

MEETING OF THE PARLIAMENT

Wednesday 27 November 2002
(*Afternoon*)

Session 1

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Scottish Parliament

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(Afternoon)

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

St Andrew points us to the mystery of God. It is there that there is light against the clouds; it is there that there is a stretching energy; it is there that we find a tower, and another cross. In God—creator, redeemer, sustainer—is a depth and a source of meaning that takes us beyond romance and rationality into a sustained and sustaining vision, and a pattern for human service.

Amen.

Time for Reflection

The Presiding Officer (Sir David Steel): I welcome to lead time for reflection today Rev Jim Jones, chairman of the synod of the Methodist Church in Scotland.

Rev Jim Jones (Synod of the Methodist Church in Scotland): Some days ago I was driving along the M9 towards Stirling. To my right, the sky was dark and heavy with rain clouds; to my left the sun was still shining. Against the lowering sky there was a low hill crowned with an ancient fortified tower, topped with a flag at full stretch in the wind. The flag, you will not be surprised to learn, had a blue background and the white cross of St Andrew, and was lit up by the facing sun. The combination of light and dark, the singularity of the tower, the energy of the flag and the associations of the centuries, which that fluttering symbol carries, all came together in a moment that stirred the spirit.

On the whole, our time and culture are much more prosaic and rational. We do not have much patience with that which is not obvious. Symbol has a hard time surviving the laser of our rationality. I, too, would want to hold up my hand for efficiency and effectiveness in organisation and delivery. Even more seriously, the cause of social justice calls us to take a long, hard look at many institutional practices that lurk under the rubric of “tradition”.

But the point about the sun-lit, wind-stretched flag against the storm clouds is that it stirred my spirit. As a living symbol, it took me beyond the confines of my narrower self into the community of the nation, and the community of the nation carries with it the sense of responsibility, respect and reciprocity—how to live together in an inclusive and generous way. Symbols are necessary, and have the capacity to evoke and empower our actions.

The white cross is the cross of St Andrew, whose day is, of course, this Saturday. You may feel some scepticism about the stories of St Andrew’s arrival on the eastern shores of this land, but, even more than his flag, St Andrew as a figure points us to depths where there are reservoirs of resources to empower and enable our quest for human being.

Points of Order

14:35

Michael Russell (South of Scotland) (SNP): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. Today the Executive's latest league tables are published, but I have yet to see them. Copies of the league tables were distributed to the press on Monday. Although my office asked to see them yesterday, they were not provided. A member of the press—who will remain nameless—had to break the embargo to show the league tables to me, so that I could comment on them.

Gross discourtesy has been shown to members, particularly members of opposition parties, who have not had a chance to see figures that were distributed to the press 48 hours ago.

The Presiding Officer (Sir David Steel): I have ruled on this issue in the past, but always in connection with the pre-release to the press of statements to the Parliament. Statistical information of the sort to which the member refers does not come to the Parliament, so this is not a matter for me. I sympathise with the point that the member is making, but he must pursue it directly with the Executive. This is not a parliamentary matter, but something that happens outside the Parliament.

Michael Russell: Presiding Officer, will you consider this issue in the context of the general standing orders provisions relating to the courtesy that members should show to one another? If a member of the Parliament who is a minister publishes important information of which she intends to make much, it would be courteous for her to provide that information to members, especially those who shadow her.

The Presiding Officer: I sympathise with the point that the member makes, but he must pursue it directly with the Executive. I should not make rulings on what happens outside the chamber.

Tommy Sheridan (Glasgow) (SSP): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. Today's business bulletin gives notice of the resignation of a junior Scottish minister. Have you been informed that the Executive plans to provide a full statement on the circumstances of that very embarrassing resignation? Will the Executive lead a debate on its mishandling of the firefighters' dispute?

The Presiding Officer: I can tell the member two things. First, an oral question on the fire dispute will appear in tomorrow's business list. Secondly, I have fulfilled my obligation under standing orders to notify the Parliament of the minister's resignation. A motion for the appointment of a new minister will be lodged tomorrow and may, of course, be debated.

Tommy Sheridan: When tomorrow will the debate take place?

The Presiding Officer: The information will appear in the business bulletin. If I am able to give a precise time for the debate, I will do so at 5 o'clock.

