdale) (SNP): I thought that it was rather strange that Ben Wallace's speech—which, given his posture, seemed to be directed solely towards Bristow Muldoon—dismissed the SNP's arguments for increased powers for the Parliament. It was especially ironic given that Ben Wallace will be leaving this Parliament at the next election to try to get a Westminster seat, because he thinks that all the big, important matters are decided down at Westminster.

I want to deal with the dependency culture that we have in Scotland and on which Labour power in Scotland depends to a great extent. Scottish Labour politicians rely on depressing the ambitions of the Scottish people. Clearly, they had to do that for the 18 years when they were in Opposition, given their total failure in that position, but they continue to do so as they struggle to make up excuses for whatever policies are foisted on them by Tony Blair and Gordon Brown from south of the Border.

Nowhere was that dependency more obvious than in the reaction of Labour back benchers to the recent budget. In 2003-04, Scotland will send to the Treasury £1.1 billion in extra taxation. That is made up of about £400 million that is our share of the 10 per cent windfall levy on oil companies and just under £700 million from national insurance increases and the freeze on the taxable allowances on personal taxation. That is something that did not get much attention in the budget—I wonder why. In return, our increased share of expenditure will be £344 million. Let us work out the arithmetic. We send £1.1 billion down and get £344 million back, which amounts to a net outflow to London of £750 million extra as a result of the budget. Yet Labour back benchers were salivating at the budget. They were ecstatic at the prospect of how much of our own money Gordon Brown would be giving us back, but we are being done to the tune of an extra £750 million.

Andrew Wilson has argued the case for taxation to be controlled in Scotland. Let us look at current business taxation. Gordon Brown spent a large part of his speech telling us all the great things that he would do for small businesses, always omitting to tell us, of course, that 75 per cent of small businesses in Scotland would not benefit one whit because they are unincorporated businesses. Such businesses will suffer from the national insurance contribution increases, but they will get none of the small business benefits that Gordon Brown was going on about and none of the research and development credits.

I cannot believe Labour's poverty of ambition. Even with devolution, we could have some kind of fiscal autonomy that would make a difference for businesses in Scotland and therefore for the whole economy and everyone else in the country. Surely the whole spirit of devolution is divergence. Goodness knows how many times I heard Brian Wilson say in the House of Commons that devolution was about doing things differently. Divergence can take account of the different needs, aspirations and philosophy that we have in Scotland, but what do we have instead? We have a uniform taxation system and a spending system that is governed by the Barnett formula, which is explicitly designed to produce convergence on expenditure per head of population. It is nonsense. In devolution, we have a government structure that is, apparently, designed to foster divergence, but we have a taxation and spending system that is designed to foster convergence. Which do people want?

Bristow Muldoon: Will Alasdair Morgan give way?

Alasdair Morgan: Not at this stage.

The arrangement that I have described assumes that public spending needs are identical in Scotland and south of the border, but we know that they are not. It assumes that service delivery costs are identical in Scotland and south of the border, but they are not. It also assumes that public choice about the role and extent of public services in Scotland is the same as it is south of the border, but it is not.

It is interesting to note that the coalition partners support fiscal independence. Which Malcolm Bruce was it, I wonder—surely not the MP for Gordon—who said on 7 April 2000:

"The Scottish Parliament itself will not be able to meet the aspirations of the Scottish people ... until it has control over their own revenues?"

We know that Brian Monteith supports fiscal autonomy, because he said in *The Herald* the previous year:

"I think the answer lies in us considering full fiscal freedom for the Scottish Parliament".

There was also support from Mr Monteith's Westminster colleague, David Davies MP, who was then chairman of the Public Accounts Committee but has since moved on to higher things and is now chairman of the Tory party. He said:

"The best plan would be to place certain taxes under the control of the Scottish Parliament. Prime candidates would be income tax, council tax ... I would add a share of UK customs and somewhere between 66 and 99% of revenue from North sea oil."

Well, of course, we say thank you very much to the Tory party for that.

Even the Scottish Constitutional Convention, which Patricia Ferguson mentioned earlier, said in its document, "Towards a Scottish Parliament", that the current block-grant method of funding

"would be a minimalist approach which is neither radical in concept nor conducive to accountability as it would effectively mean that the Parliament would be more accountable to Westminster than the Scottish people".

That says it all.

The onus is on the unionists to explain why we should not be independent, when every other country of Scotland's size in Europe is independent. Why is independence the norm? Why should not we be independent and enjoy the same benefits that those countries enjoy?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: In the interests of getting in as many members as possible, I would be grateful if the remaining speakers could confine their remarks to four minutes.

11:35

Rhona Brankin (Midlothian) (Lab): It is interesting that, rather than talk about the direction of our economy or the future of our public services, the SNP has opted to occupy three hours of parliamentary time to talk independence. John Swinney's motion makes passing reference to public services and the economy, but it is clear to everybody that those are not the SNP's priorities.

We must ask why the SNP has called this debate today. At a time of global instability and uncertainty, what makes independence such a big priority for the SNP? I shall tell members what I think today's debate is really about. Members on the nationalist benches probably will not like this, but it seems to me that the debate is more about boosting the flagging support for John Swinney on his own party benches than it is about debating the real issues affecting Scotland today. John Swinney, the Rev I M Jolly of Scottish politics, whinges constantly about Scots being a pack of whingers. Rather than tackling the problems that are faced by ordinary families, the SNP is talking independence today because that is the only issue

that can unite its battling left-wing and right-wing factions.

Andrew Wilson: Will Rhona Brankin give way?

Rhona Brankin: I will give way to Andrew Wilson when I get on to talking about the economy, because it will be quite interesting to debate that matter with him, but I will carry on just now.

I want, in particular, to talk about the empty vessel that is SNP economic policy. The SNP claims that, under independence, surplus oil revenues would be used to establish a North sea oil fund—in spite of the fact that at no time in the past decade has North sea oil revenue been greater than Scotland's borrowing requirements. It is time for the SNP to face the fact that there is no excess revenue for an oil fund.

Andrew Wilson: Is not it time that Rhona Brankin raised her game? She should stop personalising serious constitutional arguments and answer this question. The Labour party initiated devolution debates in the House of Commons during the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s, because that constitutional mechanism was required to get Scottish solutions to Scottish problems. Why was it perfectly right for the Labour party to do that, whereas we are denigrated for doing precisely the same thing to extend Scottish solutions to Scottish problems?

Rhona Brankin: Many of us fought for many years to achieve a Scottish Parliament, but the SNP was never part of that fight and I deprecate that. We now have Scottish solutions to Scottish problems. We must now seek to develop that.

Stewart Stevenson (Banff and Buchan) (SNP): Will Rhona Brankin give way?

Rhona Brankin: I want to get on with my speech.

The SNP's 1997 manifesto said that Scotland's share of the UK debt burden was £4 billion. Interestingly, the SNP made no such claim in its 1999 manifesto. I call on the SNP to come clean and acknowledge that Scotland has a fiscal deficit that punches a massive hole in the SNP's independence wish list. Let us look at the SNP's plans for public service trusts in an independent Scotland. When we look behind Andrew Wilson's smoke and mirrors, we see the harsh reality that the plan simply would not work. An SNP Administration in an independent Scotland would have to borrow heavily to fund its spending plans and would, as a consequence, burden future generations with massive debt repayments.

What do we hear about the cost of separation? How much will it cost to have a separate army, navy and air force, not to mention the diplomatic missions that will be set up across the globe? How

much would the SNP pay for all those embassies? I am sorry that the SNP seems to be more interested in building embassies in Ecuador and consulates in Cameroon than it is in investing in Scotland's schools and hospitals.

Let us contrast that warped sense of priorities with Wendy Alexander's plans for Scotland's economy under our Labour-led Executive. Only yesterday, she set out the strategy for economic growth. That strategy is important, as we face a crucial choice between building our own skills-led economy or remaining reliant on the failed strategy of competing with eastern Europe and Asia to attract inward investment.

Richard Lochhead: Will the member give way?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The member is closing and will not give way. She has spoken for four and a half minutes.

Rhona Brankin: That is where the SNP's new policy of tax cuts for business falls down. The SNP is convinced that copying the 1980s Irish model and making Scotland a low-tax, low-labour location would cure the ills of the Scottish economy, but it would not. The way ahead is through a modern economy that is built on skills. Scotland should not be a low-wage location that offers short-term, quick-fix sweeteners to potential investors.

Andrew Wilson should get out into the real world and speak to business people. I speak to many business people and none of them sings the praises of independence. On the contrary, they tell me that they fear that separation will create instability and uncertainty for businesses, especially those for which the English market is particularly important.

I ask members to reject the self-indulgent political posturing in the SNP's motion. We should get back to the real work of delivering a modern, competitive and sustainable economy for Scotland.

11:41

Mr David Davidson (North-East Scotland) (Con): I expected to hear a riveting, keynote and devastatingly brilliant speech from Mr Swinney on why we should become independent, but I was disappointed by his contribution. He seemed to focus on the phrase

"smarter use of the existing powers".

That is saying nothing more than that we should hold the current lot accountable in the chamber, which is what we constantly try to do.

I want to pick up on some points that Mr Swinney made. He had the usual wallop at nuclear power. Everybody understands that nuclear power

contributes a huge percentage of the power that we need to run our economy.

Bruce Crawford: Will the member give way?

Mr Davidson: In a moment.

We welcome the development of renewable energy, but it will not be here in time. The SNP should accept that nuclear power is not necessarily bad. The issue concerns new technology. Like nuclear bombs, nuclear power is just a bandwagon. I do not like nuclear bombs, but this is about keeping peace.

Bruce Crawford: There is a good connection between nuclear generation and nuclear power through the bomb. Does the member accept the figures in a publication by the Electricity Association, which says that nuclear power makes up only 28 per cent of the registered capacity in Scotland? In 2010, when the next power station runs out at Hunterston, unless the Executive ups the ante in respect of targets that are set for renewables, the door will be opened to new nuclear power in Scotland. That is the real problem that we face.

Mr Davidson: In other words, the member agrees with what I said. We need nuclear power to fuel our economy in the shorter term.

Patricia Ferguson spoke about devolution delivering. There has not been devolution from the Labour party. Everything is centrally controlled. We are over-governed and over-regulated, which is a turn-off for business. The latest fiasco, which hit the press today, concerns problems with the e-tourism project. The area tourist boards are being told that if they do not sign up, they will not get their money. Such central control is damaging.

The Labour benches are the biggest threat to devolution. If Labour members acted as they should in respect of devolution, we might move on to consider the drivers of our economy.

Brian Fitzpatrick: Will the member give way?

Mr Davidson: Not just now.

Let us consider some things that the Government claims are being delivered through devolution. I do not have to say anything more about health. Everybody is waiting for everything. More money is not the solution. Power should be decentralised to people to enable them to spend and focus on the services that are best delivered locally. I do not see that being done. If anything, Mr Swinney should have talked about that, but he did not.

The rural economy is in great difficulty. Could the SNP in an independent Scotland turn around the rural economy overnight? I do not think so; there would be no chance of that. On education, the SNP has said nothing about how it would

revitalise the school building programme and give teachers time to upgrade the quality and standard of teaching. We heard nothing about that. The list goes on and on.

The truth is that there has to be an acceptance in economic debates that, without wealth creation, no social spend is available. Only the Conservatives accept that. There have been glimmers from Andrew Wilson of odd thoughts here and there. They are not terribly cohesive, although no doubt they will be in due course. Where will the money come from? This is the first time that the SNP has not told the chamber that oil will pay for everything. Where will the money come from if everything is put into public control, private capital is not invested and people do not take risks to generate the wealth that we need to go forward?

I realise that time is tight. The SNP should come up clearly and quickly with a properly spelt-out alternative on how it would generate the economy. It should not whinge on. What tools would it give? The SNP talks a lot about freedom. What freedom will there be for those who will invest and create the wealth and jobs that will provide all the good things that Scotland wants? A negative approach and whingeing about the UK not delivering in Scotland are nonsense. The Barnett formula was designed for one purpose—to assist Scotland when its economy was down. We need to hear from the SNP and the Labour party about maximising the additional public funding that is available through the Barnett formula. They should not waste that opportunity and should get stuck in.

11:46

Christine Grahame (South of Scotland) (SNP): I want to tackle a real issue—the problem of the constriction of the Scotland Act 1998 on our justice system. It should be borne in mind that the justice system is one of the few areas of jurisdiction that remained intact, despite the shabby union of the Parliaments.

Of course, certain areas in an independent nation will remain a matter of consensus and sometimes binding agreement between fellow independent nations if there is mutually beneficial concern—for example, environment laws and employment laws.

To demonstrate the anomalies of the Scotland Act 1998, I want to speak about the reserved matter of the benefits system. Incidentally, in recent evidence to the Justice 1 Committee, the Prison Service Union disclosed that 60 per cent of prison officers at Kilmarnock prison are on state benefits, so taxpayers subsidise the commercial profits of Premier Prisons Ltd.

There is the recent and appalling example of new Labour's threat to remove child benefit from those whose offspring commit offences. The announcement was extraordinary. If Margaret Thatcher had made it, the press and those on the Labour benches would have yelled. Where are the Liberal Democrats on the issue? Who knows? Who cares? The suggestion was outrageous and demonstrated how far new Labour has moved to the right—even beyond Mrs Thatcher.

When young people offend, a multitude of social and deprivational problems are often in the background. When I was a teacher, I recall an eight-year-old child in the playground who was not only born to fail, but born to offend. Everyone knew that his family gave him no chance. The last thing that his family needed, with seven children, was the removal of its benefits. The Parliament has no power over that.

Maureen Macmillan (Highlands and Islands) (Lab): Will the member give way?

Christine Grahame: No. I do not want to hear the member.

People in poverty or on the edge of poverty should not have such a threat hanging over their heads. The income of such people is a million miles away from ministerial salaries. However, if the proposal were to become law, the Parliament could do nothing about it, although I suspect that the Parliament and Scotland would not want any truck with it.

The threat to remove housing benefit from persistently disruptive neighbours is another example. The idea sounds neat and good, so why not? I represented somebody who had a terrible neighbour. In the pleadings, we found out that the neighbour had a mental disorder, but was not so badly mentally disabled as to be sectioned. I, and the lawyer who acted for her, had to manage the situation carefully. Under the proposals, who would make a distinction for her? Her housing benefits might be removed, although she would have no control over what she was doing. The proposals are outrageous, but the Parliament could do nothing about them if they became law down south.

Those are two small but potent examples of why we need control of the benefits system in Scotland. The Parliament should be able to reflect a just and socially caring Scotland, which is more than 300 miles away from the Blair London body politic and its drive to foist right-wing politics on a left-of-centre Scotland.

11:50

Mr Duncan McNeil (Greenock and Inverclyde) (Lab): It will come as no surprise that I express

pride in belonging to a party that faces up to the responsibility of power and shares it with our coalition partners to deliver, for the people of Scotland, greater access to all levels of education, free personal care, and a massive investment in housing that goes directly to some of the most marginalised people in Scotland.

We do not want to be complacent, because there is still much to do. We contrast our record—of parties working together to make the Parliament a success that delivers—with the failure of the SNP's basic mission.

Ms Sandra White (Glasgow) (SNP): Will the member give way?

Mr McNeil: No, thank you.

The SNP has failed to progress the case for independence. The SNP has also failed as a parliamentary group, because it promised to make the Parliament a success but takes every opportunity to talk the Parliament down. The SNP has a failed leader who does not and cannot stand up to his detractors on the SNP benches; nor can he stand up for his loyal supporters who are being picked off every weekend and whose political careers are being ended. He says nothing in their defence. He gives no word of public sympathy and no word of condemnation when the cliques end the careers of our colleagues in the Parliament.

The SNP is aware of its failure and realises that the people of Scotland reject anti-English rhetoric and the politics of grievance. Bulldog Wilson is not present, but the sight of him in an England top at the world cup will not convince people that the SNP has changed—as we have heard this morning, it has not. No communication strategy, however sophisticated, will convince people that the SNP has changed or seeks to make the devolved settlement a success.

The SNP must put aside the constitutional arguments and the excuse that we cannot achieve anything unless we achieve independence. The SNP must work to make the Parliament a success. That is the only way in which it will gain the respect of the Scottish people and deliver for them.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I will give Alex Neil two minutes, if he can use them.

11:52

Alex Neil (Central Scotland) (SNP): It is a great pity that those on the Labour benches could not rise to the occasion, because what we are talking about is the future of Scotland and the future of our people.

I want to concentrate my remarks on the European dimension, which has been barely mentioned by the unionist parties. Although we

went into the union with the United Kingdom, we must recognise that we are all now part of a much bigger union—the European Union.

Ten, 20, or 30 years ago, many of the major decisions on economics, agriculture, fishing and trade, and on matters such as education, employment law and social security law were made in London. Perhaps in those days it made sense for us to go to London. However, it is now a fact of life that 60 per cent of the legislation that goes through Westminster emanates from the European Union through the European Commission or the Council of Ministers.

This nation of Scotland must reassess its position in the context of the European Union and have no concept of separatism, no barriers to trade, and no concept of barriers to the movement of people or capital within the European Union, which currently has 15 members but will soon have 27.

What should Scotland's position be? Should we be a provincial Parliament with limited power that can do only small things for our people? If not, should we be like the Dáil, the Parliament in Brussels, the Parliament in Lisbon, and the Parliament in Vienna and be able to do things for our people? There is no reserved power at Westminster under schedule 5 to the Scotland Act 1998 that covers any subject in which Westminster's governance of Scotland would be superior in any way to Scottish governance of Scotland through an independent Parliament.

The other aspect of independence is that we would be at the top table, not only arguing for our self-interest, but making a positive contribution to the development of Europe and the European Union. The members on the unionist benches must waken up, lift their eyes, and raise their horizons because, sooner or later, Scotland will rise and be a nation again.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: It would not have been the debate that it has been if we had not had that wee burst at the end. My apologies to other members who hoped that they might squeeze in at the tail-end. It is not possible to call any more members.

We move to the closing speeches. I invite Pauline McNeill to close for the Labour party. She has six minutes.

11:55

Pauline McNeill (Glasgow Kelvin) (Lab): I hope that the SNP feels a lot better this morning, having had three hours in which to complain. That is proof of the pudding.

When will the penny for Scotland drop for the SNP that the people have rejected, in successive

elections, the different constitutional arrangement of independence? I hope that the SNP will accept that message. I challenge the SNP to say whether, if it loses the 2003 elections, it will accept once and for all that Scots are content with the constitutional arrangement. I invite any SNP member to answer that challenge.

Mr Gil Paterson (Central Scotland) (SNP): Will the member give way?

Pauline McNeill: Is Gil Paterson's intervention in response to my challenge? I ask him to say yes or no to my question of whether the SNP, if it loses the 2003 election, will accept that Scots are content with the constitutional arrangement.

Mr Paterson: The Labour party spent 18 years taking on the Tories. Did the Labour party accept every election that the Tories won?

Pauline McNeill: I did not expect Mr Paterson or any SNP member to rise to my challenge.

It is a fact that the SNP was not party to the Scottish Constitutional Convention that established the blueprint for devolution. Many Scots value the Parliament's powers and structure, including the committee system. Even the Tories and the Scottish Socialist Party, whose ideas we oppose, accept the reality of the constitutional settlement.

John Swinney said that he wants the best that Scotland can be. [*Interruption.*]

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Order on the back benches.

Ms Margo MacDonald (Lothians) (SNP): I'll haud the jaickets.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The member who is holding the floor is entitled to speak without members having a separate debate across the back benches.

Pauline McNeill: Thank you, Presiding Officer.

John Swinney said that he wants the best that Scotland can be. Who would not want that? The question is who and what can deliver that Scotland. Can it be done by an independent Scotland that is separate from our long-standing partners in the UK and dependent on a volatile commodity? Or can it be done by a devolved Parliament that has powers over public services, health, education, transport and crime within a stable UK framework, which gets the best from two Parliaments?

Ben Wallace was right to draw out the contradictions. Where would we be if we were not within a UK framework when it comes to shipbuilding in Scotland? We would not have been able to secure the orders in Scotstoun and Govan if Scotland were independent.

I have no doubt, Mr Paterson, that in 2003 the Scottish people will reward those parties that make the devolution settlement work. We have the lowest levels of inflation and the lowest levels of unemployment ever. In my constituency of Glasgow Kelvin, 3,550 workers have benefited from the minimum wage and unemployment is down by 11 per cent. The people like and want stability and that is what they have.

John Swinney made the biggest mistake of all by claiming that the SNP will not blame others for failure and that the nationalists will stop whingeing. I do not believe that the members who sit behind Mr Swinney—the 35 members and 30 spokespersons—will stop using Parliament's resources to complain.