Lifelong Learning

The Presiding Officer (Sir David Steel): I ask those members who want to take part in today's debate to indicate that now. Already more members have requested to speak than I will be able to call. That is a hint to opening speakers to keep their speeches as short as possible.

Today's main debate is on motion S1M-3625, in the name of Alex Neil, on the final report of the Enterprise and Lifelong Learning Committee on lifelong learning.

14:38

Alex Neil (Central Scotland) (SNP): I thank all those who have contributed to the publication of the final report of the Enterprise and Lifelong Learning Committee on lifelong learning. I thank the 120-odd individuals and organisations that gave us evidence in written and oral form, and the 200 people who took part in the lifelong learning convention earlier this year. I also thank members of the committee, especially Marilyn Livingstone, who will sum up on behalf of the committee. I pass on apologies from Annabel Goldie, the deputy convener of the Enterprise and Lifelong Learning Committee, who is otherwise engaged this afternoon.

I thank the clerks to the committee—Simon Watkins, Judith Evans and their team—who played a major role in preparing the report. I also thank the consultants and the advisers, three of whom are present in the distinguished visitors' gallery, for their input.

Although the report has not received much publicity, it deals with one of the most important subjects that the Parliament will discuss. Lifelong learning—tertiary education and training—which covers higher, further, vocational, informal and community education is one of the most important of the Parliament's responsibilities. We now spend more than £1.3 billion a year of our budget on this activity.

I say right at the beginning of the debate that we have much to be proud of in our education and training system. The message must go out from this debate that, although the committee has made 80 specific proposals for improving higher, further and vocational education, people should not interpret that as meaning that we are anything other than proud of our achievements in this field.

As the convener of the Enterprise and Lifelong Learning Committee, I get the opportunity to visit many of the institutions in Scotland that are involved in the delivery of higher and further education and training and vocational education and training. There is a great deal for us to commend. Work on cancer research is being done

at Dundee University and work on games technology is being done at the University of Abertay Dundee. The University of St Andrews has a centre for biomolecular sciences. Heriot-Watt University's department of petroleum engineering is working on a project that is funded by the General Medical Council to use oil technology techniques to improve chemotherapy in our hospitals. The University of Glasgow and the University of Edinburgh have centres of excellence in many disciplines and are way ahead in commercialisation.

In our college sector, work on biotechnology is going on in Falkirk College of Further and Higher Education. John Wheatley College is working on improving access to higher and further education for people living on peripheral housing estates. At the Crichton campus in Dumfries, four universities offer degrees from one campus. We are making progress—albeit that we need to improve this—in establishing a university for the Highlands and Islands, which is long overdue. I could go through a list of employers' organisations, students' organisations and deliverers of community and vocational training that are doing an excellent job for Scotland.

We can take pride in the fact that more than half of our school leavers go straight to university from school, which is one of the highest rates in the whole of the western world. That is an issue that needs to be debated—no doubt, my good friend David Mundell will mention it in his contribution. We can also take pride in the fact that 40 per cent of those going to university today come from the further education sector. That demonstrates the enormous contribution that the sector makes and the fact that further and higher education are coming closer and closer together.

Despite all those pluses and despite all the strengths, there is no doubt that to face the challenges of the 21st century, many things need to be done by the Parliament, the Executive—which has worked in close co-operation with the committee in the publication of our report—and by all those involved either as suppliers or consumers of education and training.

We now face six key challenges. First, we face the knowledge challenge. In days gone by we lived in an agricultural economy; then we lived in a manufacturing economy and then we lived in a service economy. Tomorrow's world is going to be one of a knowledge economy, where knowledge is power and knowledge will rule supreme in determining who is successful and who is not.

Phil Gallie (South of Scotland) (Con): Does the member agree that knowledge extends further than purely the brain and that the hands and the physical traditions of craftsmanship also play a part?

Alex Neil: Absolutely. I want to mention two other aspects of our report. One is citizenship and the need for our young people and others to have knowledge of the role of the citizen in our society. The second aspect is sustainable development, which Robin Harper will no doubt address. That is also critically important.

The knowledge life cycle is rapidly diminishing. It used to be the case that, after one had been to college or university to learn a trade or to study to be a doctor, an accountant or an economist, one could probably have gone through most of the rest of one's working life knowing what there was to know and picking up any additional things that one needed to know without any further formal education or training. Those days have gone forever.