Alasdair Morgan referred to Ben Wallace's choice of going to another Parliament. Mr Morgan's previous party leader made that choice. There is a contradiction for the SNP in that fact.

The SNP complains even when Labour delivers the biggest ever investment in the NHS. Even on the day that Parliament voted for free personal care, the SNP could not join in with the clapping. I remember that well.

As Patricia Ferguson outlined earlier, devolution has delivered. I will refer to some of our flagship policies. First, there is land reform, which is a policy that should not be underestimated; its impact on rural communities will be lasting because the Land Reform (Scotland) Bill boldly proposes a dramatic change to Scottish property rights that favours rural communities and their development. There will be statutory confirmation of existing rights of access, which is fundamental to achieving a fair Scotland. If we had waited for the SNP to deliver land reform through independence, land reform would never have happened.

The Adults with Incapacity (Scotland) Act 2000, which is an important piece of legislation that affects 10,000 Scots, is the result of devolution delivering. I have had numerous letters from pensioners who are delighted with the installation of central heating in Glasgow tenements because they have never had any permanent form of heating. From this October, free bus travel for pensioners, for which many Labour members have campaigned, will be implemented. This Parliament will foot the bill for that important policy.

Ms MacDonald: Will the member give way?

Pauline McNeill: No.

The challenge of reforming the NHS is not an easy one. The issue is not all about cash; it is also about ideas and managing, and Labour is making the difference. The economics of independence are a dream compared with the reality of the

investment that Labour has put in place through its budget last week.

Nicola Sturgeon appeared to argue for a separate pay review for Scottish nurses. I represented the nursing profession for more than 10 years and I can tell her that we always argued against a separate pay structure, performance-related pay and English nurses being paid more than Scottish nurses, because that would lead to a divided work force and a divided NHS.

Nicola Sturgeon: Will the member give way?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: No. The member is in her last minute.

Pauline McNeill: We have £20 billion or so each year to spend in Scotland. Thanks to the stability of the UK economy, as created by our Labour Chancellor, Gordon Brown, Scotland has been allocated additional sums of money to invest in public services. Literally millions of pounds, although the figure is, as yet, uncommitted, have been allocated to the goal of fixing Scotland's railways and Waverley station, which needs more platforms so we can have more trains on the tracks.

Kenny MacAskill asked what we are going to tell people on the doorsteps if we cannot talk about tax because it is reserved. I point out to him that that is what we have been saying on people's doorsteps for many years and they have still rejected independence. We will continue to say that on the doorsteps.

I urge the SNP to accept the true will of the Scottish people, which is to have a devolved Scotland within the UK. I ask the SNP to join in the real debate, which is about improving schools, hospitals, criminal justice, social justice and our railways. It is not too late to join in.

12:02

Phil Gallie (South of Scotland) (Con): I do not fault the SNP for bringing a motion on independence to the chamber, because independence is the reason for the party's existence and is the principle that it stands behind. I believe that if everyone in the chamber—particularly the Liberal Democrats—stood by the principles that they talked about in election campaigns, politicians would perhaps be viewed in a better light. That said, I emphasise that I do not agree with the nationalists' motion. I am a staunch unionist and see the benefits of the union. However, it is fair that we should occasionally debate the issue of independence.

Alex Neil: The former Scottish Office Tory minister, Allan Stewart, said that independence in Europe was far preferable to unionists than devolution. Does Phil Gallie agree?

Phil Gallie: I cannot say that I have always agreed with everything that Allan Stewart has said, although he is a good friend and colleague. I would go further and say that I would not want to identify myself too closely with anything to do with Europe, but that is another argument.

The Conservatives accept that, in the past, we argued against the establishment of the Scottish Parliament—we make no apologies for having done so. As Gil Paterson pointed out during Pauline McNeill's speech, we fought against it for the 18 years that we were in Government because we felt that it was unnecessary and would not bring about benefits. We thought that it would produce bureaucracy, add to the cost of running Scotland and take money away from services. To an extent, we have been proved right on those issues—witness the fact that the number of ministers that it takes to run Scotland has risen from five to 20. I do not believe that that is a good deal.

To Mike Rumbles, I say once again that we seek efficiency from the Scottish Parliament in the running of Scotland's affairs. We argued that devolution would be a threat to Scotland's block grant. Our funding benefits from our partnership in the union. The funding arrangement is based not on a handout approach but on the fact that Scotland's geography and spread of population mean that it takes more money to run the affairs of Scotland than it takes to run those of the rest of the UK. When you are in a partnership, you have to accept that such an arrangement is part of the deal.

The Scottish Parliament is here and the Scottish Conservatives' view is that, within the present constitution, under the umbrella of Westminster, and with the responsibilities that the Scottish Parliament has, we will do all that we possibly can to make the Parliament work.

Alasdair Morgan: Does Phil Gallie agree with David Davis, his UK party chairman, that the Scottish Parliament should have much greater power over many areas of taxation?

Phil Gallie: No. One of the reasons why I did not give my support to the campaign of David Davis, who is a friend of mine and whose views I respect, is that I think that he went too far on that issue and on the issue of setting up English regional Parliaments. I disagree with David Davis. It is right that members of parties are able to have differences. There is no problem with that at all.

We send parliamentarians to Westminster to look after our affairs and we should be proud of the fact that, in the previous Conservative Administration and in the Labour Administration, Scottish ministers have had more than their rightful share of places in the Westminster

Cabinet. That means that MPs from Scotland have a fantastic say in the major affairs to which many SNP members referred.

Mr Rumbles: Will Mr Gallie answer the question that David McLetchie refused to answer? If the referendum were held again, would he vote yes, yes?

Phil Gallie: I do not think that there is any chance that such a referendum will be held.

One of the reasons for my decision to vote against the SNP's motion is that I think that the nationalists are presenting their proposals too early. We need to give people in Scotland confidence in the Scottish Parliament. Perhaps because of the actions of the Scottish Executive or because of some of the issues that the Parliament chooses to debate, there is not a great deal of respect outside the chamber for what goes on here. Every member should be concerned about that. That is the issue that we should address, instead of worrying about further change and more responsibilities.

John Swinney talked about doing better in relation to education and health. He is right. We should be talking about that, not about expanding our responsibilities, at least until we can manage our present responsibilities properly. That is a fundamental point.

John Swinney talked about Ireland. Ireland was fortunate. When it joined the EU, its finances were such that it had to be assisted considerably from the European kitty, into which the UK made a net input while most other nations took money out. That was the foundation of Ireland's success. Now, the interest rate that has been set for the EU does not suit the Irish economy, and that is causing problems. We should think about that when we consider issues relating to Europe. I cannot understand why SNP members feel that we must have independence from Westminster but go hell-bent into Europe. The constraints that they complain about in relation to Westminster would be placed on them by Brussels. That is a weakness in the SNP's argument in the eyes of the electorate.

Patricia Ferguson talked about delivery. John Swinney referred to a lessening of delivery in areas such as health and roads, which have become a massive problem. There are issues to do with how budgets are spent and how funding is allocated to local authorities. Those are the issues that people in Scotland want to see addressed. I was pleased with John Swinney's suggestion that the Conservatives looked after those issues much better in Westminster than Labour and the Liberals are doing now in the Scottish Executive.

We in the Conservatives will not close our eyes to a change in the responsibilities of the Scottish

Parliament in the future. If we see a power that could come from Westminster to the Parliament to allow the Scottish Parliament to perform better, we will not simply put our heads in the sand and say no. We will consider the options, talk to our Westminster colleagues and perhaps, somewhere along the line, go along with a change. However, that change will be limited and it will have to be proved to be of benefit to Scotland.

12:11

The Deputy Minister for Parliamentary Business (Euan Robson): It is difficult to sum up such a wide-ranging debate, which has been interesting in parts. In my view, it is unnecessary and wholly inappropriate to talk about reopening the devolution settlement. In September 1997, the Scottish people endorsed by an overwhelming majority the detailed plans for devolution, which were closely modelled on the proposals drawn up by the Scottish Constitutional Convention over several years. Those proposals represented strong consensus across the public, political and civic spectrum in Scotland.

It is no exaggeration to say that devolution is the biggest constitutional change in Scotland for 300 years. It is an idea whose time had come and the settlement is working. Indeed, it is remarkable how quickly and smoothly our fledgling institutions have put down strong roots—perhaps to the disappointment of those who did not wish them well in the first place.

Of course, we have not got everything right first time, but no one should underestimate the scale of what has been achieved. The devolution settlement works and it is here to stay. The partnership between Labour and the Liberal Democrats has provided a platform for stable and effective government and an ambitious and radical legislative programme. Across the spectrum of issues that matter to the Scottish people, the Executive is developing and implementing distinctive policies, tailored to the needs of the people.

Fiona Hyslop: Correct me if I am wrong, but I think that the minister said that there is no need to reopen the devolution settlement. Is he saying that federalism is dead as far as the Liberal Democrats are concerned? Look at the faces of his Liberal Democrat colleagues. Have the Liberal Democrats ditched federalism, which was one of the core principles of the party's policy? Does the minister think that no further constitutional change is possible?

Euan Robson: I said that it was inappropriate to reopen the devolution settlement at this stage. Of course there can be constitutional developments in the future—constitutional developments are happening all the time. There is nothing—

Alex Neil: Will the member give way?

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

Euan Robson: No. I must move on. There is no question but that the Parliament is making a real difference. Let me give members a few examples. We are improving the educational opportunity for our children by lowering class sizes for our youngest pupils and delivering free nursery places for all four-year-olds and three-year-olds whose parents want such places. We have introduced the McCrone settlement for teachers. Members, including Mike Rumbles, have mentioned the fact that we have been making homes warmer for the elderly and needy through the central heating initiative. Duncan McNeil mentioned the investments that we have made in housing. We have trebled the number of one-stop clinics that provide health care in communities and we have increased the number of nurses in training. Robert Brown emphasised the on-going importance of increasing skills in our economy. We have increased the number of front-line junior doctors in our hospitals and have reduced their working hours. Patricia Ferguson mentioned the major development of free personal care.

Devolution is not an end in itself, but a means of improving the lives of the people of Scotland. That is the challenge that we have embarked upon and that is our overriding goal. We set out our stall in the partnership agreement and the programme for government. Those committed us to an ambitious—unprecedented in Scottish terms—programme of legislation to deliver clear objectives.

First and foremost, those objectives included delivering modern, cost-effective public services that are aimed in particular at making improvements in health, education, crime, transport and jobs. They also included bringing about democratic renewal of the political process according to the principles of openness, accessibility and accountability that underpinned the consultative steering group's work.

Mr Paterson: I am a bit confused, because in Scotland, the Liberals seem heavily in favour of private finance initiatives, yet in England, they oppose PFIs.

Euan Robson: I am sorry about the member's self-induced confusion. We take a practical approach to the implementation of PFI/PPP.

The Executive's objectives have included fostering a modern, competitive economy by encouraging a culture of enterprise and a knowledge-driven economy. We want to build a Parliament that speaks for the whole of Scotland, works for all the people of Scotland and commands support from every corner of Scotland,

from Shetland to the Borders. Perhaps most important, the Executive's objective is to promote social justice and tackle social exclusion in all its insidious forms.

Those are the tasks that we have set ourselves. We can show solid, tangible progress. Since July 1999, the Parliament has passed 35 Executive bills across the range of devolved matters. Some of them have been mentioned. They include the Adults with Incapacity (Scotland) Act 2000, which I am proud to have been involved with when I served on the Justice and Home Affairs Committee. Other pieces of legislation include the Community Care and Health (Scotland) Act 2002, the Freedom of Information (Scotland) Bill—which was supported by all members bar the Tories—and the Abolition of Feudal Tenure etc (Scotland) Act 2000, to mention but four.

That legislation has introduced major reforms in health and education and has modernised public services. Legislation has dealt with housing and criminal justice and has abolished student fees. We should not forget that, before devolution, we would have been lucky to have parliamentary time for more than one or two bills a year. The advent of the Scottish Parliament has allowed us to do much more, and the benefits of that are beginning to be felt. No member should underestimate the achievements.

The world has moved on, but the SNP is stuck in the same old groove. As many members have said, although the overwhelming majority of Scots vote at election after election for parties that reject independence, the SNP continues to pretend that independence is somehow the answer to every problem. SNP members do not answer hard questions. As Bill Aitken said, whenever a problem arises, the SNP says that it would throw money at it, but it cannot say how it would raise that money.

The SNP has said nothing about the costs and consequences of dismantling common machinery such as the system for pensions and benefits, or about the consequences for our armed forces and defence industries. I must agree with some—only some—of Ben Wallace's comments.

Bruce Crawford asked about genetically modified crops. He referred to the Scotland Act 1998 (Agency Arrangements) (Specification) (No 2) Order 2002, which was made under section 93 of the Scotland Act 1998 and returns devolved powers on GM crops. The order proposes to authorise specialist scientists in the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs to undertake administrative functions on our behalf. The order does not return responsibility for decisions about GM crops to Whitehall. The Minister for Environment and Rural Development will appear before the Transport and the Environment Committee on 8 May to argue

forcefully against annulment of the order.

Bruce Crawford: Does the minister agree that the order will transfer the functions under regulation 14 of the Genetically Modified Organisms (Deliberate Release) Regulations 1992, which means that the UK Government will be able to

“examine an application for a consent to release genetically modified organisms for its conformity with the requirements”

of the Environmental Protection Act 1990 and the 1992 regulations and to

“evaluate the risks posed by the proposed release”?

By handing responsibility over to the UK Government, Ross Finnie will become simply a rubber-stamping minister.

Euan Robson: I do not agree in the slightest. The minister will—

Bruce Crawford: That is what the regulations say. Has Euan Robson read them?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Order.

Euan Robson: Ross Finnie will explain the position to the Transport and the Environment Committee. It is nonsense to suggest that anything other than GMO releases in Scotland will not remain the responsibility of Scottish ministers.

In 1997, the people of Scotland confirmed overwhelmingly that they wanted devolution and that they wanted the Scottish Executive and the Parliament to work closely and effectively in co-operation with the Westminster Parliament and the UK Government. That is precisely the situation that we have and it is working for the benefit of the Scottish people. We have developed and are delivering distinctive policies on education, health, jobs and enterprise and on promoting social inclusion, open government and equal opportunities.

The devolution settlement is working well. We have been given wide powers and we are making full use of them in the Parliament to deliver the policies set out in the programme for government.

12:20

Roseanna Cunningham (Perth) (SNP): What a dire performance the minister gave in his closing speech. At least the Tories have an argument—I do not agree with it, but at least their opposition to independence is grounded in strongly held belief. I detected a possible movement in both David McLetchie’s opening remarks and Phil Gallie’s closing speech. That is welcome. However, what has been most fascinating this morning is that—it is fair to say this—the Labour leadership has bottled the debate. Frankly, the quality of the

Labour and Liberal Democrat speeches tells us why they have bottled it; it is because they have nothing to say.

Patricia Ferguson: The member should consider the point that I made earlier. We are not going to sit through three hours of extra whingeing from the SNP when ministers could be doing the job that they are meant to do, which is to deliver for the people of Scotland. I am pleased that Ms Cunningham can treat the debate that she and her party have engineered with the flippancy that her body language has just shown.

Roseanna Cunningham: The Executive parties now appear to equate criticism with whingeing. What is fascinating is what that gives away about their attitude to politics, which is that there should be no criticism. They want a one-party state, in which nobody says that anything that the Executive does is wrong. That is the truth about their position.

I am fascinated by the Liberal Democrat position in the debate. The Liberal Democrats appear to have ditched their policy on federalism, although Euan Robson tried desperately to fix his mistake by amending his position at a very late stage.

As one of the few members of the Parliament who has experience of another national culture, I know that one of the things about Scotland that immediately strikes visitors is the sense of self-deprecation, which in Scotland often goes too far and becomes flat-out negativity. Some fine stock phrases give the game away. They include, “better the devil you know” and “it’s aye been that way.” Those are two phrases that sum up a whole frame of mind, which frankly has been encouraged by too many of our so-called leaders in the past. We have heard similar sentiments expressed today. It has been easier for Scots to list the ways in which a good idea might fail, and therefore should not even be tried, than for them to have a go.

Scotland is not unique in that attitude. It has been the case in other countries, which have managed to turn the “can’t do culture” around into a “can do” culture. They have thrived as a result. It is always instructive to listen to a debate such as this morning’s and count the ways in which it is said that Scotland can’t, instead of the ways in which she can.

Today, however, we have not heard much in the way of reasons why Scotland can’t. The most striking characteristic of the debate has been the poverty of argument from Labour and the Liberal Democrats. It has been characterised by feeble interventions and speeches that said very little, if anything at all. Some of them were profoundly silly. I am grateful to Robert Brown for the startling new theory that other countries are different. Until he said that, it had never occurred to me. Bristow

Muldoon's speech was incomprehensible. When members come to the chamber, they should at least make an effort to make speeches that say or mean something.

The Tories said that the argument for independence is about emotionalism. If I have one criticism of what they have said in defence of themselves, it is that they proceeded to defend the union on the same emotional basis. The Tories cannot criticise the gander when the goose is using the same sauce—they should be honest about that.

A lot of what has been going on this morning has been about attacking SNP policies. That is fair enough and we do not have a problem with that, but that is not attacking independence. The assumption that is being made is that all that someone has to do is to attack an SNP policy and somehow they have attacked independence. That is a basic misunderstanding of the entire situation and it betrays the intellectual vacuity of the arguments of the other parties.

Rhona Brankin made a fascinating speech about Scotland's apparently debt-burdened economy. She has obviously not read Cathy Jamieson's so-called tough questions, from which it is clear that Labour is fast abandoning the black hole and the deficit.

Like all members, I am often asked why I got involved in politics. I dare say that many members have wryly asked themselves that question from time to time. I asked it at least three times during Labour speeches this morning. It is a fair question. There is a great deal of dissatisfaction about politics and politicians in general. People assume that most politicians are in politics for themselves. The answer to that cynicism is, of course, "the vision thing" and "the bigger picture". The SNP certainly has that. Our vision is of independence and the power that it can give to the people of Scotland to take control of their own destiny.

It is true that, in some areas, the devolution settlement allows us almost, if not quite, total control. My colleagues have already spoken about a number of those areas. I will touch on justice. We cannot be trusted to make decisions about the classification of drugs and firearms, which is a little bit odd, but, if we want to, we can pretty much do anything else that we choose in criminal and civil justice. That should afford us the opportunity to initiate, innovate and make up our own minds about the approach that we wish to take in Scotland to problems in Scotland, even though those problems are not unique to Scotland or even the United Kingdom. Indeed, in some areas, that is exactly what has happened, which makes Mike Rumbles's silly speech a complete waste of time.

The truth is that the SNP has acknowledged

good ideas when they have been produced—particularly when the Executive has nicked those good ideas from the SNP in the first place. The truth is that the Executive has taken on board SNP initiatives and we thank it for acknowledging that many good ideas come from our party. However, this week, we have seen how that can be set at nothing by a diktat from the Prime Minister—not even a decision by the Westminster Parliament—that would effectively turn benefits offices into courts and roll judge and jury into one. The Scottish Parliament has responsibility for tackling crime in Scotland, but social security is unambiguously a reserved matter. That means that we in Scotland are powerless to stop the Prime Minister's plan to remove child benefit and housing benefit from low-income parents of young offenders. How on earth does that fit in with the strategy that the Executive might have on youth crime and youth disorder? The benefits system cannot and must not be allowed to replace the criminal justice system, but how can this Parliament stop the rollercoaster, assuming that the plan survives today's elections in England?

Mr Rumbles: What is the role of Alex Salmond in Westminster, if not to address the very issues that Roseanna Cunningham has been raising?

Roseanna Cunningham: I promise Mike Rumbles that the SNP will address those issues in Westminster. Crime is a devolved matter. By his intervention, the Prime Minister is driving a coach and horses through Scotland's criminal justice system. Ultimately, the way to stop such intrusions into the devolved area is for the Parliament to have control over the reserved area—social security—as it would if it were an independent Parliament.

Even within the existing framework, the SNP would do a better job than the Labour and Liberal Democrat Executive. On the subject of justice alone, I can mention SNP policies that have been brought forward—policies on drug courts, measures to tackle sex offenders and compensation orders, which are one of the ways in which the SNP would begin to address parental responsibility in a more sensible and responsible fashion than Tony Blair currently proposes.

The SNP would make the greatest improvement where it is needed—in the delivery of public services. That topic has been the default moan of Labour members in the debate. None has moaned more than Des McNulty. The SNP has talked consistently this morning about public services and the failure of the Parliament to deliver what the people of Scotland want in the way of public services.