Some of the knowledge that is imparted today will have changed dramatically in a year, or two years, or three years. Therefore, there is a demand for genuine lifelong learning. Education must not be seen just as a one-off experience that lasts from the age of five until the ages of 18 or 22. Learning will have to be a lifetime experience, so that we can stay ahead of the game.

That is why many of our recommendations, such as the lifelong learning log, are designed to take account of the new knowledge economy. The aim is not just to record what people learn, the formal qualifications that they obtain and the informal learning that they undertake, but to use that as a tool to plan their careers and their route to further learning, which will enable them to fully realise their potential. We must face up to the knowledge challenge if we are to compete effectively in the 21st century and to create a socially just and decent society.

The second major challenge is what I call the fairness challenge—the social justice challenge or the access challenge. In spite of all the improvements and all the additional money, it is still a fact of life that someone who is the son or daughter of a banker, an accountant or an MSP has an 80 per cent chance of getting to university, whereas someone who is the child of a farm labourer or a postman has only a 14 per cent chance, on average, of getting to university. We must close that gap, because the children of the postman and the farm labourer are not failing to get to university because they do not have the intellectual ability to do so, but because the system does not work in their favour.

One of the most impressive pieces of evidence that the committee received was given by Linda McTavish, who is the principal of Anniesland College in Glasgow, which is now an excellent institution of learning. She pointed out that those who go through the education system in Scotland could be described by drawing a triangle and slicing it into three sections.

At the tip of the triangle would be the small number of people who get on in life and in education. They have not only the intellectual ability, but the wealth of background to see them through, irrespective of what assistance the state provides. Those are the people who would get on anyway, almost regardless of what we did.

The middle slice would consist of the people who get by. I probably come into the middle slice in only one respect—I am the son of a miner, the grandson of a miner and the great-grandson of a miner. I was the first ever member of the Neil family to get to university. I was only able to do that with the support that I got from tuition fees and grants, coupled with a summer job and the job of delivering the post at Christmas, which I still have to do on occasion. I am one of those who required the assistance of the state to get by. That enabled me to end up with a degree and to get on to the rung.

When we get to the bottom of the triangle, we come to the vast numbers who neither get on nor get by but get nowhere, because they have not had the opportunities in life. In itself, that is bad enough. However, Linda McTavish pointed out to us that, if we invert the triangle and use that as an indicator of how resources are applied to those three groups, we find that the vast bulk of the resources still go to those at the tip of the triangle. Those are the people who get on and largely do not need the resources. A smaller slice goes to those in the middle, but practically little goes to those who are most in need.

Many of our recommendations—such as those on improving the access premium in universities, on targeting part-time returners to learning and mature students, and on trying to get greater equality of esteem between FE and HE—are intended to address the fairness challenge, so that we can get those triangles to lie closer, side by side.

The third major challenge that we face is the demographic challenge. Overall, our population is declining, but our working population is declining particularly rapidly. Let me provide, as an example, two statistics for the area that you represent, Presiding Officer—although I do not mean this to apply to your good self. The truth is that 50 per cent of those in work today in the Borders region will be collecting their pensions by 2010, which is in eight years' time. That is how big our problem of an aging working population is. If we look further ahead for Scotland as a whole, we see that the number of 15 to 19-year-olds coming on to the labour market will decline by one fifth by 2025. We face a demographic time bomb. Part of our challenge in lifelong learning is to address the problems that are created by that situation.

The fourth challenge is the jobs challenge. The official statistics show that Scotland still has 115,000 people who are officially unemployed and collecting benefit. That lies side by side with vacancies in the building trade. In many parts of Scotland, one cannot get a joiner or a slater or an electrician or a plumber. In the oil and gas sector, there are major skills shortages in certain niches. Even in electronics, despite the recent rundowns, we have key niche shortages in project management and general management skills. We need to get far better not only at matching the unemployed to the job opportunities, but in ensuring that, overall, education and training help many more people to use that education and training both for their own and for the community's benefit.