Des McNulty: Why, in the three years of the Parliament, has no SNP member proposed and got through a committee a single change in the

budget in any area? Not a single proposal has the SNP made.

Roseanna Cunningham: If proposals have not gone through it is probably because the Executive parties have a built-in majority on committees and are rather loth ever to take on any ideas from the SNP, regardless of how good they are.

Scotland's future must be based on strong public services. That is why we are making what I call our "local pact with the people". The five key principles of public service delivery are: that it be locally delivered; that it be public; that it be accountable; that it be consumer-oriented; and that it be transparent. When private profit is taken from public services, precious resources that should be directed towards front-line services are siphoned off.

The Executive's record on public services has been appalling. It amounts to a massive extension of the privatisation programme that Labour vehemently opposed when the Tories began it. Our proposals, which involve a not-for-profit trust, would ensure that the work that needs to be done would be done—but with the big differences that the assets and the control would stay in public hands and that all the money would be invested in services, with no cream skimmed off the top. The SNP would, under the present system, do a better job of delivering the sort of Scotland that Scots want; but that would be only second best because, to make things work in Scotland, we need independence. In that framework, we could tackle the core problems rather than simply apply a soothing balm to the symptoms.

We are giving the people of Scotland a positive, upbeat message that concentrates on their ability to take control of their future. Independence is about giving the people of Scotland the power that they need to tackle the real inequalities in our society and to make the changes that must be made. Policy autonomy is all very well in areas such as health, education and justice, but budgets are constrained by what Westminster deems appropriate. And even policy autonomy can go only so far. No one can seriously argue that it is possible to build a coherent transport infrastructure when we can build roads but not railways.

Independence is not the threat that some of the timorous beasties on the Labour benches seem to think. It is truly about an end to dependency. It is Scotland's single greatest opportunity. Independence can be the key to Scotland's future as a go-ahead economy and a can-do society, where the root causes of inequality can be addressed and a true equality of opportunity attained. That is what the SNP wants. It is apparent that that is not what Labour wants.

Business Motions

12:32

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Mr Murray Tosh): The next item of business is the consideration of two business motions. The first is motion S1M-3057, in the name of Patricia Ferguson, which is a timetabling motion for stage 3 of the Scottish Qualifications Authority Bill, which is to be taken this afternoon. Any member who wishes to speak against the motion should press their request-to-speak button now.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees that, at Stage 3 of the Scottish Qualifications Authority Bill, debate on each part of the proceedings shall be brought to a conclusion by the time-limits indicated (each time-limit being calculated from when Stage 3 begins and excluding any periods when the meeting is suspended)—

Groups 1 and 2 no later than 1 hour

Motion to pass the Bill—no later than 1 hour 30 minutes.—[*Euan Robson.*]

Motion agreed to.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Motion S1M-3055, in the name of Patricia Ferguson on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, sets out the business programme. Again I ask any member who wishes to speak against the motion to press their request-to-speak button now.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees—

(a) the following programme of business—

Wednesday 8 May 2002

2.30 pm Time for Reflection

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

followed by Executive Debate on Sustainable Development—Meeting the Needs

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5.00 pm Decision Time

followed by Members' Business—debate on the subject of S1M-2966 Margaret Smith: World Asthma Day, 7 May 2002

Thursday 9 May 2002

9.30 am Social Justice Committee Debate on the Voluntary Sector

followed by Business Motion

followed by Ministerial Statement on New National Qualifications

2.30 pm Question Time

3.10 pm First Minister's Question Time

3.30 pm Executive Debate on Action to Recruit, Retain and Value Nurses

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5.00 pm Decision Time

followed by Members' Business

Wednesday 15 May 2002

2.30 pm Time for Reflection

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

followed by Executive Business

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5.00 pm Decision Time

followed by Members' Business

Thursday 16 May 2002

9.30 am Scottish Conservative and Unionist
Party Business

followed by Business Motion

2.30 pm Question Time

3.10 pm First Minister's Question Time

3.30 pm Executive Business

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5.00 pm Decision Time

followed by Members' Business

and (b) that Stage 1 of the University of St. Andrews
(Postgraduate Medical Degrees) Bill be completed by 27
June 2002.—[*Euan Robson*.]

Fiona Hyslop (Lothians) (SNP): I had not intended to speak against the motion, but I notice that members' business for 15 May is not itemised. It was discussed at last week's meeting of the Parliamentary Bureau, and again at this week's meeting, that the debate would be a motion by Michael Russell of the SNP on the case of Shirley McKie. I understand that it may be because of a printing oversight that that has not appeared in the business bulletin.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I think that I am correct in saying that business motions merely state "Members' Business" but never actually specify what that business is.

Fiona Hyslop: The business is usually specified.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The clerks advise me that the business is sometimes specified, but not always. There is a perfectly good reason for that. We are not always aware of what members' business will be when the business motion is accepted. Often, the Parliamentary Bureau will decide that a particular day will be an SNP day or a Labour day, but the actual motion for debate will not follow until later. However, I advise the chamber that there may be a legal difficulty with Mr Russell's proposed motion.

Mr Robson, do you wish to respond?

Euan Robson (Deputy Minister for Parliament): Not particularly, Presiding Officer, except to point out that we have not specified members' business on Thursday 9 May either, according to my reading of the business motion.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The ruling is clear: it is not necessary, when moving a business motion, to specify the topic of members' business, nor the member who has secured it.

Motion agreed to.

12:35

Meeting suspended until 14:30.

14:30

On resuming—

Points of Order

Alasdair Morgan (Galloway and Upper Nithsdale) (SNP): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. You are aware that I have secured today's members' business debate. The motion featured on what I think is called the discussion board on the Parliament's website. I understand that, at some stage this morning, reference to the motion was removed from the website under instructions from officials of the Parliament, but has subsequently been reinstated. Will you give the Parliament the background to those decisions?

The Presiding Officer (Sir David Steel): Forgive me, but I do not want to hold up question time. I undertake to have the matter reviewed by the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body. In the meantime, the motion has been reinstated on the website. That is the important point. I am concerned about the matter.

Tommy Sheridan (Glasgow) (SSP): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. Will you tell us when it was reinstated? I know that it was on the website at 12 noon and that it was gone at 12.15 pm.

The Presiding Officer: I decided a few minutes ago that it was to be reinstated.

Tommy Sheridan: A few minutes ago? On your instructions?

The Presiding Officer: Yes.

Miss Annabel Goldie (West of Scotland) (Con): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. In today's business bulletin, question 2 is listed under the name of Mrs Dorothy-Grace Elder. You will be aware of recent publicity about Mrs Dorothy-Grace Elder's resignation from the Scottish National Party group in the Scottish Parliament and from membership of the Scottish National Party. Is it competent for a member in that position, who sits in the Parliament as the result of election under the party list system, to remain a member of the Scottish Parliament when she has intimated resignation from her party?

The Presiding Officer: Yes. The Scotland Act 1998 is quite clear. Once a member is elected to the Scottish Parliament, he or she can be removed only by resignation, death or disqualification. In this case, none of those circumstances has occurred. Can we proceed with question time?

Mr Lloyd Quinan (West of Scotland) (SNP): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I refer to the points that were made by my good friend Alasdair Morgan and by the leader of the Scottish Socialist

Party. I inquire about the present situation with respect to rule 16.4 of the standing orders, which relates to the broadcasting of proceedings. Where are we in the development of a code of conduct that relates to the broadcasting of the Parliament's proceedings? Was the decision to suspend the bulletin board taken by the Parliament's chief executive under standing order 16.4.2 without reference to the members?

The Presiding Officer: No. I do not want to hold up question time. The members' business debate tonight was always going to be broadcast and webcast. The only question related to an interactive forum. The corporate body has never discussed the matter. It will now do so.

Mr Quinan: I asked who took the decision. If it was not the corporate body and it was not the chamber, was it the Parliament's chief executive?

The Presiding Officer: With respect, we are not going to name officials in the chamber. The corporate body will deal with the matter and I will report to the Parliament after that.

Mr Quinan rose—

The Presiding Officer: I am sorry, Mr Quinan, but you are holding up question time. If you want to pursue the matter, come and see me afterwards.

Question Time

SCOTTISH EXECUTIVE

Sustainable Scotland

1. Robin Harper (Lothians) (Green): To ask the Scottish Executive what issues will be discussed at the next meeting of the Cabinet sub-committee on sustainable Scotland. (S10-5087)

The Minister for Environment and Rural Development (Ross Finnie): The Cabinet sub-committee on sustainable Scotland meets regularly and will meet regularly over the next year to discuss how sustainable development can best be embedded into the work of the Scottish Executive. Agendas are decided by the chair near the time of the meetings and reports of the meetings are placed on the sustainable Scotland website.

Robin Harper: Will the minister ensure that the committee discusses the sustainability of genetically modified crop trials as a matter of utmost urgency? Is the minister aware that continuing the trial of GM crops in the Highlands contravenes recommendations that were made by the Government's advisory body, the Agriculture and Environment Biotechnology Commission? The commission has advised that GM trials should not go ahead unless separation distances between GM crops and normal crops are increased and unless there has been a proper consultation—

The Presiding Officer (Sir David Steel): You may not speak to a long extract from the paper, Mr Harper. You must get to the question.

Robin Harper: Sorry. The minister has legal justification to halt the trial now. Is he willing to do so before any more people are arrested in the Highlands?

Ross Finnie: What is sustainable in the context of conducting the trials is for me, as the minister, to refer the question whether the trials are safe to an expert body. The discussion is not entirely analogous to the discussions that have been held in the chamber on the measles, mumps and rubella vaccine, but I recall many contributions in those discussions in which it was deemed appropriate for a minister who is in doubt about scientific evidence to refer the matter to an independent scientific body. I assure members that, when I grant permissions for GM crop trials, I refer the matter to the appropriate expert body, which is the Advisory Committee on Releases to the Environment. I ask that body to confirm on an objective and scientific basis that trials will not harm the environment. I grant permission for trials only when I receive an unequivocal response. I

regard that as a responsible way of discharging my duties. It is right for me to take advice from an independent expert body. That is a sustainable course of action.

Maureen Macmillan (Highlands and Islands) (Lab): A spokesman for Charles Kennedy said that the minister would try to get permission from Europe to halt the experiment at Munloch. Will the minister confirm that claim?

Ross Finnie: I am afraid that I am not the spokesman for Charles Kennedy and I am not in touch with the spokesman for Charles Kennedy. If the spokesman wishes to speak to me, I have no doubt that he will. I am unable to confirm the claim. I can point only to the answer that I gave to Mr Harper about the basis on which I take decisions on trials.

Fiona McLeod (West of Scotland) (SNP): The minister referred to ACRE in his earlier answer. Is he aware that Adrian Butt of the ACRE secretariat has written to say that it is

"ACRE's role to advise ministers",

and that

"Ministers are not obliged to take ACRE's advice nor is the Committee's advice the only consideration for ministers when issuing a consent."

When will the minister use the powers under section 112 of the Environmental Protection Act 1990 to stop the crop trials?

Ross Finnie: The member is well aware that it is entirely right that I refer such matters to an independent expert body. Of course I could ignore the advice of that body, but that would leave me in an extraordinary position, as the regulations require me to take a decision on the basis of independent scientific advice. If I chose to ignore the advice of the expert body, I would have to find another expert body to give me advice. Unless I have grounds for believing that there is something inherently wrong in the way in which ACRE proceeds, it is entirely responsible for me to refer matters to it as an independent expert body and to take the advice that it gives.

John Scott (Ayr) (Con): The minister is aware that road traffic is predicted to grow by 27 per cent from present levels by 2021. However, the document entitled "Meeting the Needs ... Priorities, Actions and Targets for sustainable development in Scotland", which was published on Tuesday, says that the Government intends to

"stabilise road traffic at 2001 levels ... by 2021".

Does the minister really believe that the target is achievable simply by encouraging greater use of public transport?

Ross Finnie: The member is aware that that figure was included in the document, which was

announced by my friend Wendy Alexander, the minister with responsibility for transport. The document has more to it than simply encouraging the use of public transport; it sets out a clear strategy—and a way of achieving it—for diverting many individual car users on to public transport.

Compulsory Blood Tests

The Presiding Officer: Question 2 is from Dorothy-Grace Elder. [*Applause.*]

Mr Frank McAveety (Glasgow Shettleston) (Lab): Gaun yersel, Dorothy.

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

2. Dorothy-Grace Elder (Glasgow): To ask the Scottish Executive whether it plans to make blood tests compulsory for persons who have assaulted police officers by spitting, biting or any other means whereby an officer could be infected with HIV or with other high-risk diseases. (S1O-5121)

The Deputy Minister for Justice (Dr Richard Simpson): I am aware of the member's deep interest in health matters. The Executive is aware of the petition on this subject that has been submitted to the Public Petitions Committee and of the committee's intention to raise the matter with Scottish ministers. We regard the health and safety of police officers as a matter of the highest importance. We will, therefore, give the Scottish Police Federation's request sympathetic consideration in responding to the committee. Any power of compulsion, however, would raise legal issues that would have to be addressed if such a proposal were to be implemented.

Dorothy-Grace Elder: I thank the minister for his reply. The Executive is obviously giving the matter serious consideration. However, he will be aware that police officers have no protection under human rights legislation. They can be spat at or bitten—indeed, criminals are using threats of spitting and biting as a terrible weapon against them—yet the officers are not allowed to know the results of the tests. Criminals have sometimes agreed to have tests but not to have the results revealed to the officer, thereby putting the officer and their family in mental torment for months. Will the Executive toughen up and do something?

Dr Simpson: Members may be aware that I worked in the Scottish Prison Service as a deputy medical officer. I was assaulted on two occasions—once scratched, once bitten—by young women who were drug addicts. I therefore have great sympathy for the police officers who are in such a situation.

Nonetheless, there is a problem in respect of article 8 of the European convention on human rights on the requirement to respect private and

family life. The Scottish Parliament has legislative competence to formulate a change in the law, but we would have to balance the public safety interests—which I believe are of great importance—with the individual's right to privacy in their family life. We will consider the issue carefully.

Brian Fitzpatrick (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (Lab): Does the minister recognise the fact that article 8 rights are not exclusive and that, as Dorothy-Grace Elder has pointed out, victims have rights, too? Will he reflect on the serious concerns that have been expressed by our police, our front-line national health service staff—including those who work in accident and emergency services—and others who work in public services? Will he confirm that there will be a policy of zero tolerance towards such vile attacks and that the Executive will stand with the victims?

Dr Simpson: Brian Fitzpatrick raises several issues. First, he is right to say that the interests of the individuals and public safety can allow us to legislate in a different way. Secondly, the issue of public service—I have already mentioned prison staff—also concerns the fire brigade, as firefighters go into situations in which sharp objects and needles are present and can contaminate them. There is guidance for them on that, just as there is guidance for the police force. The partnership Executive is about to issue guidance for accident and emergency staff and we are assessing a scheme, which is already being run, whereby the police train accident and emergency staff in self-protection.

I confirm the Executive's absolute commitment to the protection of all front-line staff and assure the member that we will adopt a zero-tolerance position towards people who use their illness or disease to threaten others with infection. That is intolerable and will not be treated lightly.

Phil Gallie (South of Scotland) (Con): Is there nothing in the Freedom of Information (Scotland) Bill, which was passed recently, that the minister could use to pass on such information to the police? Can he think of any information that would be more important to an individual officer than the type of information that Dorothy-Grace Elder has mentioned?

Dr Simpson: We will consider the matter carefully. I am not sure whether the Freedom of Information (Scotland) Bill will give us sufficient powers to get that information. However, we will look at the situation closely and, if we feel that it is appropriate to take legal action to ensure the protection of front-line staff, we will take such action.

Autistic Spectrum Disorder

3. Mr Lloyd Quinan (West of Scotland) (SNP):

To ask the Scottish Executive what progress it has made in extending parental choice with regard to the treatment of children with autistic spectrum disorder. (S1O-5090)

The Deputy Minister for Health and Community Care (Hugh Henry): The Scottish Executive supports the view expressed in the Public Health Institute of Scotland's recent autistic spectrum disorders needs assessment report that priorities for improving services for people with autistic spectrum disorders must include the involvement of people with autistic spectrum disorders and their families, early assessment and integrated joint planning.

Mr Quinan: Can the minister confirm that, in extending parental choice, he will support parents who want to use the Lovaas applied behavioural analysis one-to-one programme for autistic children? Will he also support the biomedical treatments that Dr Danczak is developing at his clinic in the Health Care International hospital in Clydebank? Does he agree with the parents of autistic children throughout Scotland and with me that there can be full parental choice only if one-to-one care for every child with autism in Scotland is provided?

Hugh Henry: Some parents have argued that education authorities should fund the Lovaas approach. Research into that and other approaches to working with autistic children suggests that most approaches show some evidence of effectiveness. However, it has not yet been possible to demonstrate conclusively that one approach is more effective than another. Practice in schools throughout the United Kingdom tends to be eclectic, with staff drawing on features of a number of approaches, including that to which the member referred.

Glasgow Airport Rail Link

4. Tommy Sheridan (Glasgow) (SSP): To ask the Scottish Executive whether it will guarantee to provide the necessary public funds to allow the construction of a direct rail link from Glasgow city centre to Glasgow airport. (S1O-5095)

The Deputy Minister for Enterprise, Transport and Lifelong Learning (Lewis Macdonald): The current study on rail links to both Glasgow and Edinburgh airports will report on a range of options, including options for how those links should be funded.

Tommy Sheridan: Strathclyde Passenger Transport believes that the Glasgow airport rail link can be operational by 2005 and has committed £500,000 to developing important details of the link over the next three years. It is

now time for the Scottish Executive to show the same commitment. Will the minister today give a cast-iron guarantee that within the next 12 to 24 months the Executive will at least fund the essential upgrade of the rail lines between Glasgow central station and Paisley? Will he commit the Executive to supporting financially the Glasgow airport rail link as a priority ahead of the Edinburgh airport rail link? Does he agree with Strathclyde Passenger Transport that the Glasgow airport rail link can easily be operational by 2005, if the Executive is willing to support it?

Lewis Macdonald: Our clear view is that the proposals for rail links to Glasgow and Edinburgh airports should be examined together and jointly. The study to which I referred is being conducted on that basis. The Executive has no intention of putting one project ahead of the other. We are carrying out an objective study, on the basis of the evidence. That study is making significant progress and will allow decisions to be made in the fairly near future. We expect to narrow down the options during the summer and to receive a final report on the options for both airports in the autumn. We do not intend to pre-empt the discussions that we will have with all potential funding partners on how the projects can be best funded and developed. I would be surprised if Mr Sheridan or anyone else suggested that we should take an initiative that excluded the possibility of other partners supporting the development of the projects and providing funding for them.

Ms Sandra White (Glasgow) (SNP): Does the minister agree that the Glasgow airport link, in conjunction with the Glasgow crossrail scheme, is vital for the regeneration of Glasgow? Does he not understand that the airport link could have been up and running by now if so much money had not been spent on studies of the link and the crossrail scheme?

Lewis Macdonald: Labour members do not and never will endorse an approach to transport expenditure that involves committing ourselves to major infrastructure projects without understanding what is being undertaken or planning the way in which money should be spent. The study that we are carrying out into the proposed rail links to Glasgow and Edinburgh airports is designed to ensure that the schemes that emerge offer the best value for money to the taxpayer and the best support for economic regeneration of the communities in question.

Lord James Douglas-Hamilton (Lothians) (Con): As a fair-minded Aberdonian, will the minister give even-handed support to the projects in both Glasgow and Edinburgh, bearing in mind the fact that Strathclyde Passenger Transport has already allocated £500,000 for preparatory work on the Glasgow airport rail link? It is enormously

important and in Scotland's best interests that both projects are developed together.

Lewis Macdonald: I do not believe that what Strathclyde Passenger Transport has announced in the past few days amounts to preparatory work for the rail route to Glasgow airport. The key study that we are undertaking treats both airports jointly and even-handedly. That is the right way of proceeding. Of course, we will listen carefully to anything that Strathclyde Passenger Transport has to say. However, we have no reason to believe that it will add particularly to the evidence that we are amassing in our study of projects for links to both airports.

Robert Brown (Glasgow) (LD): Does the minister acknowledge the growing impatience, in Glasgow in particular, over the slow progress on the matter? Will he undertake to push the studies to a conclusion and thereafter show some leadership in producing a timetable for action to complete the link to Glasgow airport as soon as possible?

Lewis Macdonald: We intend to show leadership and to make progress on the project as quickly as we can. We will do so on the basis of the evidence of the studies and we will do so in partnership with the UK Strategic Rail Authority, with the British Airports Authority—which clearly has an interest as the operator of the airports—and with other partners. As I say, I hope to see the evidence before the end of the year.

Flights (Highlands and Islands)

5. John Farquhar Munro (Ross, Skye and Inverness West) (LD): To ask the Scottish Executive what action is being taken in order to reduce the cost of flights from the Highlands and Islands. (S10-5099)

The Deputy Minister for Enterprise, Transport and Lifelong Learning (Lewis Macdonald): The Scottish Executive provides a substantial subsidy to Highlands and Islands Airports Limited, which results in significantly lower costs to airlines, and provides direct subsidy to air services between Glasgow and Campbeltown, Tiree and Barra.

John Farquhar Munro: I am sure that the minister will appreciate that many airline services to rural and island communities are not simply public transport links but essential lifelines. Will the minister consider making representations to Westminster with a view to exempting from air passenger duty all flights to and from Highlands and Islands airports? That would lead to a modest but welcome reduction in air fares.

Lewis Macdonald: John Farquhar Munro will be aware that exemption from air passenger duty was introduced for all flights from the Highlands and Islands, and within the Highlands and Islands,

from 1 April last year. To my knowledge, the Treasury has no proposals to introduce exemptions for flights from other airports. We feel that the current arrangements accurately and adequately reflect the special status of the Highlands and Islands. The exemption that the Treasury granted last year was a recognition of the unique status of the Highlands and Islands. It was on the basis of European criteria for services within sparsely populated areas that Scottish ministers came to an agreement with the Treasury on the exemption. It was a marked achievement, which has provided benefits to the Highlands and Islands.

Mr Jamie McGrigor (Highlands and Islands) (Con): Does the Executive understand the anger of islanders and tourists alike who find that it is cheaper to fly across the Atlantic than it is to fly across the Pentland firth?

Lewis Macdonald: Of course. As Jack McConnell said when he and I were in Stornoway recently, the airlines ought to consider their fare structures carefully. Clearly, that is a matter for the airlines and not for Government. The Executive, through its support for HIAL, reduces significantly the charges that airlines face. A knock-on effect of that is reduced costs to passengers.

Other operators are coming in and offering flights at cheaper rates in the Highlands. An example of that is the easyJet service between Inverness and Stansted. That kind of low-cost operation is clearly welcome and will contribute towards reducing costs for air travellers.

Mr Duncan Hamilton (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): The minister's words were rather complacent. Does he understand that nothing that he has said will lessen the fury of a constituent who contacted me this week to complain about the price of £293 to travel from Stornoway to Edinburgh? Does the minister not understand that the greatest thing that he could do would be to attract low-cost airlines on to those routes? With that in mind, will he not instruct HIAL—of which the Executive is the sole shareholder—to review or reduce airport charges further?

Lewis Macdonald: Duncan Hamilton should acknowledge that, far from being complacent, the Scottish Executive works continuously with HIAL and with the private sector to implement our policies. Those policies involve the investment of significant subsidies in HIAL that reduce its charges substantially. That is why easyJet has been able to make a commercial case for operating a service between Inverness and London. I hope that other low-cost operators that wish to operate in the Highlands will engage in negotiations in precisely the way that easyJet did. I know that Ryanair has been speaking to HIAL and that negotiations are progressing well, not on

the basis of seeking additional subsidy but on the basis of commercial opportunities for the publicly owned airports and the privately owned airline to provide better services within the Highlands and Islands.

Tavish Scott (Shetland) (LD): The minister mentioned the fare structure. It is now possible to obtain a ticket between Aberdeen and London Heathrow for £89.50, which, as it allows considerable flexibility, is available not just to people who can travel at longer notice but to people who wish to travel at shorter notice. Is he aware that no such flexibility of fare structure is available to the people whom I represent on Shetland, or indeed to people living on Orkney or the Western Isles? Will the minister seek urgent meetings with representatives of British Airways to tackle them on the social responsibility issues that the First Minister raised recently? In my view, British Airways simply has no sense of social responsibility.

The Presiding Officer: Order.

Tavish Scott: Will the minister undertake to hold urgent discussions with British Airways and to ensure that we can achieve some change in that regard?

The Presiding Officer: Order.

Tavish Scott: People are extremely annoyed about the fares that they have to pay—

The Presiding Officer: Order. We have got the point.

Lewis Macdonald: We recognise that the cost to users is a matter on which airlines have to make a judgment. Our responsibility is to provide infrastructure and support. If, as is the case for a number of areas of Shetland, Orkney and the Western Isles, a socially necessary service is not being provided on a commercial basis, but is a lifeline requirement, we will grant a public service obligation to allow the local authority or, in certain circumstances, the Executive to support that service.

Dental Care (Grampian)

6. Elaine Thomson (Aberdeen North) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive how it will ensure that people have better access to dental care in the Grampian region. (S10-5115)

The Deputy Minister for Health and Community Care (Mrs Mary Mulligan): On 25 April, I announced a £1 million golden hello package to improve recruitment and retention of national health service dentists and to help to ensure that patients are able to access NHS dental treatment. Key features will include funding to provide a vocational training place for all new dental graduates and a £3,000 allowance for each

new dental graduate who takes a training place in one of eight designated areas, including Grampian, where Elaine Thomson's constituency is located. Those measures are part of a phased programme to tackle recruitment and retention issues and to address demand.

Elaine Thomson: As the minister knows, there is a major shortage of dentists in Grampian, which the new recruitment measures should help to address. The minister will be aware that access to NHS dentistry is crucial for less well off areas, where the dental health of both adults and children is often poor. I ask the minister to consider exploring further with Grampian NHS Board how the number of salaried NHS dentists can be increased and how the very successful toothology dental health campaign can be extended and supported.

Mrs Mulligan: The introduction of salaried dentists is an important part of meeting the demand for NHS services. On 1 April, the Scottish Executive introduced a new career structure for salaried dentists, to encourage that option to become part of the career path. In that way, we hope to offer people more opportunities.

Richard Lochhead (North-East Scotland) (SNP): People in Grampian welcome the new measures on general dental practitioners. However, the biggest problem in Grampian by far relates to dental services at local hospitals, where people have to wait for up to four years to see an orthodontist. I hope that the minister agrees that that is wholly unacceptable. Will she outline the short-term and long-term measures that she will take to address that problem, particularly in relation to young children who are waiting up to four years for treatment at a very important stage of their development?

Mrs Mulligan: As I said, we are considering several ways of encouraging the retention and recruitment of dentists. Within the Grampian area, 7.5 full-time equivalent salaried dentists are operating, one of whom is an orthodontist practising from the dental hospital. We will continue to consider other options for improving the situation.

Mr Mike Rumbles (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (LD): The golden hello is extremely welcome in Grampian, but there are simply not enough dentists being trained. What efforts is the Executive taking to increase the number of dentists?

Mrs Mulligan: The target for the number of people coming out of dental schools is 120, which we expect to reach this year. A substantially greater proportion of people are trained in dentistry in Scotland than south of the border. The issue is one of ensuring that those people stay in

Scotland, and I hope that the measures that I have outlined today, among others, will encourage them to stay in Scotland and practise in the NHS here.

Alcohol-related Problems

7. Irene Oldfather (Cunninghame South) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive what support it is providing to help deal with alcohol-related problems. (S1O-5097)

The Deputy Minister for Health and Community Care (Mrs Mary Mulligan): The Scottish Executive published its "Plan for Action on Alcohol Problems" on 18 January this year. The plan sets out a powerful package of measures to reduce alcohol-related harm. The proposed action covers culture change, prevention and education, support and treatment for people with alcohol problems and the protection of individuals and the wider community. Early Executive action includes the launch on 19 April of a £1.5 million national communication strategy to tackle binge drinking.

Irene Oldfather: I welcome the initiatives that the minister outlined. The minister will be aware of research that shows that young people in particular have little awareness of the concept of alcohol misuse. Will she give an assurance that in targeting the issue of alcoholism in young people future advertising and information campaigns will tackle that lack of awareness?

Mrs Mulligan: We are particularly concerned about young people's misuse of alcohol. The Health Education Board for Scotland is working on proposals to take alcohol education into schools and community facilities. We are considering the possibility of further measures to assist and support through treatment youngsters who have become involved with alcohol. I have written to the Westminster Government, which is responsible for advertising, to ask it to review its policy on alcohol advertising.

Mrs Margaret Smith (Edinburgh West) (LD): I particularly welcome the minister's final comment.

Although I welcome the Executive's recent initiative to target binge drinking among those aged 18 to 35, I agree with Irene Oldfather that we have to target under-age drinkers. Is the minister aware of a recent UK-wide report by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation that noted that up to a quarter of 13 and 14-year-olds say that they have downed five or more drinks at one sitting? Does the minister agree that the Executive should spearhead a joined-up approach to tackling alcohol misuse in under-age drinkers, which would ensure that all relevant agencies are involved and that particular support is available to children at times of trauma?

Mrs Mulligan: A joined-up approach is essential, which is why we are considering with

our education and social justice colleagues how to take such an approach on this issue. HEBS is about to launch a campaign and we must look at how that is rolled out and learn lessons from it.

Glasgow Housing Association

8. Ms Sandra White (Glasgow) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Executive what discussions it has had with Glasgow Housing Association since the result of the housing stock transfer ballot. (S1O-5094)

The Deputy Minister for Social Justice (Ms Margaret Curran): The Executive has been involved in regular discussions with Glasgow Housing Association both before and after the housing stock transfer ballot.

Ms White: Is the minister aware that Bob Allan, the GHA chief executive, said recently that he had serious doubts whether the building labour was in place to deliver the GHA plan, which put in doubt the promise that was made to tenants who have waited a long time for repairs to be carried out? Will she guarantee Glasgow tenants that repairs will be carried out as promised?

Ms Curran: I am not aware of the specific comments to which the member refers, but I will check the details.

On a number of occasions during the stock transfer debate, tenants raised with me the serious matter of labour supply. We took a series of actions to ensure that the labour supply would be in place. I guarantee that tenants will get their repairs done. Wendy Alexander's department has done a lot of work to ensure that apprenticeship schemes and conversion courses for shipyard workers are in place. I reassure the member on that score.

I am a bit disappointed that Sandra White did not take the opportunity to note the number of tenants who took part in the ballot, which was an overwhelming endorsement of our policy. It is most disappointing that people who were on record before the housing stock transfer as saying that they would stand by the wishes of the tenants are not doing so. The housing stock transfer ballot gives us the opportunity to make progress with housing in Glasgow and I am pleased that we can answer Sandra White's concerns and deliver for tenants in Glasgow.

Ms White: On a point of order, Presiding Officer.

The Presiding Officer: Is it a real point of order?

Ms White: As far as I am concerned it is a real point of order, and I am sure that you will agree.

Is it in order for a minister to continue with propaganda on the housing stock transfer when she is supposed to be answering a question?

The Presiding Officer: As I have said many times, the standing orders do not allow me to control what ministers say in their answers.

Paul Martin (Glasgow Springburn) (Lab): When the minister last met representatives of Glasgow Housing Association, did she discuss tackling anti-social behaviour, which is a serious issue in our constituencies? Will she ensure that Glasgow Housing Association puts in place an effective action plan to deal with that serious issue?

Ms Curran: I have had such a discussion with Glasgow Housing Association. I am pleased that Jim Wallace joined me on a visit to Cranhill, which is in my constituency, to discuss that issue. By tackling issues such as housing design, we can begin to design out crime in local communities. I have had many discussions with Bob Allan about the issue, which is a key priority for Glasgow Housing Association. We have a unique opportunity to use housing design methods to begin to tackle crime. The Executive will use a joined-up approach to deliver crime in Glasgow, which we regard as a top priority.

The Presiding Officer: I do not think that that is quite what the minister meant.

Mr Keith Harding (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): Will the minister take action in light of the announcement by Glasgow City Council that 93 per cent of the work done by its buildings direct labour organisation is defective?

Ms Curran: As Mr Harding knows, Glasgow City Council adheres strongly to the best-value regime, through which it will address any issues that emerge following that announcement. We will work in partnership with Glasgow City Council to take determined action to tackle the serious issue that he raises.

Glasgow City Council (Meetings)

9. Mr Kenneth Gibson (Glasgow) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Executive when it last met representatives of Glasgow City Council and what issues were discussed. (S10-5101)

The Deputy Minister for Finance and Public Services (Peter Peacock): We regularly meet Glasgow City Council to discuss matters of mutual interest.

Mr Gibson: Is the minister aware that Glasgow City Council's share of local government resources has declined, year on year, since new Labour came to power? This year, Glasgow's share is £56 million less—equivalent to more than £272 for every Glasgow council tax payer—than it would have been if it had remained at the level that new Labour inherited. Does he agree with Glasgow City Council's Labour leader, Charlie

Gordon, that that decline represents a denial of social justice for Glasgow, as it impacts on the city's ability to deliver quality services and deal effectively with poverty and poor educational attainment? Will he therefore take the necessary steps to ensure a fair deal for the city of Glasgow?

Peter Peacock: Part of the role of any council leader is arguing to maximise the resources for their authority—I used to do so myself. Glasgow's special needs are recognised in the grant distribution system, which is why Glasgow gets the highest payment per head of all mainland councils in Scotland. It received a 7 per cent increase in grant this year, and its grant is 41 per cent more per head than that of Edinburgh or Aberdeen and 8 per cent more than that of Dundee.

Many other sources of funding are available to Glasgow City Council through a range of partnerships, such as social inclusion partnerships and the better neighbourhood services fund. The money that is coming through stock transfer will enable huge progress to be made on tenant conditions in Glasgow, and there are also school public-private partnerships. When it comes to grants, Glasgow is miles better than many other councils.

Tommy Sheridan (Glasgow) (SSP): Glasgow City Council believes that the minister's distribution mechanism does not lend enough weight to deprivation. Does he agree with Glasgow City Council, or is it his opinion that the mechanism for distributing local authority funds is satisfactory?

Peter Peacock: The means of distributing funds has been a subject of debate for as many years as I—or anyone else—can remember. The system has been constantly refined. Many reviews have taken place of the deprivation indicators in the distribution system—we are where we are with that. The recent changes gave more money to Glasgow and other councils that have high levels of deprivation. It is as a result of those deprivation factors that Glasgow gets a higher proportion of cash per head of population than any other council in Scotland.

Scottish Transport Group Pension Funds

10. Dennis Canavan (Falkirk West): To ask the Scottish Executive when it expects to receive the relevant records from the Scottish Transport Group pension funds' trustees in order to enable ex gratia payments to be made. (S10-5128)

The Deputy Minister for Enterprise, Transport and Lifelong Learning (Lewis Macdonald): The trustees of the STG pension funds wound up the pension schemes on Tuesday 30 April and we now have full access to the records of the schemes.

Dennis Canavan: I am delighted to receive a positive response at long last. It has taken a long time—10 years—for justice to be done for the pensioners. How long will it take before the pensioners get the money in their hands? Will the minister discuss with the Treasury in London the possibility of raising the amount that is on offer, which is £118 million, so that the pensioners receive the maximum benefit from their pension fund surplus?

Lewis Macdonald: We estimate that approximately 14,000 pensioners are involved. Executive officials intend to write to each of those pensioners within the next few weeks to indicate what we believe their dates of service were and what we believe they will be entitled to. Once we have received confirmation of those details, we hope to be able to make payments to the vast majority of pensioners in the next four months.

In addition, if I may answer Mr Canavan's point about the size of the surplus, this morning we received the audited accounts, which show that the pension funds have a surplus of £174 million. We will talk to Treasury ministers about the distribution of that money.

First Minister's Question Time

The Presiding Officer (Sir David Steel): Before we begin First Minister's question time, I invite the chamber to give a warm welcome to Señor Mas, the Prime Minister of Catalonia, and his delegation in the gallery. [*Applause.*]

Secretary of State for Scotland (Meetings)

1. Mr John Swinney (North Tayside) (SNP): To ask the First Minister when he will next meet the Secretary of State for Scotland and what issues he plans to raise. (S1F-1856)

The First Minister (Mr Jack McConnell): I first join the Presiding Officer in welcoming our guests from Catalonia. I also inform the chamber that we have today signed the very first partnership agreement between the devolved Government of Scotland and a devolved Government elsewhere in Europe. I am delighted to say that we signed that agreement earlier this afternoon with Catalonia, which has become such a good friend of Scotland over recent years. [*Applause.*]

I last met the Secretary of State on Monday 29 April and we will meet again on 17 June.

Mr Swinney: I support the agreement with the Catalan Government that the First Minister has announced.

The First Minister will be aware that, on Sunday, I called for cross-party unity to combat racism in Scotland. Earlier this week, I wrote to the First Minister and to the other party leaders on the same subject, to suggest some ways in which we might take forward that cross-party unity to combat racism. I appreciate that the First Minister may not have had much time to consider the correspondence. Will he acknowledge whether he is, in principle, prepared to co-operate with the other party leaders to combat racism in Scotland?

The First Minister: I am delighted to hear that the letter has been sent. This morning, I checked with the people in my office, but to their knowledge the letter has not yet been received. We look forward to receiving it.

All my adult life I have been involved in cross-party campaigns against racism. Everybody on the Executive benches would be delighted to join anyone on either the SNP or the Conservative benches to campaign against racism in Scotland.

Mr Swinney: Will the First Minister develop some of what he said a bit further? In the preparations for next year's Scottish Parliament and local authority elections, are there any specific measures that we as politicians can take to ensure that we keep racism out of the political debate in Scotland?

The First Minister: We all have an individual responsibility for that. It is critical that, as we work towards next year's elections, we focus on the issues that matter to the people of Scotland. The best way to defeat racism in Scotland is to ensure that we focus on the issues that matter in communities across Scotland. That means that we must tackle poverty, unemployment, health problems, educational problems and problems of opportunity. We need to reduce the fear of a lack of opportunity, which can sometimes lead to the hatred of others. By focusing on those issues—I sometimes wish that all parties in the chamber would do so—we will not only make a difference but end the scourge of racism in Scotland.

Mr Swinney: I appreciate the sentiments of the First Minister's reply. As we approach next year's elections to the Scottish Parliament, is the First Minister prepared to go one stage further by making a specific commitment that his party, like my party, will not share a platform with anyone who espouses fascist or racist views in Scotland?

The First Minister: I have no intention of sharing a platform with anybody who espouses racist views. As we move towards the election next year, it is vital that we focus on the issues. In the course of the past 10 days, I have been involved in the announcement of one of the biggest new jobs projects in the west of Scotland for a long time. I have also opened a new hospital and a new school in the Western Isles and new airport terminals in the Western Isles and in the northern isles. In Stockholm and in Brussels, I have been able to represent Scotland's devolved Parliament and Government in an effective way. I have also visited the Ardler housing estate in Dundee.

I know that his party is opposed to housing stock transfer and the regeneration of housing estates in Scotland, but when I see the—[*Interruption.*] There has been enough bullying for one day, thank you very much. When I see the regeneration that is taking place in Dundee and elsewhere, the new hope in those communities, and the way in which people are coming together to represent themselves and those they live beside, I know that that is the best way for us to proceed—not just to combat racism, but to take on the fear, the lack of opportunity and the lack of hope that have bedevilled Scotland for too long. If we do that, we can build a much better Scotland.

Cabinet (Meetings)

2. David McLetchie (Lothians) (Con): To ask the First Minister what issues will be discussed at the next meeting of the Scottish Executive's Cabinet. (S1F-1865)

The First Minister (Mr Jack McConnell): The Cabinet will discuss our main objective for

Scotland, which is, as David McLetchie will be aware, closing the opportunity gap.

David McLetchie: I hope that youth crime will be high on the agenda, now that the First Minister's own back benchers have awakened him to the serious problems that vandalism, theft and disorder are causing in communities throughout Scotland. Scottish Conservative attempts to make the Executive take the problem seriously frankly have been ignored in the Parliament. The Executive's pathetic response to the problem in its Criminal Justice (Scotland) Bill is to extend the children's panel system to include 16 and 17-year-olds, at a time when the system cannot even cope properly with younger offenders. If the First Minister will not listen to me, will he listen to his own back benchers, and ditch that discredited policy from his Criminal Justice (Scotland) Bill?

The First Minister: First, I put on record the fact that it is not the intention of anyone on the Labour or Liberal Democrat benches to take any serious offenders or repeat offenders out of the courts system and place them in the hearings system. That allegation is untrue and needs to be denied.

There are measures in the Criminal Justice (Scotland) Bill to secure new opportunities to force young people to face up to the crimes that they have committed. There are also new measures to secure proper services and support for victims—measures that have been outstanding in Scotland for far too long.

In recent months, we have seen not only an action plan to tackle discipline problems in schools, but other measures to secure the right environment for young people, so that they are diverted from paths of indiscipline and disorder on our streets, and so that they face up to their actions when they go off the rails. A concerted programme of action against youth crime and a policy of zero tolerance of disorder and violence on our streets are the only ways in which we will clear up the problem in Scotland for good.