Over a lifetime, the earning power of someone with a degree is equivalent to over £0.5 million in additional income compared with those without a degree. For those with a higher national diploma, their earning power is still about half of that figure. It is in the interests both of individuals and of society to make use of that great reservoir of talent that lies among those, such as the unemployed, who do not get the chance. We need to try to ensure that, more and more, we have programmes such as modern apprenticeships that are geared to the needs of industry.

We believe that the modern apprenticeship programme is an excellent programme. One of the recommendations of our interim report was that the age barrier should be lifted. That has already been done. Among our other recommendations for improving the programme and the way in which we spend the money was that not only should overall targets for such programmes be set, but they should look at the targets that are needed to improve our economic performance as a nation.

The fifth challenge is the resources challenge. I acknowledge the additional real money that has recently been put into the system of higher, further and vocational education and training. It would be churlish not to recognise that additional investment. Compared with other nations, however, we are still underinvesting in our tertiary education and training systems. Canada spends 2.4 per cent of its gross domestic product on tertiary education and training. Denmark spends about one third more than we do. Our rate is approximately 1.2, 1.3 or 1.4 per cent, depending upon how it is measured and in which week the Office for National Statistics publishes the results. It is a fact of life and we all recognise that there will be an increasing need for additional resources and investment in the years to come. There will be a debate about how that resourcing should be done, whether through top-up fees or whatever.

I will say straight away that the Enterprise and Lifelong Learning Committee agreed on day one

to park the issue of student finance. If we had made that an essential part of our report, we would never have reached the stage that we have today. We would have been bogged down in the party-political argument—important though that argument is—on student finance. We therefore parked the issue.

I must, however, make two points. First, the committee is unanimous that whatever future system of funding is put in place, there must be a stream of funding for the institutions and a separate, albeit related, stream of funding for individuals. We cannot give all the money to individuals and let the institutions hang by themselves. We agree that that would be a recipe for disaster.

Secondly, the committee has parked the issue of student finance in order to achieve a unanimous report. However, speaking personally—and most people agree no matter on what side of the fence they sit—we cannot continue to park that issue because it is urgent and must be addressed in the months and years ahead.

The final challenge is that of delivery—mainly to finish delivering my speech 30 seconds within time. I have addressed some issues that will be taken further by my committee colleagues.

I finish by saying that when I consider the challenges that we face in tertiary education and training, I am reminded of the challenge faced by Conrad's mariner when he saw the storm coming. He knew he could not dodge it; he had to face it, he had to fight it and he had to beat it. Let the message go out from today's debate that the Scottish Parliament, the Scottish Executive, funding councils, employers, students and institutions are all going to work together to face up to these challenges so that we do not just make things better for our people, but so that we make our college, university and vocational education the best in the world.

I move,

That the Parliament welcomes the 9th Report 2002 of the Enterprise and Lifelong Learning Committee, *Final Report on Lifelong Learning* (SP Paper 679), and invites the Scottish Executive to take the report into account when developing the new strategy.

The Presiding Officer: I thank the convener for what was a model presentation of the report, if I may say so.

14:58

The Minister for Enterprise, Transport and Lifelong Learning (Iain Gray): I thank the convener of the Enterprise and Lifelong Learning Committee for giving me this opportunity to speak. I congratulate the committee on its report, which is a thorough and wide-ranging analysis of a

complex policy area. The committee has certainly given the Executive food for thought. It is particularly impressive that the committee took evidence from such a wide range of interests, as its convener indicated. It is even more impressive that that vast body of evidence has been distilled into the final report and that the convener distilled the report into his 20 minutes almost exactly.

As the committee is well aware, the Executive plans to produce a new lifelong learning strategy early next year. I confirm that we intend to take full account of the committee's findings in developing that strategy. Today, however, I want to listen and not to give the Executive's definitive position on the committee's recommendations. The report was published only four weeks ago and I will give the committee a considered response when we publish the strategy document early in the new year. In the meantime, the debate gives me the opportunity to listen to the Parliament's views on the committee's proposals. I am grateful for that opportunity.

I have produced an interim response to the report, which has been placed in the Scottish Parliament information centre. It should be clear from that that the Executive has much common ground with the committee. At the most fundamental level, we agree that lifelong learning is crucial.

Like the committee, I believe that a learning culture can lead to more confident citizens, more cohesive communities and a more prosperous economy. All of us—whether we are employed or not and regardless of where we work or what we do—can benefit from learning new skills and developing new interests. As the convener made clear, that is a requirement for us all in this day and age. The people of Scotland and Scottish businesses in the private and public sectors have a huge appetite for learning. By working with providers, employers, trade unions, the work force and all learners, we can harness that appetite so that everyone can realise their potential through learning.

The convener said that in no way did the committee's recommendations suggest that an enormous amount of good practice in lifelong learning did not exist. I echo that. In recent years, the Executive has made several significant structural and funding changes to stimulate demand, expand provider capacity and widen access to learning and training. We are also improving the information, guidance and support that are available to individuals and businesses about the benefits of learning to them. I listed the initiatives that are under way on those matters in my interim response to the report.

Today is about looking towards the future, so I will not dwell on the past. However, the evidence

is that the current lifelong learning system in Scotland is producing some positive results. For example, 50 per cent of Scottish young people participate in higher education by the time that they are 21. More than 65,000 new further education places have been created in Scotland since 1998-99. Three in four people in the Scottish work force are qualified to Scottish credit and qualifications framework level 5 or above, and that figure continues to rise. More than 20,000 Scots are in training for a modern apprenticeship, which is at SCQF level 6. However, the committee is right to say that the future holds significant challenges for us. I am not complacent about our need to face up to those challenges.

Like the committee, I take seriously the forecast changes in Scotland's population. Fewer young people will enter the labour market, so it will be important for us to help those who are in work to reskill and retrain. We must keep up with the demands of our economy and enable young people to enter the world of work with confidence.

Phil Gallie: The minister was right to boast somewhat about the rise in the number of youngsters who go to university. Alex Neil referred to the earning power of those young people. Given the other circumstances to which Alex Neil referred, does the minister feel that the people who might earn the largest sums in the future will be the craftsmen about whom Alex Neil spoke, rather than university entrants? Should parents encourage their youngsters to enter the skilled trades?

Iain Gray: We are proud of our participation rates in higher education. Not all the 50 per cent of young people who are in higher education are in universities—25 per cent are in higher education in the FE sector.

A key concept in the committee's report is parity of esteem. It is important that we ensure that young people are not funnelled into particular channels, but are given the opportunity to choose the channel that is right for them and right for us and our economic growth. That does not mean university or higher education for everyone. The committee made that point powerfully in its report.

Like the committee, I believe that inequality and disadvantage should have no place in a modern, 21st century Scotland. I am convinced that closing the opportunity gap will improve the lives of people in our most excluded communities. That, in turn, will help to make learning of all kinds more attractive to everyone and help to establish the learning culture that we all need for success in the future.

The issues are of interest not only to the Executive and the committee, nor do we alone bear the responsibility for delivering change to

meet the challenges. I am thinking not only of the delivery agents such as the funding councils, enterprise networks and the institutions, but of the employers, the work force, trade unions, learning providers, community groups and individual citizens, all of whom have responsibilities and roles to play, which is why there was such broad engagement in the development of the report.

I have said that there is much common ground between the Executive and the committee. I will quickly give some examples of that. We share the committee's aspirations for widespread stakeholder engagement in lifelong learning policy. We will address that in the strategy. We agree with the committee that learners need and deserve better and more co-ordinated information and advice about learning. All the various players on the lifelong learning field need to work closely together to ensure that learners have easy access to digestible information about the learning that is relevant to them.

Like the committee, I believe that it is essential that the learning opportunities that are available in Scotland are not just of high quality but, as the convener said, of the highest quality. That will be an important strand in the new strategy.

The committee recommended the medium-term merger of the Scottish Higher Education Funding Council and the Scottish Further Education Funding Council. We understand the case that the committee has made for further integration between the councils and we will provide specific proposals on the funding councils in the new strategy.

The committee has made a number of recommendations about work-based learning for young people. We are already working with the enterprise networks to re-engineer the skillseekers programme entirely. We will take serious account of the committee's findings in doing that.

Mr Brian Monteith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): Will the new strategy take into account the findings of the review into higher education that is taking place at Westminster? Will the strategy be published after that, so that it can address the implications for Scottish education of the Westminster review?

Iain Gray: A number of different reviews and processes are going on. As Mr Monteith knows, the Scottish Executive is engaged in a separate review of higher education. I expect that that report will be published a little later than the lifelong learning strategy. I will endeavour to ensure that there is consistency between the two.