David McLetchie: I do not doubt for a moment that there is a need for concerted action, but I am disappointed that the First Minister is not prepared to reconsider the policy. I will illustrate why the public and the police are so angry and frustrated.

Last Saturday night, along with other MSPs and councillors from Edinburgh, I was out with Lothian and Borders police for an on-the-streets briefing. We were all horrified to be told of the case of a 15-year-old boy, who, since January 1999, has accumulated 297 offences against his name, who, frankly, has cocked a snook at the whole justice system and who was found a place in secure accommodation only in the past week. According to research carried out by the Prince's Trust, that one-boy crime wave will have cost our justice

system more than £600,000 in the past three years alone, quite apart from the cost to his victims and the community in which he lives.

Does the First Minister recognise that there is an urgent need for more secure accommodation, to deal with this scandalous situation and to take persistent offenders off the streets and out of the hair of people in the communities in which such offenders live?

The First Minister: Those are easy and simplistic slogans, but they do not do the issue justice. Scotland already has a significantly higher level of secure accommodation for young people than there is in England. In Scotland, measures are already in place to ensure that young people are forced to face up to their actions.

It is only by ensuring first that we have the right number of police officers, not just in our police forces but in our communities, and secondly, that we have the programmes in place that not only keep young people off the streets, but get them back on the rails as quickly as possible when they go off them, that we are able to tackle youth offending, and in particular repeat youth offending, as quickly and effectively as possible. We have secure accommodation, but we also have the other placements that are needed to tackle the problem. It is also important that we ensure that as many young people as possible stay in school, get a proper academic career and leave school with hope and opportunity.

Yes, the issue is about being tough and hard on those who offend. I have heard of cases—including one I heard about during my visit to Lothian and Borders Police at Torphichen police station—of repeat youth offenders who are not picked up by other agencies when the police refer them. Those cases have to be tackled more quickly. There is nothing more dispiriting than for somebody in Scotland to report a crime and have the young person lifted, for the person then to be put back on the street that afternoon. We need to tackle such instances, but we have to have the infrastructure in place to ensure that the system works. That is exactly what we are working towards.

Vaccination

3. Mr Kenneth Macintosh (Eastwood) (Lab): To ask the First Minister what reassurance parents have received about the safety of vaccinations. (S1F-1875)

The First Minister (Mr Jack McConnell): A guide for parents issued by the Health Education Board for Scotland makes it clear that immunisation is the safest and most effective way of protecting children against serious diseases. I would urge any parent with questions about the

measles, mumps and rubella vaccine to read the report of the MMR expert group, which was published this week, and arrange an early discussion with their GP or health visitor.

Mr Macintosh: I thank the First Minister for his comments and for the welcome given to the report of the expert group on MMR, which was published earlier this week. Does the First Minister agree that the only way to resolve all the questions about the safety of the MMR vaccine to the satisfaction of everybody concerned is to conduct further research into the causes of autism? Does he further agree that, in the meantime, the priority for the Parliament must be to put in place the services and support that adults and children with autism, their carers and their families need?

The First Minister: Yes. It would be plain daft for anybody in the chamber to disagree with the need for more research and not to support the call for improved services. That is the rational way ahead. Ministers will continue to work towards that objective and I am sure that we will have the support of members in the chamber who care about the issue.

Mr Lloyd Quinan (West of Scotland) (SNP): Does the First Minister agree that, although much in the expert group report is to be welcomed, and much work is to be done based on its recommendations, it would be honest to say that it has gone a little way towards alleviating the fears that many parents have about the use of the MMR vaccine? Does he also agree that the only way to produce real confidence among the population of Scotland and other members of this disunited kingdom is to get an honest answer from the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom about whether his son Leo was given the single vaccine in France last summer or whether he has been given the triple vaccine?

The Presiding Officer: That is certainly a reserved matter. I do not know whether the First Minister wants to answer.

The First Minister: That is the new, non-moaning SNP. That is the kind of question and statement that demeans Scottish politics. There are genuine concerns about vaccinations among parents. We in the chamber need to take seriously those concerns. That is why the work of expert groups is important. That is why it is important to listen to the advice of those most closely involved in the health service. That is why it is important not to distort the debate and not to induce further fears and worries among parents.

I hope that we can now unite behind the work of the expert group and the action being taken by ministers and the Health and Community Care Committee of the Parliament—an important institution—to ensure that, in the months and

years to come, we get the vaccination rates for children back up to a safer level.

Mrs Margaret Smith (Edinburgh West) (LD): Does the First Minister agree that the term “single vaccine” misleads parents into thinking that the vaccination will involve a single jab when it will mean children having six injections? The likelihood is that, if they knew that, it would lead to a fall in immunisation levels as we have seen in other countries and as we saw in this country in the 1970s in relation to whooping cough vaccinations

The First Minister: There are those in the chamber who have tried to run down the work of the expert group that was published on Tuesday. They have been wrong to do that. They should listen to other bodies: the Faculty of Public Health Medicine; the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health; the Royal College of Nursing; the RCPCH public health medicine environmental group; the Community Practitioners and Health Visitors Association; and the public health laboratory service.

All those bodies care deeply about our health service, children and parents and would not advise us to continue with the strategy if they did not believe deeply that it is right. I genuinely hope that members will avoid the temptation to score political points. Instead, in the months and years ahead, they should get behind the expert group, its report and the action that is required on research and services to ensure that we rebuild confidence in the health service's vaccination programme.

Mary Scanlon (Highlands and Islands) (Con): Does the First Minister agree that, at 66 per cent and 73 per cent respectively, the uptake of the MMR vaccine in the Western Isles and the Highlands is now at a critically low level? Will he consider offering the single vaccine to people who, despite all the advice from GPs and others, are not choosing any vaccine at all?

The First Minister: As the convener of the Health and Community Care Committee has said, the evidence is that, if we did that, it would reduce vaccination levels even further, which would be damaging for children in Scotland. It is important that we use the clinical judgment of our GPs and doctors. Where they think it appropriate for someone to receive a single jab, they already make such a recommendation. However, it is most important that we stick with the national vaccination programme and encourage people not to put their own and others' children at risk by choosing not to take the vaccine. I hope that the expert group's report, which was published this week, encourages many more people to take it.

Social Harmony

4. Ms Margo MacDonald (Lothians) (SNP): To ask the First Minister whether the Scottish Executive plans to introduce any new policy or programmes designed to promote social, racial and inter-community harmony. (S1F-1871)

The First Minister (Mr Jack McConnell): Racism must have no place in modern Scotland. Later this year, we will launch an anti-racism campaign to help to stamp out racist attitudes and actions. I hope that all parties in the chamber will join that campaign.

Ms MacDonald: I am delighted to hear that. Given the current situation, is the First Minister willing to accept responsibility for a more sharply focused anti-racism, anti-sectarianism campaign? Last night, the Finsbury Park synagogue was desecrated in a way that might well be copycatted. Although the Scottish Parliament is not responsible for immigration policies or for any of the other foreign policy attitudes that might underlie such behaviour—if they do not encourage such behaviour, they certainly do not prevent it—I ask the Executive to accept more responsibility, to ensure that no such copycat behaviour takes place in Scotland. I have lodged a motion on the subject, and I invite the Prime Minister, I mean the First Minister—oh gosh, that was Freudian.

The Presiding Officer: Order. You can speak to your motion when we come to it, but at the moment we are taking questions.

Ms MacDonald: I crave your indulgence, Presiding Officer. We all know about the current situation, and I ask the First Minister to set a precedent by putting his signature to a motion on anti-Semitic behaviour in Scotland.

The Presiding Officer: Order. Ministers do not sign motions anyway.

First Minister, do you want to take that question?

The First Minister: Yes. First of all, we have to continue with the programme of work that is already well under way. In the area of justice alone, we have introduced a new and rigorous equal opportunities programme for police, and the Crown Office is tightly implementing a policy of monitoring racist crime. We will publish a code for reporting and recording racist incidents across the public sector, and the money is now in place to tackle institutional racism in the national health service. Furthermore, just a few months ago, Nicol Stephen published a leaflet on tackling the bullying of asylum seekers' children in Scotland's schools. We are taking action to combat racism across the areas for which the Executive is responsible.

I wish to make one point: we cannot be complacent about racism in Scotland. There is a myth that such attitudes do not exist in this

country. Although in recent centuries Scots have travelled all over the world and have been welcomed in many countries, we need to be as welcoming in return. Moreover, we must recognise that a multicultural society in Scotland that welcomes people from different backgrounds, races and countries will be stronger and more confident to take its place in the modern world. The Executive and the whole Parliament should back that job.

Euro 2008

5. Phil Gallie (South of Scotland) (Con): To ask the First Minister what progress has been made in the bid for the 2008 European football championships. (S1F-1857)

The First Minister (Mr Jack McConnell): Good progress has been made with the Scotland-Ireland bid for Euro 2008. Mike Watson, Ireland's Minister for Tourism, Sport and Recreation Dr Jim McDaid, and I visited the Union of European Football Associations congress in Stockholm last week. The Scotland-Ireland bid was highly rated and we are on schedule to submit the technical bid to UEFA by the end of May.

Phil Gallie: I am sure that the First Minister will accept my welcome for that, but will he also assure me that, given the serious financial situation that many Scottish senior league clubs are facing, the bid for Euro 2008 will not disadvantage them in any way?

The First Minister: If I did not believe that the success of bringing the championships to Scotland and Ireland in 2008 would benefit Scottish football clubs, and youth football in particular, I would not support it. It is vital that we campaign for that bid to succeed, not just to promote Scotland as a venue for international events and not just for the economic benefits that it will bring, but for the boost to football and sport in Scotland that it will give. As members will be aware, we have agreed with the Scottish Football Association that a substantial proportion of any profit made from a successful championship in 2008 will be invested in youth football and youth sport.

Karen Whitefield (Airdrie and Shotts) (Lab): Does the First Minister agree that one of the benefits of a successful bid would be to reinvigorate interest in local community teams? Will he join me in expressing sympathy with the fans of Airdrieonians Football Club and wish them well in their endeavours to retain a senior football club in Airdrie?

The First Minister: All members will agree that it is a tragic shame for the town of Airdrie, as well as for the football supporters, that the football club has reached the situation that it is currently in. Football clubs in local communities in Scotland's

small towns are a vital part of those towns' identity on the national map. I hope that, in Airdrie and elsewhere, the name of Airdrieonians Football Club will be retained in years to come.

It is important to recognise that, for all that is occasionally said about the work of MSPs, this case is a good example of a local member who has worked tirelessly to try to secure the future of the club, and I praise Karen Whitefield for that. I hope that all members will join me in wishing the fans and other local people all the best in trying to resurrect Airdrieonians Football Club in the months ahead.

Scottish Qualifications Authority Bill: Stage 3

15:33

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Mr Murray Tosh): For the stage 3 proceedings on the Scottish Qualifications Authority Bill, members will require the bill itself, the marshalled list, which contains the amendments that have been selected for debate—in this case, all of them—and the agreed groupings.

Before I invite Nicol Stephen to speak to the first group of amendments, I ask members who are in the middle of conversations to resume them elsewhere, and I ask other members who are leaving the chamber to do so quickly.

Section 1—Scottish Qualifications Authority: members

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Amendment 4 is grouped with amendments 5, 6, 7, 8, 9 and 10. I call Nicol Stephen to speak to and move amendment 4 and to speak to all the amendments in the group.

The Deputy Minister for Education and Young People (Nicol Stephen): Executive amendments 4 to 10 deal with the appointment of a board member who is an employee of the SQA, or who has special knowledge of the interests of the SQA staff. They also deal with consequent changes to the membership of the board.

The Education, Culture and Sport Committee accepted at stage 2 an amendment lodged by Jackie Baillie that sought the appointment of a representative of the SQA's staff to the board. The Executive resisted that proposal at stage 2, but I am pleased to say that the Scottish ministers now accept the principle. Amendments 4 to 10 seek to ensure that the terms of any such appointment are made clear and that certain consequences of that appointment are properly reflected in the bill.

Amendments 4 and 5 seek to allow an increase in the size of the SQA board to a membership of between eight and 10, whereas previously, the membership was seven to nine, plus the chief executive. Amendment 9 also relates to that; it seeks to reflect the proposed increase in board membership by increasing the quorum for a board meeting. The quorum requirement will increase from five members to six members.

Amendments 7 and 8 seek to specify the type of person who should be appointed as the additional board member. Amendment 7 proposes that the word "representative" of the employees of the SQA should be replaced by the words:

"person appearing to the Scottish Ministers to have

special knowledge of the interests"

of the employees of the SQA. That change directly reflects the wording of the provision that was added at stage 3 of the Water Industry (Scotland) Bill. The revised wording makes it clear that the additional member to be appointed will be a full board member with the same corporate responsibilities as every other board member.

Amendment 8 spells out that ministers should consult the employees of the SQA or existing representatives of the employees, such as trade union representatives, to seek their views on the knowledge and attributes that any potential appointee should possess.

Amendment 6 simply deletes the words "At least". Again, that is in line with the wording in the Water Industry (Scotland) Act 2002, to make it clear that one appointee must have special knowledge of the interests of staff.

Amendment 10 seeks to ensure that appropriate conflict-of-interest provisions apply to any employee of the SQA who may be appointed to the board. As I mentioned at stage 2, such provisions already apply to the chief executive in his ex officio membership of the board. Amendment 10 ensures that the same provisions will apply in future to any SQA employee who becomes an SQA board member.

I hope that members will welcome the proposed changes, which reflect the clear wish of the overwhelming majority of the members of the committee at stage 2.

I move amendment 4.

Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab): I welcome the Executive amendments. As we heard, they are consequential to—and indeed improve upon—the amendment that the committee accepted at stage 2. The Executive can be helpful in improving amendments that the committee lodges. The effect of the amendments will be to provide for employee participation at board level. Virtually all committee members wanted that.

I am aware that a range of consultation and communication mechanisms are now in place in the SQA and the positive attempt to involve staff at all levels is welcome. Having an employee on the board does not replace those mechanisms, but serves to enhance the process and ensures that there is effective communication and that we avoid the evident failures of the past.

The success of the 2001 examination diet was in no small way assisted by the efforts of the staff of the SQA and it is therefore appropriate that they are represented on the board. I hope that the chamber will support the Executive's amendments.

Michael Russell (South of Scotland) (SNP):

Jackie Baillie and the minister have said virtually all that there is to say. The proposal was supported right across the Education, Culture and Sport Committee, with the exception of Mr Monteith. I am grateful that the Executive has moved on it. It sets a useful precedent. The Water Industry (Scotland) Act 2002 led to the proposal and I hope that it, in turn, will lead to other things, including employee representation on the boards of the national arts companies, which the committee has previously requested. That has not yet happened. However, amendments 4 to 10 move us into a situation in which consultation within the SQA will not be replaced, but will be added to. We are pleased to support amendments 4 to 10.

Mr Brian Monteith (Mid Scotland and Fife)

(Con): I, too, welcome amendments 4 to 10, not because I welcome the concession in principle, but because I welcome the intention to ensure that the bill works. We have had too many mistakes in the past, so I welcome the fact that the Executive has lodged these tidying up amendments.

As the only member of the Education, Culture and Sport Committee who supported the Executive's position, I am disappointed that it did not show some bottle by sticking to its principle. I recall that the discussion centred around whether employee representation was required on the board when there was already representation on the advisory council. I do not rule out, as I said at the committee, employee representation on any board. However, a position has already been made available on the SQA's advisory council. In addition to that, the intention was to change the board, not to make it more representative, but to ensure that it had members who would take seriously their duties for the sake of the board and the SQA and not because they were representing a particular group.

I felt that the proposal to have an employee on the board was unnecessary and I am disappointed that it has succeeded. Although I was the Executive's sole supporter on the committee and have lost out on this matter, I will not cross the floor. However, I look forward to reading the minister's memoirs next year to find out why he changed his mind.

Des McNulty (Clydebank and Milngavie)

(Lab): As a member of the Transport and the Environment Committee, I led the charge for employee involvement on the water board, so I am particularly pleased that the work of one committee is cross-fertilising that of others. Had there been an employee representative on the SQA board, much of the knowledge that was in the organisation when it was going wrong 18 months or two years ago might have come to the

surface a wee bit earlier.

Even without that experience, the general principle of public bodies operating in partnership with their employees and involving them in the governance process is a good one. I hope that, having moved that good principle from Scottish Water to the SQA, we can extend the principle to other public bodies. We should be applying the principle on a broader basis, where it is appropriate to do so.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I invite the minister to respond, in so far as he can without compromising the commercial viability of his memoirs.

Nicol Stephen: The best way to achieve that is to be brief and to say that I welcome the general support. I understand that Brian Monteith continues to oppose the principle, but I am pleased to hear that he will support amendments 4 to 10.

Amendment 4 agreed to.

Amendments 5 to 10 moved—[Nicol Stephen]—and agreed to.

Section 3—Advisory Council

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Amendment 1, in the name of Michael Russell, is grouped with amendments 11, 2 and 3. I call Michael Russell to move amendment 1 and to speak to the other amendments in the group.

Michael Russell: I will be as brief as the minister. The two big issues at stage 2 of the bill were the question of employee participation and the question of the relationship between the advisory council and the SQA board. The minister undertook to produce suggestions. I have seen his memorandum and his proposals. They do not go as far I want, but they go about 90 per cent of the way. It would be churlish to do other than thank the minister for that. He is a model of his sort. I doubt whether his memoirs will be a prose model, but his ministerial work on the bill is to be commended because he listened to the Education, Culture and Sport Committee. In that light, there is no reason for me to move amendment 1.

Amendment 1 not moved.

15:45

The Deputy Presiding Officer: In that case, I ask the minister to speak to and move amendment 11.

Nicol Stephen: In the circumstances, I could say nothing and formally move amendment 11. However, it is important to explain the background to amendment 11. I will try to be brief.

We fully understood the intention that lay behind Michael Russell's proposals. As he said, during the Education, Culture and Sport Committee's stage 2 consideration of the bill I made it clear that the Executive anticipates that the advisory council will carry out most of its work in the public domain, given its role as a key voice of the SQA's wide range of stakeholders. The advisory council will be required by the bill to consult other stakeholders before providing advice. We anticipate that the council will publish much of its advice in order to demonstrate to stakeholders that their views are being transmitted accurately.

It will be important for future confidence in the SQA and the advisory council that the flow of advice and decisions is transparent to all stakeholders. The Executive supported the intention of Michael Russell's amendments, which was to ensure transparency in advice and decision making, but did not support the amendments. We have taken a different approach and have lodged an amendment to include in the bill the power to make regulations on this. We have said that we will produce draft regulations that reflect the policy intention that lies behind what Michael Russell was trying to achieve and that we would have a memorandum of understanding. In other words, there should be a framework to govern the relationship between the board, the advisory council and the Scottish Executive.

We feel that care must be taken not to create inappropriate inflexibility in the wording of the bill. Amendment 11 seeks to make all of that possible. It will allow provisions that are almost identical to those set out in Michael Russell's amendment to be included in the advisory council regulations. I have provided an indicative draft of the regulations to the members of the Education, Culture and Sport Committee, which includes those provisions. I am happy to assure members that those provisions will be included in the regulations that will be made to create the advisory council after the enactment of the bill. The regulations will, therefore, impose a duty on the advisory council to copy its advice to ministers and a duty on the SQA to provide a written response to the council, again copied to ministers, in the event that it decides not to act on the council's advice. That was proposed in Mr Russell's amendment.

At this point, I should plead with Mr Russell not to press his amendment but, knowing that he has already agreed not to move it, I will simply move amendment 11.

Amendment 11 moved—[Nicol Stephen]—and agreed to.

Section 5—Advice to SQA

Amendments 2 and 3 not moved.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes the consideration of amendments.

Scottish Qualifications Authority Bill

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Mr Murray Tosh): The next item of business is a debate on motion S1M-2996, in the name of Cathy Jamieson, which seeks agreement that the Scottish Qualifications Authority Bill be passed.

15:48

The Minister for Education and Young People (Cathy Jamieson): I rise somewhat earlier in the proceedings than might have been expected. One of the things about good co-operation between the Executive and the Education, Culture and Sport Committee is that we do not have an exciting time debating with Michael Russell during stage 3. Nevertheless, it shows how well the Executive and the committee can work together when we share a common goal, as we did in relation to this bill.

I thank everyone on the bill team, the committee members, the clerks and the other MSPs who assisted in dealing with the bill. Inevitably, as Brian Monteith outlined, there were differences of approach, but the aims of the Executive and the Education, Culture and Sport Committee have been broadly the same: to ensure that the SQA is effectively governed and that it is accountable.