I understand that the conclusions of the Whitehall HE review will be available in January. The bulk of the conclusions of that review will apply only in England. Obviously, we will look at

what is said in the review and consider whether there are consequences for Scotland.

Andrew Wilson (Central Scotland) (SNP): Although the conclusions of the Westminster review will apply in the rest of the United Kingdom, does the minister recognise that, if the Government in London chooses to implement top-up fees, the increased dependency of institutions south of the border on fees will have direct implications for the funding of higher education in Scotland, owing to our loss of Barnett consequential? How will the minister deal with that situation? Can he confirm today that the Executive is categorically opposed to top-up fees?

Iain Gray: I think that my reply to Mr Monteith made it clear that we will have to look at whatever changes are proposed for the rest of the UK and consider what consequences those changes might have for Scotland. It would be remiss of us to do anything before we know what the proposals are. However, during the recent discussion about top-up fees, Universities Scotland said:

"We don't think deregulated fees are even worth considering. It is politically off the agenda."

Perhaps one of the most significant proposals in the committee's report is its call for the introduction of an entitlement to learning for all. I think that that is a powerful concept. As I understand it, it is about equity of opportunity and access. However, I believe that the committee recognised the difficulties that are inherent in putting that proposal into practice, particularly in relation to resources. In fact, the committee stated that it is important that entitlement is taken forward

"within the envelope of available resources."

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

The Presiding Officer: I call Brian Fitzgerald—Fitzpatrick, I mean.

Brian Fitzpatrick: I am obliged, Mr Stone.

I do not think that it is any secret to anyone who read the committee's report or participated in its deliberations that the entitlement to learning for all was probably the most heavily soldered, shall we say, aspect of the debate. Does the minister accept that establishing the principle of entitlement is one thing, but that taking that principle forward—if that is recommended to him—will be a key shaping task for the lifelong learning policy, not least because of the implications for funding and stability within several sectors?

Iain Gray: Indeed, not only funding but other aspects are important for taking forward the idea of entitlement. For example, the committee links entitlement to the SCQF, which is clearly important for the development of lifelong learning. However,

the SCQF is in its infancy and there is a great deal of work to do to complete, implement and propagate it. That framework is another aspect that we must ensure is right and robust before we move forward. Our strategy will address that.

Potential learners do not always take up existing learning opportunities, so we must be certain that people are aware of available opportunities and ensure that barriers to access are steadily dismantled. The committee's convener saw that as one of the most important aspects of the report.

None of that is easy. Barriers to access, both real and perceived, are as many, varied and complicated as individual learners are. The provision of co-ordinated services to learners and of help for people to help themselves through the learning pathways are important factors. One of the practical steps that we will take to extend access to learning is to set up a successor scheme to individual learning accounts. We are making good progress on that and I will provide further details in the new strategy.

The committee also recommended that we establish a single funding system for the whole of lifelong learning, albeit one that recognises the differences between the sectors. I understand that the committee is particularly concerned about the differences in funding between the HE and FE sectors.

Care needs to be taken with the way in which figures are analysed. Comparisons of simple averages do not always recognise the complexities within and across sectors. For example, a medical course will always be more expensive than a business studies course. We must not lose sight of the fact that what is really important is that resources are in place in each part of the system to enable the delivery of our objectives at every level. Our strategy must address that.

On a connected point, the committee further suggested that the current lifelong learning system is not cohesive and does not serve learners or business well. The committee made several suggestions for structural change to bring the various elements of the current system closer together. There are some relatively new elements in the system—for example, Careers Scotland and learndirect Scotland—which need time to prove their effectiveness. However, I agree with the overall aim of getting the system to work smoothly and coherently and I will address that in our new strategy.

The committee rightly devoted much space in its report to workplace and vocational training. As the report says, the enterprise networks have an important role to play in supporting work force development and in helping business and the

economy to grow. That is why we placed learning and skills at the heart of our strategy for the networks. The convener is right in his view that it is important to society and the individual that we match skills to the needs and opportunities of the economy. We must provide the framework and opportunities to support an efficient labour market and maximise opportunities for those who enter that market.