The Education, Culture and Sport Committee should take credit for its consideration of the bill. It aided the passage of the bill very constructively. As my colleague said, we felt that it was important to share the draft regulations and information with the committee on a continuing basis. That way, committee members knew that we were taking on board the points that they had made. They also knew that we were genuinely reflecting on those points and taking the appropriate action.

It is important to remember why we are introducing the Scottish Qualifications Authority Bill. The Scottish Executive was determined to ensure that the SQA was put on the best possible footing for the future. No one wants to see a repeat of the previous difficulties. It is important that young people, who throughout Scotland are looking forward to starting the examination process in the near future, are confident that we have taken all the actions that are appropriate to putting the SQA on a firm footing for the future.

We wanted a streamlined and re-focused board, we wanted to create a dedicated advisory council for the SQA's stakeholders and we wanted to clarify the lines of communication between the board, the advisory council and ministers. On board reform, it is important that the smaller and more focused SQA board that is set out in the bill

ensures that it concentrates on governance and the strategic direction of the SQA. Although we accept that there were concerns about the appointment of a representative of SQA staff to the board, the Executive was concerned to implement that measure appropriately and workably. This afternoon, the Executive sought to ensure that that appointment would reflect the views and interests of all SQA staff. The Scottish Executive recognises that, during the difficult times, SQA staff continued to work constructively to ensure that a service was delivered to the young people who were taking exams and who were involved in appeals. Staff also continued to work on other initiatives.

The Scottish Executive has always supported strongly the involvement of SQA staff in decision making at all levels in the SQA. We wanted to ensure that the inclusion of a staff representative did not mean that other initiatives were not progressed. Ahead of that appointment to the board, the SQA is already introducing a range of mechanisms to ensure staff involvement throughout the organisation. We welcome that.

It is important that the input of external stakeholders to the SQA's delivery of its services will be strengthened by the creation of the new advisory council. Appointments will be made to ensure balanced membership that ensures that the full range of the SQA's stakeholders from all sectors is represented. The SQA has always involved stakeholders in the development and delivery of its qualifications and awards and it will continue to do so. However, the council will provide a unique strategic forum for discussion of the different stakeholders' points of view. It will enable the board to draw directly on the experience and views of those who receive its services.

Under the regulations that will accompany the bill, and in a separate memorandum of understanding, it is established that the Scottish Executive, the board and the council will work closely together. We hope that that will be a constructive and proactive relationship, because the relationship between the board and the council will be critical for the future. I anticipate a continuous exchange of views and information between them. However, we will make it clear in the regulations that the board will have a duty to provide feedback to the council if it decides not to accept the council's advice. We hope that that will ensure that the two bodies quickly develop a clear understanding of each other's priorities and of the action that needs to be taken.

I am pleased that we have had the opportunity today to put the final parts of the bill in place. The bill is intended to ensure that the governance arrangements that are in place for the SQA will

support effective delivery of its services. We need an effective, reliable and responsive SQA. That is a shared objective of the Scottish Executive and the Scottish Parliament. It is also of critical importance to the people who rely on that organisation to deliver. I believe that the arrangements that are set out in the bill and in the subsequent regulations that we will introduce will achieve that.

I wish the young people who are about to start the examination processes every possible success and I look forward to continuing to work with the SQA to deliver for those young people.

I move,

That the Parliament agrees that the Scottish Qualifications Authority Bill be passed.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: At this stage, we are approximately 40 minutes ahead of programme.

15:55

Michael Russell (South of Scotland) (SNP): We should be able to keep well ahead of programme. Mr McConnell is encouraging me to speak for longer than I intended—I will be happy to speak longer if Mr McConnell wants to hear me.

I will start with a reference to Mr McConnell. When he was Minister for Education, Europe and External Affairs, he introduced the bill. To my mind, the one big issue that had to be considered was whether the organisation should be a non-departmental public body or an agency. Given the difficulties that had existed, my feeling was that an agency structure was more appropriate. I was not convinced otherwise by Mr McConnell's arguments, but by those of John Ward, who is the chairman of the SQA. He made the fair point that the number of changes required to make the body an agency would have been unduly disruptive. I was happy to accept John Ward's argument and to work with the present ministerial team to ensure that the bill was the best that it could be. That is not a personal comment about Jack McConnell; I would have worked with the previous ministerial team had it still been there.

In his evidence to the Education, Culture and Sport Committee, the director of education for North Lanarkshire Council made an interesting comment about the SQA. He said that the structure of the SQA was not that of a normal non-departmental public body. The differences are important. The aims of restructuring the SQA are twofold. One is to ensure that the SQA never again gets into the difficulties that it got into two years ago. The second is to provide a platform for changes in the examination system, which will undoubtedly continue to be made. There was a laudable desire to ensure that the SQA is up to its

current task, but there was an equally strong desire to ensure that it was up to other tasks that might fall to it as the examination system changes.

The bill ends one period for the SQA and starts another. I pay tribute to the ministers, particularly to Nicol Stephen, who has been flexible. The changes that have been made to the bill increase the likelihood that the SQA will be able to move forward and reduce the chances that the body might revert to the difficult situation that it was in. That was the aim when the process began. The bill has been improved by interaction between the Education, Culture and Sport Committee and the ministerial team. The SNP members are happy to support the bill as the start of something new.

There are big challenges for the Scottish education system and for the examination system, as has been shown in some of the debates that took place last week, for example, on the future of the standard grade exam. With a new and properly functioning SQA we should be able, by collaboration, co-operation and discussion to make changes that will benefit the real consumers, who are the young people of Scotland.

I am happy to support the bill.

15:58

Mr Brian Monteith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I have no intention of detaining members for too long. I welcome the conclusion of the bill's progress through Parliament. The bill brings to an end what was a tragedy for the many people who were unfortunate enough to experience the disaster of the 2000 examination diet. The Parliament has spent a great deal of time examining why that diet was such a disaster and two committee reports have been produced. It is worth paying tribute not only to the Education, Culture and Sport Committee, but to the Enterprise and Lifelong Learning Committee, which examined the governance of the SQA. The bill is essentially about that. Although the bill was dealt with by the Education, Culture and Sport Committee, the Enterprise and Lifelong Learning Committee's work brought it about.

It was important that we considered the SQA's set up and how it was run. It was clear from analysis of the problems that the board was too large. The board contained many members who believed that they were representing interest groups rather than running the organisation as board members and putting the organisation and its customers first. It is therefore right that there should be a smaller board and a tighter management system. The Conservative group in the Parliament welcomes the bill and looks forward to the only mention of the SQA in the Parliament coming when we discuss the outcomes

of examinations, their value, the reforms that might be required of assessment for higher still and the development of standard grade.

We will never know whether having a member representing staff on the previous board would have prevented the disaster that happened. However, I remind members that there were several whistleblowers at that time who tried to alert management, politicians and many others to the problems that were being faced. There were also reports that there was a bullying management style, although there is no clear evidence that that was the case. I do not believe that it is possible to say with conviction that, had there been a staff representative on the board, things would have been any different. However, it might well be that the inclusion of a staff member on the new board, with a new management culture, will make a difference. I like to think so.

Conservative members welcome the bill and look forward to its bringing about an effective SQA. We hope that the SQA will go from strength to strength and begin not only to re-establish the reputation of Scottish education in Scotland, but to export that reputation again to the wider world.

16:02

Ian Jenkins (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD): I add my thanks to everyone who has been involved in the progress of the bill and pay tribute to the willingness of ministers to acknowledge the various concerns that were highlighted by the Education, Culture and Sport Committee during the bill's passage—especially the issues of staff representation and the relationships between the advisory council, the ministers and the board.

This is a good bill and it will do an important job. The SQA is a massively important organisation in the life of our country. Its well-being and efficiency are important for young people and students of all ages in every corner of Scotland. I worked in schools for more than 30 years and recognise that what happened in 2000 was a real shaking of the foundations. First, we had to stabilise the situation which, with the help of the SQA and everyone else, we managed to do. Now we must turn to the future. The bill establishes an executive board that is leaner, thinner and more focused than the previous one.

In the course of our inquiries, I have come to realise that the SQA is a much bigger business than I ever realised when looking at it from a school's perspective. It has many organisational problems, a huge number of employees and a complex set of functions that carry with them genuine organisational difficulties. It is important that the board should be in a position to manage

that complex organisation effectively even in a world in which—as Mike Russell said—the demands that are put on the organisation change constantly and will continue to change. I believe that the board that the bill establishes will be able to do that.

Perhaps the most important innovation in the bill is the creation of the advisory council, which can act as a scrutinising mechanism and a forum for discussion of proposals and policy issues. It can also offer the board considered advice, to which it must pay regard. Today's amendments clarify and codify that arrangement in a way that strengthens the bill and the organisation. The strong lines of communication that we have introduced during the progress of the bill, along with the regulations and the memorandum of understanding, will play a vital role in the future governance of the SQA. It is important that the board's decisions are informed and influenced in a way that serves the interests of everyone who comes under its umbrella—the schools, the college system and other education providers. Indeed, the board's decisions must serve the interests of the whole wider community.

I have spoken about the size of the organisation, its importance and the need for the board to manage it effectively as a business. However, it is more than a business. When one hears rumours—unfounded, I trust—that examinations such as higher Gaelic might be dropped for financial reasons, one hopes that the advisory council will play a role in bringing other criteria to bear on any such proposals. Neither Gaelic nor any other language should come under threat in that way. If it is costly to administer the Gaelic higher exam, there should be a cross-subsidy that allows it to continue. Another possibility would be to make the exam less expensive by making it less elaborate. Members will know that I constantly inveigh against a bureaucratic and overelaborate assessment system that distorts what happens in classrooms and places intolerable burdens on teachers. I still believe that that was a big contributory factor to the troubles that affected the SQA.

The role of the advisory council in overseeing, informing and monitoring the deliberations and decisions of the board will be invaluable. I hope that policy proposals and possible changes to the assessment and qualifications systems that are proposed via the education department or Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Education will come before the advisory council for consideration. Today's reports of decisions relating to the return of marked papers, and the debate about how standard grade will be dealt with in future, to which Michael Russell referred, are the kind of topics that would benefit from formal consideration by the advisory council. That would allow all the stakeholders' views to be taken into consideration.

In passing the bill today, I hope that we ensure that there can be no repeat of the organisational failure that led to so much distress in diet 2000. More than that, we hope that the bill puts in place a constitutional arrangement that will allow the SQA to move forward, as Cathy Jamieson said, in its vital role in effective partnership with everyone who has an interest in the future of Scottish education. That includes the Executive, schools, colleges, pupils, parents and the whole Scottish community. Ultimately, it includes everyone in Scotland and many individuals and agencies beyond our shores that depend on the accuracy and validity of the qualifications that are awarded in Scotland. I am happy to support the bill.

16:07

Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab): Like all other members, I welcome the Scottish Qualifications Authority Bill, not least because it will enhance the qualifications system for schools, colleges, employers and, most important, our young people.

Summer 2000 may seem a long time ago to some of us, but it is still very fresh in the minds of the young people, parents and teachers who experienced the very real difficulties that were caused by the failures in the SQA. The causes of those failures are well documented. They include overly complicated systems of governance, an unwieldy board structure and a significant communications failure that permeated the organisation.

Recognising those problems, the Executive and the then Minister for Education, Europe and External Affairs, Jack McConnell, moved very quickly to restore public confidence in the SQA. The entire chamber welcomes the improvement in the 2001 examination diet that was brought about through their efforts.

The bill—which, as Mike Russell said, was announced by Jack McConnell and developed by Cathy Jamieson and Nicol Stephen—represents the next stage in that process. It builds on the lessons that have been learned, deals with the issues of governance and communication that lay at the heart of the problems that were experienced and provides much-needed stability so that the SQA can move on.

First, it reforms the SQA board, making it much smaller and much more focused on the management and governance needs of the organisation. Secondly, it sets up an advisory council, involving the stakeholders, to provide advice on qualifications and education matters. Both measures deal with the institutional clutter that existed previously. The regulations and the memorandum of understanding that set out clearly the mechanisms for ensuring that the board

operates effectively, meets regularly and often, and communicates properly not just with ministers, but with all stakeholders, will undoubtedly make a positive difference to communication at all levels.

In that context, the Executive's move to include in the bill provision for employee participation on the board is very welcome. We know that less-senior staff at the SQA reported problems prior to the 2000 examination diet, but the message did not get through. We also know that the staff are critical to the success of future examination diets. Our thanks to them and to all those who were involved in making the 2001 diet a success should be recorded.

I echo the minister's comments about the very positive working relationship between the Education, Culture and Sport Committee and the Executive during the passage of this bill. We had the same aim and we worked together to achieve it. The aim, ultimately, is to ensure that the SQA delivers effectively for the young people of Scotland. I hope that the chamber will support the bill.

16:10

Robin Harper (Lothians) (Green): I declare an interest as a fellow of the Educational Institute of Scotland. I would like to stress the point that Michael Russell made. The new organisation of the SQA should be able to adapt and to implement change expeditiously. There is considerable pressure for further simplification, especially of the assessment procedures for higher still. My only plea to the Executive is that it should make absolutely certain that the SQA is resourced in such a way that it can adapt to the changes that it should be making over the next couple of years.

16:11

Mr Frank McAveety (Glasgow Shettleston) (Lab): Along with my colleagues on the Education, Culture and Sport Committee, I welcome the constructive way in which ministers and committee members engaged in the process of finding a structure that would allow the SQA to move on after a very difficult period and after the lack of public confidence that followed the 2000 diet. The reports of the two committees of the Parliament have been taken on board. The Enterprise and Lifelong Learning Committee identified governance as a central issue to be addressed. It also identified the importance of the relationship between ministers and the advisory council.

The Education, Culture and Sport Committee carried out a thorough investigation. After many thoughtful moments, the minister had the opportunity to reflect more carefully on our deliberations. He has made reasonable

suggestions this afternoon and that has been welcomed by committee members and by MSPs throughout the chamber.

Reference has been made to the fantastic idea of the memoirs of a Lib Dem minister. I do not know whether that will be the thinnest book in the world or, given the paucity of Lib Dem ministers before the advent of the Scottish Parliament, the rarest book in the world, but I look forward to reading it. I hasten to add that, if Lib Dem ministers have the thinnest memoirs, Labour ministers may well not get a certificate for what we write in our ministerial memoirs if asked.

We share with most folk a commitment to have a more manageable size of board for the SQA. There is no doubt that one of the key findings of the parliamentary reports was that the board was unwieldy. We have reduced the board considerably but—and this is more important—as Jackie Baillie and others have said, we have enhanced it by including the eyes and ears of the staff who are critical in any delivery of effective service.

His acceptance was curmudgeonly, but Brian Monteith—that acolyte of new right politics who has his young man, Murdo Fraser, beside him—gave us the sense that even he was moving towards what might be called the pragmatic third way. I welcome Brian to the new Labour world.

The memorandum of understanding may be quite boring to read but it is very important in this process. A number of key points emerge from it, one of which is that it will be incumbent on the board and the advisory council to work closely and constructively with each other. That relationship will be important for the delivery of the SQA examination diet over the next few years, although it will be important for each of them to respect the boundaries within which they operate.

The way in which the board conducts its business should be transparent and open. One of the key findings of the deliberations of the Education, Culture and Sport Committee and of the two parliamentary reports was the lack of transparency and openness in the past. We would welcome any work done to rectify that lack of transparency.

I would like to put on record my appreciation of the role played by other members of the committee—in particular Michael Russell, who has entered a new phase in his political development. His views have perhaps been tempered by the wisdom and wise words of his colleague Irene McGugan. The fact that Michael has actually withdrawn amendments today is a great testimony to the Education, Culture and Sport Committee's success in finding a shared agenda. I should add that that first remark was facetious, in case

Michael thinks that I was being serious.

Underpinning the committee's work was the idea that there would be times when we would want to get together, leave our armoury at the committee room's door and try to work in a way that would make a genuine difference to young people. That difference has been made partly through our commitment to the bill, although the real proof will come in the way in which the SQA as an organisation works with its staff and its users. Most important is its relationship with stakeholders, including staff, students, pupils and schools, which are paying for the SQA's service. If we can get that right, we hope not to repeat the tragedy of 2000—I think that it is right to call it that. Let us hope that the currency of examinations will be measurable for students at the time of future diets.

16:15

The Deputy Minister for Education and Young People (Nicol Stephen): I add my thanks to those already expressed to everyone who has contributed to the passage of the bill through the Parliament. I will not fill up the time between now and 5 o'clock by repeating all those thanks.

Alex Johnstone (North-East Scotland) (Con): I started my interest in politics campaigning against Nicol Stephen in the 1980s and early 1990s in Kincardine and Deeside. I will be delighted to read the details of his memoirs. If he wishes to recite them now, I will sit here and listen.

Nicol Stephen: I thank Alex Johnstone for that. I have always enjoyed the campaigns in which I have managed to defeat the Conservative party candidate.

I was going to mention—in a cross-party, consensual way—the role of the Conservative party and Brian Monteith in the passage of the bill. Perhaps more important, I was going to mention the roles of Karen Gillon, convener of the Education, Culture and Sport Committee, and Alex Neil, convener of the Enterprise and Lifelong Learning Committee. I was also going to mention Frank McAveety but, given his remarks, I will not. All those contributions have helped ensure that the bill does what we intended it to do: to put the SQA on the best possible footing for the future and to ensure that the organisation is increasingly transparent and accountable in all that it does and that it is more responsive to its stakeholders.

I wish also to thank the SQA ministerial review group and its members for their role. They have shown how effective a constructive stakeholder group can be in relation to the responsibilities of the SQA. The new streamlined SQA board, whose functions are set out in the bill, will be better able to focus on the governance and direction of the

SQA, while the creation of a new advisory council will ensure that stakeholders retain their voice at the heart of the SQA's development and delivery of its qualifications and awards.

Amendments passed this afternoon give the SQA's employees greater involvement at board level to accompany the other measures being introduced by the SQA to ensure that employees are full partners in the organisation's future. I wish to give special mention to Jackie Baillie for her efforts in that regard.

Meanwhile, other provisions in the bill will ensure that the advisory council and SQA board carry out their discussions openly and transparently in a way that, where appropriate, involves the Executive and whereby the SQA's reasons for not taking the advice of the advisory council are explained if that should be the case. I also give mention to Mike Russell for his role in those amendments and for the responsible and constructive approach that he has taken at all times in relation to the bill.

It would seem sycophantic were I to praise Ian Jenkins's role, so I will not, but it is important to respond to one of the concerns that he raised and to nail it right now. There are no plans to drop any Gaelic exam. To suggest otherwise is simply wrong and inaccurate.

The Scottish Qualifications Authority Bill seeks to focus the SQA firmly on its future. It emphasises the importance of involving stakeholders in helping set the SQA's future direction and in improving the delivery of qualifications and awards. A bill on its own is not enough. The SQA still has a great deal of hard work to do and will continue to have a great deal to do every year.

The bill is important and I am glad that we have achieved cross-party consensus on it. I believe that that sends out a powerful message, not only to the SQA and its staff but to every teacher, parent and pupil in Scotland. I therefore commend the bill to the Parliament.

Motion without Notice

16:20

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Mr Murray Tosh): I am minded at this point to accept a motion without notice to bring forward decision time, if members agree to that. Are we agreed?

Members indicated agreement.

Motion moved,

That S1M-3066 be taken at this meeting of Parliament.—
[Euan Robson.]

Motion agreed to.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees under Rule 11.2.4 of the Standing Orders that Decision Time on Thursday 2 May 2002 be taken at 4.21 pm.—[Euan Robson.]

Motion agreed to.

Mr Lloyd Quinan (West of Scotland) (SNP): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. Does the motion without notice include members' business tonight, or would that be covered by a separate motion?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Members' business follows decision time. Mr Morgan has been perched on his chair with his lectern in front of him for the past half-hour.

Mr Quinan: Thank you.

Decision Time

16:21

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Mr Murray Tosh): There are three questions to be put as a result of today's business. The first question is, that amendment S1M-3052.1, in the name of Patricia Ferguson, which seeks to amend motion S1M-3052, in the name of John Swinney, on the powers of the Scottish Parliament, be agreed to. Are we all agreed?

Members: No.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

FOR

Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Barrie, Scott (Dunfermline West) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Edinburgh Central) (Lab)
 Brankin, Rhona (Midlothian) (Lab)
 Brown, Robert (Glasgow) (LD)
 Butler, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (Lab)
 Chisholm, Malcolm (Edinburgh North and Leith) (Lab)
 Craigie, Cathie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (Lab)
 Curran, Ms Margaret (Glasgow Baillieston) (Lab)
 Deacon, Susan (Edinburgh East and Musselburgh) (Lab)
 Eadie, Helen (Dunfermline East) (Lab)
 Ferguson, Patricia (Glasgow Maryhill) (Lab)
 Finnie, Ross (West of Scotland) (LD)
 Fitzpatrick, Brian (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (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, Dr Sylvia (Stirling) (Lab)
 Jackson, Gordon (Glasgow Govan) (Lab)
 Jamieson, Cathy (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (Lab)
 Jamieson, Margaret (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (Lab)
 Jenkins, Ian (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD)
 Kerr, Mr Andy (East Kilbride) (Lab)
 Lamont, Johann (Glasgow Pollok) (Lab)
 Livingstone, Marilyn (Kirkcaldy) (Lab)
 Lyon, George (Argyll and Bute) (LD)
 Macdonald, Lewis (Aberdeen Central) (Lab)
 Macintosh, Mr Kenneth (Eastwood) (Lab)
 Maclean, Kate (Dundee West) (Lab)
 Macmillan, Maureen (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Martin, Paul (Glasgow Springburn) (Lab)
 McAllion, Mr John (Dundee East) (Lab)
 McAveety, Mr Frank (Glasgow Shettleston) (Lab)
 McCabe, Mr Tom (Hamilton South) (Lab)
 McConnell, Mr Jack (Motherwell and Wishaw) (Lab)
 McLeish, Henry (Central Fife) (Lab)
 McMahon, Mr Michael (Hamilton North and Bellshill) (Lab)
 McNeil, Mr Duncan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (Lab)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow Kelvin) (Lab)
 McNulty, Des (Clydebank and Milngavie) (Lab)
 Muldoon, Bristow (Livingston) (Lab)
 Mulligan, Mrs Mary (Linlithgow) (Lab)
 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)
 Scott, Tavish (Shetland) (LD)
 Simpson, Dr Richard (Ochil) (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)

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)
 Davidson, Mr David (North-East Scotland) (Con)
 Fabiani, Linda (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Gallie, Phil (South of Scotland) (Con)
 Gibson, Mr Kenneth (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Hamilton, Mr Duncan (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Harding, Mr Keith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Harper, Robin (Lothians) (Green)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Lothians) (SNP)
 Ingram, Mr Adam (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Johnstone, Alex (North-East Scotland) (Con)
 Lochhead, Richard (North-East Scotland) (SNP)
 MacAskill, Mr Kenny (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)
 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)
 Russell, Michael (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Scanlon, Mary (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Sheridan, Tommy (Glasgow) (SSP)
 Stevenson, Stewart (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)
 Young, John (West of Scotland) (Con)

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 62, Against 41, Abstentions 0.

Amendment agreed to.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The next question is, that motion S1M-3052, in the name of John Swinney, on the powers of the Parliament, as amended, be agreed to. Are we all agreed?

Members: No.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

Kay Ullrich (West of Scotland) (SNP): My little thing is still flashing.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I suggest that you speak to Christine Grahame about that.

FOR

Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Barrie, Scott (Dunfermline West) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Edinburgh Central) (Lab)
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 Watson, Mike (Glasgow Cathcart) (Lab)
 Whitefield, Karen (Airdrie and Shotts) (Lab)

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 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)
 Harding, Mr Keith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
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 Hyslop, Fiona (Lothians) (SNP)
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 Russell, Michael (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Scanlon, Mary (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Sheridan, Tommy (Glasgow) (SSP)
 Stevenson, Stewart (Banff and Buchan) (SNP)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Swinney, Mr John (North Tayside) (SNP)
 Ullrich, Kay (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 Welsh, Mr Andrew (Angus) (SNP)
 White, Ms Sandra (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Wilson, Andrew (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Young, John (West of Scotland) (Con)

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 62, Against 43, Abstentions 0.

Motion, as amended, agreed to.

Resolved,

That the Parliament notes that the devolution settlement is right for Scotland, that wide powers have been devolved to the Scottish Executive and the Parliament and endorsed by Scottish voters in a referendum, that full use is being made of these powers to deliver the policies set out in the Programme for Government, and that these powers can deliver real improvements in the public services and help secure a strong and competitive economy.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The third question is, that motion S1M-2996, in the name of Cathy Jamieson, that the Scottish Qualifications Authority Bill be passed, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to.

That the Parliament agrees that the Scottish Qualifications Authority Bill be passed.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I pause to allow applause. [Applause.]

Middle East

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Mr George Reid): The final item of business is a members' business debate on motion S1M-3002, in the name of Alasdair Morgan, on the current situation in the middle east. The debate will be concluded without any question being put. Those members who wish to participate in the debate should press their request-to-speak buttons now.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament expresses its deep concern about the situation in the Middle East; recognises the key role of the United Nations and the rule of international law, and affirms that the immediate cessation of violence, the recognition and protection of human rights and the need for negotiation are essential in order to secure just and long lasting peace in the region.

16:25

Alasdair Morgan (Galloway and Upper Nithsdale) (SNP): I am grateful for the opportunity to debate this motion today. In truth, we could have debated the subject on any occasion over the past 50 years or so, if not even before that, had the Parliament been in existence.

The area of the middle east on which I will concentrate is Israel and Palestine. It is a bitter irony that that area holds many sites that are sacred to some of the world's major religions—so much so that we call it the Holy Land. However, that is hardly an apt title in view of the many inhuman actions that have taken place there, both recently and in the past.

Over recent weeks, our television screens have been filled with images from Israel and the west bank. I will pick out two of them. The first is a picture of the Jenin refugee camp, although it was not what we would know as a camp; it was a town. The picture was of a town devastated as though by an earthquake, except that the destruction seemed to me to be far more complete than in many natural disasters and the usual international rescue organisations appeared to be being prevented or hampered from giving assistance by the Israeli army, rather than being assisted by the army as we would expect. Life in the camps was never a bed of roses, but the sights that we saw were an affront to human decency.

The second image is of an elderly Israeli woman, injured as a result of an explosion caused by a suicide bomber and lying in a hospital bed. On her body, she displayed a tattooed number from her days in the Auschwitz concentration camp. An old woman who had survived one of the worst blots on the record of 20th century civilisation surely had the right to live out her life in peace in a

safe haven. Once again, she had been let down by civilisation in what should be the brave dawn of a new millennium.

Most of us are MSPs because we are committed to a cause or philosophy. No matter how passionate our commitments, we cannot begin to imagine what makes a young Palestinian man or woman strap a belt of explosives to their body and go into a bar or disco where people of their own age are having fun—young people with whom they should share their hopes for their neighbouring countries to grow and thrive. Instead of sharing that common vision, they blow themselves and their Israeli counterparts to bits.

We cannot imagine that, nor, I suspect, can we imagine the siege mentality with which so many Israelis have been inculcated over the past 50 years. Israel is a country whose geography makes it very vulnerable, whose border areas have been under frequent attack and whose recent civilian casualty rate makes our own, most similar experience in Northern Ireland pale into insignificance. Yet however little we can come to understand those viewpoints, we can say with certainty that the actions of the Israeli army, under the direction of Prime Minister Sharon, will not dry up the supply of would-be suicide bombers. Those actions are creating a reservoir of hatred and distrust of Israel among Palestinians that is threatening to poison the minds of further generations and will serve only to prolong Israel's sense of insecurity.

It is simply not good enough for former Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu to justify, as he did recently, some of Israel's actions by referring to atrocities that were carried out by Palestinians in 1947 and 1948—not that Israel's hands were entirely clean at that time, either. A policy that justifies the present simply by reference to past injustices, no matter how strongly felt, is no way to build a future.

We should be in no doubt that it will require considerable political, moral and personal courage for the leaders of both sides to move towards peace. The previous Israeli premier paid the price of failure with his political career and, some years before, the President of Egypt, Anwar Sadat, and the Israeli Prime Minister, Yitzhak Rabin, paid with their lives. Both were killed for their commitment to a peaceful solution, and both were killed not by those with whom they sought to make peace but by extremists on their own side.

I hope that members will agree that peace will be secured only against a background of an Israeli state that is recognised by its immediate neighbours and an internationally recognised Palestinian state that exists within secure frontiers. Indeed, that is what the recent United Nations Security Council resolution 1397 called for. It is

clear to most that peace will never be achieved as long as Israel continues to occupy, and develop settlements in, the territory that was seized in 1967.

I have tried to allow for the different pressures that the two groups in the conflict have been under, but I feel that we have a right to expect more from the state of Israel than we are getting. We have a right to expect more because of Israel's membership of the community of democratic nations. Way back in 1949, the UN Security Council passed resolution 69, which recommended that Israel be admitted to membership of the United Nations. It said:

"Israel is a peace-loving State and is able and willing to carry out the obligations contained in the Charter".

There must be at least a question mark over the total accuracy of that judgment as applied to the current Israeli Government.

The European Union and, in particular, the United States must use their good offices and undoubted influence more energetically. We need to send a totally unambiguous signal to Mr Sharon that a continuation of his current policy is unacceptable. The United States of America gave Israel some £2 billion in aid last year. I therefore cannot believe that the US cannot bring more pressure to bear. President Bush—and any other politician who seeks to be his ally—would do well to realise that the immediate threat to peace in the entire region comes from the conflict on the west bank and in Gaza, not from the antics of Saddam Hussein. Indeed, the injustice to the Palestinians that is perceived by their Arab neighbours partly gives Saddam a platform on which to thrive.

There have been some small signs of progress in the past couple of days, but we know from past experience just how elusive real progress can be. This issue affects us all. Our historical connections with the administration of Palestine over much of the 20th century, the potential consequences on our economy from conflict in the middle east—consequences that we have experienced in reality in the past—and, most important of all, the common humanity that we share with all those who suffer on both sides of the conflict all mean that we must continue to do all that we can to bring the warring parties to the negotiation of a just settlement.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We move to open debate. I will allow speeches of up to four minutes.

16:33

Mr Kenneth Macintosh (Eastwood) (Lab): I will not, as is customary, thank the member who secured the debate, but I will thank him for the tone of his comments. The upsurge in violence in

the middle east is both horrifying and frightening. It is of great concern not only to the people of Israel but to everyone, including the people of Scotland. That latter group is the group to which I wish to address my remarks today.

For the record, however, I wish to start by stating that I object to this debate taking place. It is clear to me that we are having today's debate not because of the undoubted importance of the troubles in the middle east, nor because of the concern that we feel for those in the situation, nor because of the strong opinions that all sides in the conflict hold, but because of the SNP's obsession with the constitutional settlement. The SNP misses no opportunity to aggravate relations between the Scottish Parliament and Westminster. By doing that, the SNP does justice neither to this institution nor to the lives of the people of Scotland. Frankly, the SNP's actions diminish the concern that is felt for the situation that affects the people in the middle east.

Ms Margo MacDonald (Lothians) (SNP): I regret that Kenneth Macintosh said that. I will regret it even more if he genuinely believes it, because there is no one in this Parliament who believes anything other than that no boundary—devolved or reserved—demarcates humanity. We are all concerned about humanity in this debate. It has nothing at all to do with the constitutional settlement.

Mr Macintosh: I appreciate Margo MacDonald's sentiments, and the tone of Alasdair Morgan's speech, but that does not take away from the fact that we have had two SNP slots today, one on the powers of the Parliament and one on a matter that is reserved to Westminster. Frankly, that is a waste of the Scottish Parliament's time. It reflects badly on us all, but it does not diminish the concern that has been expressed by individual members, nor the strong opinions that are held on all sides.

The issue that I wish to address is the impact that the conflict is having on our own communities, and the threat of the effect that the spiral of violence may have on our efforts to promote a culture of tolerance and understanding across ethnic divides.

As many members will be aware, my constituency of Eastwood is ethnically diverse. Among other communities, it is home to the largest section of the Jewish community in Scotland. Since the failure of the Camp David talks and the breakdown of the peace process, the upsurge in violence in Israel has been matched by rising alarm and anxiety in the Jewish community here. It is not just that many people have friends and family in Israel and that they are worried for their day-to-day safety—although that fear is real enough—but that we are in danger of importing

the violence to Britain and to Scotland.

Many members will have received an information pack from the Board of Deputies of British Jews, in which our attention is drawn to the fact that the increase in terrorism and military activity in the middle east has been mirrored by a rise in anti-Semitic activity here. There have been attacks on synagogues in Glasgow and Dundee and there has been an increase in verbal abuse. I know from the number of people who have contacted me individually that there is a great deal of anxiety and unease in the wider population. During question time today, Margo MacDonald referred to the attack on Finsbury Park synagogue.

We are all fully entitled to hold and express strong opinions on the divisive and depressing problems that face the middle east, and to sympathise with Palestinian and Israeli people alike, but we also have a duty to take care when expressing those opinions that we do not exacerbate the situation or further inflame passions that run strongly in our communities. Ignorance is dangerous, and there is a level of ignorance about the state of Israel and the middle east that we would do well to challenge, rather than repeat. Many comments that I have heard on the television and radio have not reflected a balanced view, but have come from those who rush to express their prejudices. Is it any wonder that people who have heard those prejudices and suffered because of them in the past feel worried and alarmed?

We heard much during question time today about the importance of encouraging racial harmony and tackling intolerance and racism wherever they emerge. We have seen from the unfortunate example of Jean-Marie Le Pen in the French presidential election, and the recent publicity given to the British National Party in our country, the dangerous bigotry in our society, which can be tapped into by the unscrupulous or the unthinking.

There is not a politician here who can claim to know the path to peace in the middle east, but we can probably agree on this: the path to peace will be a political one. It will be achieved by people talking to one another, not fighting one another. I urge all politicians here to reflect on their own words and actions, and to have regard for the impact that those words will have, not just in the middle east, but on communities closer to home.

16:38

Tommy Sheridan (Glasgow) (SSP): I do not think that I can refrain from raising the temperature in this debate. I do not accept that the tone of this debate should be set as Ken Macintosh

suggested, because it is not good enough. The reason we have such disengagement from politics throughout the world—in particular by young people, but by all ages—is because of politicians' hypocrisy, in particular with regard to international relations.

It is important that we discuss what is going on in Palestine and throughout the middle east, because we are witnessing cold-blooded murder. We are witnessing state terror. I say to Ken Macintosh that it is from that point of view that I choose my words carefully, because they are legitimate descriptions of what is happening in that region of the world. It is hypocrisy that the western world, apparently, is preparing to engage in further bombing expeditions against Iraq—I say “engage in further” rather than “begin”, because we have not stopped bombing Iraq since the end of the Gulf war. We are preparing for war against Iraq because of its ignorance of, or lack of willingness to abide by, UN resolutions.

In 1967, UN Security Council resolution 242 was passed, demanding that Israel withdraw from the occupied territories. In 1973, UN Security Council resolution 338 was passed, again demanding that Israel withdraw from the occupied territories. Today, we do not prepare to bomb Israel, but the United States of America continues to provide that state with the best military arsenal to carry out the attacks and massacres that have taken place in places such as Jenin.

We have a situation in which Iraq should prepare to be invaded because it refuses to allow in independent UN arms inspectors. However, when Israel refuses to allow independent UN investigators into the Jenin camp—not to establish that there was a massacre, but to establish the scale of the massacre—it receives soft words of condemnation but hard military exports from countries such as Britain and the US. We should be ashamed of that.

I believe in this debate. It is important that we are open and honest. Ariel Sharon is the architect of state terror. Ariel Sharon was guilty of crimes against humanity in Shatila and Sabra in 1982 and he is repeating those crimes against humanity in Jenin in 2002. We should be open and honest enough to face up to that. As far as the middle east is concerned, Ariel Sharon is not part of the solution; he is part of the problem.

I hope that when we discuss the situation in the middle east and the situation in Palestine, we are prepared to put ourselves on the side of a nation that has been illegally occupied since 1948—if the truth be told—and has been militarily occupied since 1967. That nation has been the subject of aggression and military assault of a type that, if it was happening in any other part of the western world, we would be preparing for military

intervention on its behalf. I am afraid that it is time for angry words.

16:42

Phil Gallie (South of Scotland) (Con): Usually, I commend motions such as this one and welcome the fact that we have a chance to have a debate on merit. On this occasion, I find nothing wrong with the wording of the motion and I congratulate Alasdair Morgan on the reasonable way in which he put his case on a distressing situation.

Kenny Macintosh had a point when he talked about the Parliament's wish to have a multicultural society and the fact that we want people in this country to live and work together and to get on well together. Because of the lack of informed comment in some instances, the debate could do more harm than good. That gives me some cause for worry.

I am sure that today's situation in the middle east fills us all with despair, including me and Tommy Sheridan, even though we might see things slightly differently. Over the past decade, there has been opportunity after opportunity—we have hoped for peace and thought that the situation would settle down—and then disappointment after disappointment.

In 1993, I was privileged to meet Prime Minister Rabin—Alasdair Morgan mentioned both him and President Sadat. One of the greatest tragedies in the middle east was that both those individuals' lives were taken by one of their own citizens. When we consider the good and bad on either side, we have to ask what the objective of each of those citizens was. Perhaps there was an underlying factor that demonstrates the difficulties that any of us will have in understanding the problems that are faced in the middle east.

There is an underlying hatred, perhaps going back to 1948 when the UN established the state of Israel—or even earlier. It seems to me that that is where the real problem and perhaps the longer-term solution lie. If the neighbouring countries accepted the 1948 agreement and acknowledged that Israel is there and will not go away, we could perhaps use our influence to make Israel pull back to its borders.

Ms MacDonald: On several occasions over the past six or seven years, the Arab League has made it absolutely plain that the countries that it represents recognise Israel's legitimacy and right to survive.

Phil Gallie: To be perfectly honest, I find it extremely difficult to put my faith in any decisions made by Syria or Iraq. How could we get it into the Israelis' minds that all the members of the Arab League and the surrounding countries accept that

position? The problem is that Israel's back is to the wall. We have to consider rationally how we get through to it.

In the months leading up to the Israeli army's horrendous involvement in the west bank, 466 Israelis, 314 of whom were civilians, were killed and almost 4,000 were seriously injured in terrorist attacks. I am afraid that when a state is faced with such a situation—

Mr Lloyd Quinan (West of Scotland) (SNP): Will the member give way?

Phil Gallie: I do not have the time.

Given such a situation, perhaps the Israelis have grounds for their concerns. The fact is that Israel's first duty is to protect its citizens. However, it will ultimately have to respect the needs and requirements of the Palestinian people. Somewhere along the line, someone much wiser than I am will have to assist in that process. I would like to think that that will happen tomorrow, but I fear that it will happen many years from now.

16:47

Donald Gorrie (Central Scotland) (LD): We must follow two ground rules. First, legitimate criticism of the Israeli Government must not lead to anti-Semitism and there should not be anti-Muslim feelings or other expressions of racial hatred. We must vigorously ensure that that does not happen in our country. Secondly, Israel has the right to exist securely within its boundaries and not to be attacked, but the Palestinians also have a right to a homeland in which they can live securely. That must be the aim.

Terrorism can never be justified, but the way in which the Israelis have treated the Palestinians has created martyrs out of terrorists. It beggars belief that people have spent 50 years in refugee camps. In that respect, it is worth looking at some of the English chronicles of the late 1200s. Whereas we see Wallace as a hero, the English saw him as a terrorist. This is a question of different perceptions.

The Israeli settlements in the Palestinian areas are contrary to international law, which the Israeli Government has not recognised in a number of other respects. In the end, the Israelis will have to negotiate with Arafat. They may not like him and may consider him to be a dishonest rogue. However, if they do not negotiate with him, will they negotiate instead with Hamas or others who are even more hostile to them than Arafat is?

We must encourage and take encouragement from the moderate Israelis, who are numerous. I think that 190 reservists refused to serve outside the boundaries of the state of Israel and not all Israelis necessarily support the exclusion of the

UN team from Jenin.

To consider the matter in a cold-blooded way, the cost of the whole blockade and the war is dire indeed. The unemployment rate and level of economic activity in Palestine are now very much worse than they were. The European Union has a vested financial interest, in that our taxes went to construct a lot of the infrastructure, such as ports and airports, which the Israelis have destroyed. Who will pay to repair them all? We are Israel's biggest trading partner, but the trading agreement with Israel says that

"respect for human rights and democratic principles is an essential condition"

of the agreement. The European Union must get together with the United States to put pressure on the parties concerned and achieve some negotiation and the UN must be involved thereafter.

We must pursue the concept of the sovereignty of the individual as well as the sovereignty of the nation state. Individuals must be protected from their Governments and from multinational organisations. We can develop the United Nations system as a way of helping individuals who are not being looked after properly by their nation state.