A key step is to have a better understanding of how the system works in relation to the skills that employers are looking for and the links between the supply of skills and economic results. The establishment of Futureskills Scotland is a significant step in that direction. The results of its first skills survey are surprising and fascinating. For example, the survey shows that a lack of suitable skills in the work force—skills shortages—is a relatively minor issue, accounting for only one in five vacancies. Probably a more important issue is the skills gap. One in six employers feels that some of their employees have skills deficiencies that limit their performance.

The Executive is not the only player in this arena. We recognise, for instance, the important role that employers have to play. Indeed, we estimate that employers invest some £2 billion in training in Scotland. However, it is clear from the Futureskills Scotland survey and from elsewhere that more could be done to maximise the benefits of that investment. I want employers to do more to develop their work force across the piece. I believe that maximum benefits will result all round if that is done in partnership with employees and their trade unions. There are excellent examples of how that can be done and I am sure that the committee is aware of them.

I want to talk about resources. As with all policy decisions, affordability is an issue and I would be failing in my duties if I did not take it into account. The committee has given us a thorough analysis of the lifelong learning landscape. It has highlighted where it feels that problems arise and has suggested some solutions. The Executive is investing some £2.1 billion in lifelong learning this year. We have increased those resources by 14 per cent over the next three years in our current spending plans, which means that investment will rise to some £2.4 billion by 2005-06. We will then build on the process of deciding where the priorities lie for the future in the new strategy.

It should be clear from what I have said that I broadly agree with the aims and objectives that the committee has set out for lifelong learning in the 21st century. Learning is a lifetime opportunity and a lifetime commitment. As the convener eloquently explained, it is also a lifetime requirement. It can help people to develop in different ways that can enrich their lives, their

careers, our communities and our country. The committee's report is a powerful contribution to the debate about the future of lifelong learning in Scotland. Some difficult challenges lie ahead, but the new strategy is an opportunity to set a clear direction so that all our efforts are focused on meeting those challenges. The committee's report is already influencing the shape of the strategy and this debate is an opportunity for other members to do the same. I urge all members to get involved.

15:18

Mr Adam Ingram (South of Scotland) (SNP): I am pleased to speak in support of a report that has received almost universal acclaim across the political spectrum and among stakeholders. The committee and its staff have done the Scottish Parliament a service, picking their way through a vital but complex area of our national life and fulfilling an ambitious remit to produce a coherent set of recommendations. As the committee's convener said, the report has been the first real attempt to examine all the sectors of lifelong learning as elements in what should be a unified system that will underpin economic success, social justice and full democratic participation for all our citizens.

The report advocates a significant cultural change through the empowerment of the individual to access training and educational opportunities in pursuit of personal development. Crucially, that should mean that no group in society is left out in the cold. Learning will be relevant to everyone, which is far from the case just now. Although we might congratulate ourselves on the fact that 50 per cent of school leavers now enter higher education, we should remember that university entrants still come from predominantly middle-class backgrounds. Children of the wealthiest seventh of the population are five times more likely to go to university than children of the poorest seventh.

The other side of the coin is that 800,000 Scots of working age have low numeracy and literacy skills and 24 per cent of Scots in employment have no qualifications. In addition, financial disincentives and other barriers to entry are placed in the way of thousands of our fellow citizens who might wish to return to full-time or part-time post-school learning.

To address those problems, the committee report advocates unequivocally widening access by targeting disadvantage and redistributing resources to break down or overcome barriers. The SNP supports whole-heartedly such an approach. We believe that providers should be given extra funding to attract and support learners from non-traditional backgrounds and that the

wider access premium for higher education institutions should be increased to 25 per cent. Equally important is the need to ensure that local authorities provide adequate funding to sustain the informal learning that is provided by community and voluntary groups.

Consistent and well-funded support across the lifelong learning spectrum must also be made available to learners, particularly those with disabilities and dependants. Typically, learners in higher education are entitled to support, whereas other learners might be eligible for support. That lack of entitlement is probably the biggest barrier to lifelong learning. The report's advocacy of an extension of entitlement is therefore the key to breaking down the barriers and empowering the individual to seek learning opportunities and qualifications without financial penalty. That would help to establish equality of treatment for all learners.