16:51

Mr Lloyd Quinan (West of Scotland) (SNP): I declare an interest as vice-convenor of the cross-party group in the Scottish Parliament on Palestine.

In the document circulated to members by the Board of Deputies of British Jews, there are references to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. I must point out to members that Israel is not a signatory to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and that any reference to the declaration in the document is therefore fraudulent and bogus.

Let me tell members about one summer. On 19 June, five soldiers were kidnapped and shot. On 22 June, two policemen were shot and killed. On 27 June, a suitcase bomb killed 10 civilians at Lydda airfield. On 30 June, a car bomb at the embassy in Rome killed one policeman and two cleaners. On 2 July, 30 officers were killed in the officer's club in Haifa. On 9 July, a military police jeep machine-gunned and killed four people. On 26 July, the King David Hotel was bombed, killing 128 and injuring 97. On 29 July, two non-commissioned officers were kidnapped, tortured and killed and their bodies were booby-trapped and hanged in an orange grove.

That was not last summer. That was the summer of 1946 and the casualties concerned were British servicemen and Government officers.

The newspapers of this country called the people who carried out those actions—members of the Irgun, the Hagana and the Stern gang—terrorists. Israel was built on terrorism. Unfortunately, like other states built in that fashion, it resorts to the use of terrorism on a regular basis.

I was accused last week of breaking Israeli law. I will say this. In the state of Israel I did not break the law and, to my understanding, the rule of law of the state of Israel does not run in the Palestinian Authority areas. I committed no offence.

The words "occupation" and "occupied" have been used a number of times today. There are the occupied territories from 1948, the occupied territories from the war in 1967, the occupied territories from the war in 1973 and the occupied territories that have been occupied since 27, 28 and 29 March this year. Those areas are administered by the Palestinian Authority and are recognised as such by the United Kingdom Government and by the Israeli Government.

If I had recognised the rule of law of the state of Israel when I was in occupied Palestine, I would have been legitimising the military aggression and occupation. To do so is to acquiesce in the face of ethnic cleansing, which I have witnessed. It is also to remain unmoved at the relentless degradation and humiliation of an entire people, regardless of their religion. Those people are discriminated against for their culture and a third of that population has effectively been under house arrest since 27 March.

On Tuesday last week, I visited the Jenin camp. I visited the hospital, which used to be well equipped—the equipment was provided principally by the European Union. Now, however, the hospital has been reduced to a medical centre with less equipment than my dentist has. I watched an emergency operation being carried out on a nine-year-old boy. Two days before, his house had been hit by an Israeli rocket. He had lost an arm, a shoulder, a leg and the side of his face. His uncle was in the other bed and was providing a blood transfusion, as the Israelis had mined and booby-trapped the blood bank at Jenin hospital. Thread from a Singer sewing machine was used because there was no surgical thread. The Kuwaiti Government offered to fly in an air ambulance to fly the boy out to Amman, where he would have survived, but the Israelis declared the sky over Jenin to be an area of military operations and the air ambulance was not allowed in. The boy was dead by 4 o'clock that afternoon.

What happened in Jenin was an attempt to break the spirit of an independent and free people. To use Merkava tanks, M1 Abrams tanks, F-16s, Apache and Black Hawk helicopters is a war crime. Scots must take a stand against crimes

against humanity and war crimes.

Sergeant Shay Biran from Hod Hasharon, whose military identity in the Israeli army is 6994014, said:

"I am no longer willing to take an active part in the violent, needless and immoral policy conducted by my government ... The [Israeli] occupier has been applying consistent violence and a policy of repression for 35 years, while yet excising it from the public consciousness, and people don't understand that [Palestinian] violence is in fact counter-violence ... If I were to go to the territories, I'd be contributing to the state's destruction (not merely moral, but above all, concrete and tangible); by refusing, I am trying to save the state from self-destructing."

Those are the words of a combat medic in the Israeli army, who served four months in prison. We should listen to him.

16:57

Pauline McNeill (Glasgow Kelvin) (Lab): The issue is a reserved matter, but I welcome the opportunity to give my opinion on it. As the convener of the cross-party group in the Scottish Parliament on Palestine, I thank Alasdair Morgan for that opportunity.

I have supported the Palestinian people since I first learned of their struggle to establish an independent Palestinian state. I have been involved since the early 1980s.

The extent to which the international community has singularly failed to use its influence to urge a lasting and meaningful solution in the middle east has never failed to amaze me. There is a two-state solution, which I support. There should be a safe, secure and independent Palestine and a safe, secure and independent Israel.

Often, it is said that Palestinians are people without a land and that they are the victims of the victims. That is what makes the struggle so hard to resolve. The fact is that the middle east conflict arises from the denial of the national rights of the Palestinian people.

Recent events in Ramallah and Jenin have shocked the world. Sharon's foolishness in trying to destroy Palestinian will shows that he fails to understand Palestinian resolve. Recently, one of his generals boasted that he could crush Palestinian resistance. He compared it to an egg, which he crushed in his hand.

Shamefully, Sharon is using 11 September to convince the world that his misbehaviour is justified and that he is fighting terrorism. Sharon has failed to understand that the lesson of history is that violence breeds violence and that his attempts to demolish the infitada and the Palestinian National Authority will fail, unless he negotiates. Nobody is convinced that Israel is defending itself. The whole world is shocked by

the intensity of the Israeli aggression that has destroyed mosques, churches, schools and hospitals. Electricity and water supplies have been cut. Ambulances have not been allowed to collect the injured. Corpses have been left to rot.

Such lawlessness by the Israeli army is against every human rights agreement and convention that we can think of. There is indiscriminate shooting of civilians. Literally thousands of eye-witnesses will testify to Israel's brutality in the Jenin camp. It is alarming to think that, over the past few days, the UN has delayed in getting eye-witnesses in to account for what happened in Jenin.

I commend the many progressive Israelis who have been brave enough to speak out against their Government, because they know that, even if they are victims, no right-thinking person can justify treating another race as the Israelis treat the Palestinians by denying them their national rights.

Israel is occupying land that does not belong to it; the position is not the other way round. It is fundamental to understand that Israel is the aggressor and not the Palestinians. Israel continues to build and to settle new citizens while the numbers in Palestinian refugee camps grow.

How can there be a serious negotiation over a two-state settlement when Palestinians who were forced to flee their country do not have the right of return and have not been offered it under any set of negotiations? Afif Safieh, the Palestinian delegate to the UK, was born in Jerusalem but is banned from entering its territory. Israel continues to build new settlements on land that does not belong to it and expects there to be an agreement. Palestinians have accepted 22 per cent of the land. Afif Safieh said:

"I believe they have been unreasonably reasonable in their approach."

There should be a third-party force in the negotiations to force a peace settlement for everyone in the middle east.

Many Scots understand the conflict, but many others might think that the issue is complex. Those who understand the conflict have a duty to raise the awareness of others. Of all the international conflicts, this is the one that can be resolved, because it has a solution.

I know that many Glaswegians feel strongly about the situation. In fact, the lord provost of Glasgow has spoken out about the issue. Many Scottish musicians, including Deacon Blue, are trying to put together humanitarian aid initiatives by offering their musical services. I hope that members will look for an initiative that they can practically support. The best thing that we can do is to bring humanitarian aid.

I believe that, to make a point, there should be a short boycott of Israeli goods. We should all work towards an independent Palestinian state that is based on the west bank and Gaza strip and exists beside a safe and secure Israel. That will create the prospect of getting peace in the rest of the region.

17:02

Ms Margo MacDonald (Lothians) (SNP): The motion refers to

"the key role of the United Nations and the rule of international law."

This debate is not only about the middle east. The repercussions of what is happening in what we call the middle east will be felt throughout the globe. In the future, when we, as a world society, face the human rights problems that are bound to arise because of the changing balance of power between east and west—by which I mean the far east and our west—we will need the United Nations.

Therefore, it is imperative that the UN should not be degraded in the eyes of people all over the world as it is being degraded by the refusal of the Israelis to recognise the UN resolutions to which members have referred. America bears a large responsibility for what has happened because we all know the practicality of the situation. If it were known that America would not veto security council sanctions against Israel for its disobedience of UN resolutions, we could start the ball rolling.

Ken Macintosh talked about a path to peace. If America did not use its Security Council veto, that would be part of that path to peace. Any pressure that the British Government or other permanent members of the security council can bring to bear on America must be brought now. The situation is urgent and serious, not only for the humanitarian aspects that Lloyd Quinan described, but for the global implications.

There are other consequences. It is not merely that we diminish the UN at our peril. Yesterday, a Libyan friend told me that he had spoken on the phone to his family in Libya, who had expressed their part of the world's disgust at, and distrust of, British hypocrisy. He is a Libyan Scot who has lived here for ages and his family are young Scots. How do we build the sort of multicultural harmony of which we have talked if Arab people such as my Libyan friend know that our Government is discriminating against Arabs? That is how he sees the situation and I do not think that he should see it any other way. I do not think that there is any other interpretation of the part that our Government has played. It has tried to play a middle role but there is no middle role—illegality is

being practised against the Palestinians and we should take their side.

I spoke to Saudis yesterday, who told me that, although some people here think that it would be impractical to have a boycott of Israeli goods as there was a boycott of South African goods, in the Gulf area there is an effective boycott of everything American. Young Gulf Arabs do not want to know about America and do not trust America. Does everyone understand the seriousness of having a whole region of the world totally opposed to the world's only superpower? I am sure that everyone in the chamber understands why we must take every possible step to break down the total distrust that is growing between what we call the middle east and the far east and the west.

We are dividing the world. There are areas of the world that will look with dismay at our attitude towards the middle east, which is that our sanctions on Iraq are legitimate because it has ignored UN resolutions and has not allowed UN weapons inspectors but that it is fine for Israel to refuse to accept a UN fact-finding mission without the imposition of sanctions.

Mr Macintosh: Does Margo MacDonald agree that the comparison between the only practising democracy in the middle east with a state such as Iraq is wholly invidious?

Ms MacDonald: I regret that the only practising democracy in the middle east should have put itself in the same position as a despotic regime such as Iraq. That is the tragedy of the situation. We have to look at the situation as it is, not as it might once have been.

Mr Gil Paterson (Central Scotland) (SNP): Israel should act like a democracy.

Ms MacDonald: I am hearing from a colleague that Israel might not be a democracy, but I do not have time to investigate that just now. I am trying only to convey the feelings that have been expressed to me by Arab friends.

Ken Macintosh talked about the paths to peace, but Israel must send the same signal that was sent by the UN. Israel must accept the right of the Palestinians to have a state side by side with Israel. Somebody somewhere has to say this sometime: the people who chose to emigrate to the settlements to make a better life for their families—and I appreciate that that might have been their only aim—may stay where they are, but they will be living in the state of Palestine, not the state of Israel.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: As the debate started early and there are still a number of members to be called, I would be prepared to consider a motion without notice to extend the

debate to 17:45, although we will be finished before that. The minister has kindly agreed to that suggestion.

Motion moved,

That, under Rule 8.14.3, the debate be extended to 5.45 pm.—[*Alasdair Morgan.*]

Motion agreed to.

17:08

Mr John McAllion (Dundee East) (Lab): I congratulate Alasdair Morgan on securing an important debate. To members such as Ken Macintosh, who are concerned that it touches on a reserved area, I say that such concerns should be dwarfed by the atrocities and the abuse of human rights that are being perpetrated against the Palestinian people under the banner of the so-called war against terrorism. I would be ashamed of a Scottish Parliament that would allow suffering on such a scale to go by without a comment from the elected representatives of the Scottish people. It is right that the Scottish Parliament should debate such issues.

Mr Macintosh: Does John McAllion agree that, while it is right for elected representatives such as ourselves to have strong opinions and to express those opinions, it is misleading to think that the Scottish Parliament has a role to play when we have elected members in Westminster whose role it specifically is to deal with foreign affairs?

Mr McAllion: Our role is to be the voice of the Scottish people and if we cannot express the opinions that are out there, we are in a bad state.

There are those who, like Phil Gallie, have argued that Israel's actions in Palestine are justified by the attacks of the suicide bombers. I say quite unequivocally that any attack on unarmed civilians, whether by suicide bombers in the street or B-52 bombers a mile high in the sky, can never be justified and should be condemned by everyone.

Almost daily, I receive by e-mail accounts of the kind of atrocities that Israeli spokespersons deny every day on television. E-mails can tell lies, but photographs do not. One set of photographs in particular, which was e-mailed to me and probably to other members of the Parliament, shows a young Palestinian who has been stopped by members of the Israeli defence forces, forced onto the ground and stripped. The photographs show two members of the defence forces holding the young Palestinian on the ground while a third one shoots him in the head.

Those are individual acts of terror, but on a very small scale they make human the much wider acts of terror that are being perpetrated by the Israeli state against the Palestinian people. The crime

sheet against Ariel Sharon and other Israeli governments is long. Members have referred to it time and again in the debate. Israel has illegally, and against UN resolutions, occupied Palestinian and Arab land. Israel has established across Palestinian land a network of more than 140 illegal settlements—in excess of 400,000 illegal settlers are on Palestinian land. Israel has built a road network in Palestine exclusively for the use of its illegal settlers and that road network is banned to the Palestinian people.

Israel humiliates Palestinian people daily at road blocks that it sets up exclusively to stop Palestinians moving freely about their own country. As Lloyd Quinan said, Israel sent in F16s, tanks, helicopter gunships and bulldozers to wreak havoc and destruction in large parts of Palestinian towns. As we speak, large parts of towns such as Hebron, Bethlehem, Ramalla, and Nablus, which is twinned with my own city of Dundee, lie in ruins. They have been devastated by Israeli attacks.

In successive attacks against Palestine, the Israelis have interned without trial thousands of young Palestinians. Nobody knows what is happening to those young Palestinians. As we stand to debate the issue today, it is alleged that Israel is torturing many of them. Israel has imposed illegal curfews on an entire people. The stench of massacre rises from the ruins of Jenin and yet the Israelis deny access to Jenin to those who want to find out what happened in that place.

In describing the situation, I am describing what is going on at this very moment in the land of Palestine. I am not, in any way, being anti-Semitic. In Dundee, I have often shared platforms with representatives of the Jewish community when we have spoken against anti-Semitism, against racism and against fascism. Indeed, I have had the walls of my house daubed with a swastika because of the stand that I take against anti-Semitism.

I simply want to direct the attention of those who seek to defend Israel to the small part of the Israeli population who stand up and point out the crimes of their own Government. If we want to identify with Israelis, those are the Israelis with whom we should identify. We should be saying that what the state of Israel is doing to the state of Palestine can never be justified. If there is to be a two-state solution in the middle east, those two states must have equal status. We cannot have one state controlled by the other.

17:13

Richard Lochhead (North-East Scotland) (SNP): I congratulate my colleague Alasdair Morgan on securing this important debate and on his eloquent speech. I also congratulate the many members from all the parties who have made

eloquent contributions to the debate.

The Scottish Parliament is at its most dignified when we discuss international issues. I wish that we did that more often. I do not want to go down the road that was advocated by Ken Macintosh, who wants to stick to parochial issues. I am sure that other members also do not want to do that. The Scottish Parliament is Scotland's voice. Many people to whom I have spoken are extremely concerned about what is happening in the middle east. We would be abdicating our responsibility as Scotland's political forum if we did not discuss those concerns.

I was at Aberdeen's mosque last Friday evening. My colleague Angus Robertson MP and I fielded questions from about 70 or 80 people who were in the mosque for prayers. The people present represented about 28 nationalities. Almost every question, in over an hour and a half, was on the topic of the middle east. I do not want to go back to the mosque, look those people in the face and say that we are not willing to discuss the middle east crisis.

I would also not want to go and speak to the Jewish community and say that we were not willing to discuss the middle east crisis in the Scottish Parliament. People cannot believe that the topic is not being discussed more frequently in political circles in Scotland and that it is not higher on the public agenda. Today's debate fulfils an important obligation to those people.

We are all appalled, at what is an early stage of the 21st century, when we look at our television screens and see the horrific scenes in the middle east. As many members have said, Israel's behaviour is despicable, but there has been unforgivable violence on both the Palestinian and the Israeli sides. We are all tearing our hair out about the fact that, in this day and age, people do not realise that tit-for-tat killings get us nowhere; they only build up reservoirs of resentment and hatred that will last for years. We are all concerned that Israel is trying not only to catch the terrorists in the Palestinian state, but to dismantle that state.

The SNP supports the UN Security Council resolution that requires the withdrawal of Israel's troops to the pre-1967 boundaries, the Arab world's acceptance of the legitimacy of the Israeli state and the establishment of a viable, self-governing and independent Palestinian state. I believe that Scotland has a role in trying to achieve that. However small that role is, we should play it and do our utmost to achieve peace in the middle east and throughout the world. Many Scots, including Lloyd Quinan, have visited the middle east during the recent crisis. I pay tribute to Professor Derrick Pounder from Dundee, who went with Amnesty International and performed some autopsies.

We should learn from Norway. The Norway accord of 1993 showed that small countries can participate in some way in trying to achieve peace. Scotland should play any role that it can in trying to achieve peace in the middle east. Let us all hope that the rule of international law prevails.

17:16

Mr Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): It is absolutely appropriate that we should discuss the middle east this afternoon in Edinburgh. We are a young democracy, but we have something to say. The debate is being webcast. Given the number of hits there have been for previous debates, I am sure that people from all over the world will find out what we are saying. We can send a message in that way.

We have heard a great deal in the debate. It is hard for us to understand the vengeance and the spiral of atrocities that we see on our television screens. Although they seem very far away, they are not. Donald Gorrie correctly mentioned that Israel has a right to exist. Equally, the Palestinians have a right to justice and to a homeland. Richard Lochhead made a balanced speech. He was right to point out that there have been appalling atrocities on both sides. There is no dialogue. If the communities can be made to talk to each other and to work together, a lasting peace can be built.

Our role is to condemn violence loudly and to strive mightily for peace in any way that we can, whether that is through advocacy or lobbying organisations. The point about striving for peace is that one must have hope that it will work. I do not know the middle east and I have never been to Palestine, but I know Northern Ireland extremely well because my wife comes from Armagh. In the 20 or so years that I have known Armagh, the community was at one point blown to bits and close personal friends of my in-laws have been murdered. However, the situation there today is different. Some people might say that the situation in Northern Ireland is imperfect, but at least it is a radical improvement on the one that I knew 20 years ago. The situation has changed because ordinary people said, "Enough is enough. We will not have this any longer." I know people who are reaching out across the sectarian divide and working for the greater good.

There is hope. Events can happen for the better if all good people work together. I will close with a phrase from "The Pilgrim's Progress" that has everlastingly stuck in my mind: hope is the key.

17:19

The Deputy Minister for Finance and Public Services (Peter Peacock): Inevitably, the debate has provoked understandable passion and deep

concern among members. No right-minded person could feel anything other than deeply troubled at the truly terrible scale of human suffering and the dire situation brought about as a result of the current conflict in the middle east. Individuals in the chamber and beyond clearly have strong feelings on the issue. Our first thoughts must be for the victims of the dreadful situation and their families. The priority should be to cease all violence, to relieve the human suffering and to work to build lasting peace in the region. That can be achieved only through dialogue, trust and mutual respect among all the parties. Violence is not an answer—it will only prolong the suffering and spread the seeds of distrust and doubt.

The media have made us aware of the terrible experiences that people have endured during the present crisis, some of which have been graphically highlighted in the debate. Any caring individual would want such experiences to be brought to an end. That is why I welcome the initiative in which UK and US wardens will oversee the detention of the six Palestinians who are held in a Palestinian authority prison in Jericho.

Under the agreement, Israel has withdrawn its forces from Ramallah and Yasser Arafat is free to travel and resume work inside and outside the occupied territory.

Mr Quinan: Will the minister give way?

Peter Peacock: I do not wish to take an intervention, thank you.

It is vital that Israel and the Palestinian authorities build on the agreement and take further steps to reduce tension and rebuild mutual trust and confidence.

The Scottish Executive has no constitutional locus, nor an electoral mandate, to formulate policy or make policy statements on foreign affairs. The Scots who have been entrusted with that role—those Scots to whom the electorate gave their trust in the recent general election—are our members of Parliament at Westminster. Westminster has Scottish MPs from all the main political parties in Scotland, who are able to speak on such issues, not only from the floor of the House of Commons and in committees, but around the Cabinet table. The Secretary of State for Scotland and many other Scots who hold Cabinet positions ensure that Scotland's voice is heard and helps to shape foreign policy at the UK level. Full note of the statements that members have made today regarding the appalling circumstances in the middle east has been taken. I will ensure that the *Official Report* of the debate is passed to Helen Liddell at the Scotland Office and to Jack Straw at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office.

Meeting closed at 17:22.

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