Part-time learners would be entitled to the same fee arrangements pro rata as full-time students, as entitlement would be equalised among all learners whether in further or higher education. Mature students entering further education would have a clear idea of the support that they would receive rather than take the risk of subjecting themselves to discretionary funding from individual colleges. Similarly, the rules and criteria for funding unemployed learners or those on other benefits would be standardised to secure equality of eligibility.

Those are the kind of system changes that are required to raise demand for learning and skills acquisition among disadvantaged groups. The beauty is that that is achievable by using the groundbreaking Scottish credit and qualifications framework. We do not suggest a big-bang approach, but a few pilot studies would be useful.

In the SCQF, outputs are measured by a points system in which most forms of learning can be accounted for. The committee recommends that everyone should be entitled to the equivalent of six years of study—two years of post-compulsory school education and a four-year degree. However, that entitlement could be used at any level and at any time in one's life. The framework is a simple mechanism to make lifelong learning an accessible and practical individual choice. Therefore, it is disappointing that, in its response to the report, the Executive cannot bring itself to support the principle of entitlement. There are many warm words about widening access but, on entitlement, the Executive says that it

"recognises the difficulties inherent in this concept, and that the extent to which entitlement can be fully realised depends to a considerable degree on how it can be resourced."

Sir Humphrey would be proud of that one. I cannot for the life of me understand what is difficult about the concept of entitlement.

Brian Fitzpatrick: I am sure that Mr Ingram does not want to gloss over what was probably one of the most substantive areas of concern among committee members and the many organisations that participated in the debate at the lifelong learning convention in April. Does he accept that, although we welcome the general principle of entitlement, every sector that participated in the convention agreed that we must scope out what entitlement comprises? No one is running away from the difficult task of clarifying what entitlement means. Indeed, if Mr Ingram would care to, perhaps he will share with us the easy solution that he says he has.

Mr Ingram: I am not denying that there are difficulties in the practicalities of implementing entitlement. I am suggesting that the Executive has not accepted the principle of entitlement. Indeed, it calls the concept of entitlement difficult, which it is not. That suggests to me that the civil service might be dousing our enthusiasm for entitlement.

Entitlement will mean redistribution of resources within the system. Let us take the example of vocational training and workplace learning, for which a major reorientation is required. As Alex Neil pointed out, the demographic fact is that our pool of talented young people is shrinking fast. It is shrinking so fast that 80 per cent of the work force of 2020 is already in work. That means that, if Scotland is to have a well-trained and competitive work force in the future, we must shift the focus of training on to those who are already in work.

To close the skills gap and develop workplace skills requires a complete overhaul of the current system. Too many employers have eschewed upskilling as too difficult and have developed production strategies that require low levels of skill. If we want to move to a high-productivity, high-wage economy, we need to build capacity for workplace learning, with the training of trainers as a key element.

I will give an illustration of what is required. I want to talk about Ayrshire—I see Mr Gallie in the chamber. The expansion of the aerospace industry will be a key driver of economic growth in Ayrshire. However, that growth will be choked if a skilled work force cannot be developed. The basic infrastructure exists. Several companies, such as BAE Systems at Prestwick, operate successful training departments or schools, but those are underutilised by as much as 60 per cent, because companies are training only for their own requirements.

On top of that, disincentives are built into the current funding regime. On average, an

engineering apprenticeship in the United Kingdom costs approximately £40,000 to complete. The subsidy that is available to Scottish employers is only £7,000, compared with £14,000 in England. UK companies such as BAE Systems are therefore discouraged from training more apprentices in Scotland. At the same time, engineering courses are high cost, but FE colleges receive only half the subsidy that their counterparts in higher education get to run engineering courses. Not surprisingly, FE colleges tend to choose to run other, low-cost courses. Those funding anomalies need to be eradicated to allow for the building of training capacity and the development of the skilled work force that is required not only for an expanding aerospace industry in Ayrshire, but across the industrial spectrum.

The committee's report has comprehensively addressed those failures in the system. In that area, as in others, its recommendations are sound and sensible. Taken as a whole, the report sets out the basis of a lifelong learning strategy that is vital to achieving economic competitiveness and social justice. The question is whether the Executive is up to the challenge.

However, as Alex Neil said, the report does not address some key issues, including student finance and the funding of higher education. It would be remiss of us not to broach those subjects in the debate. The questions about the sub-Cubie arrangements that the Executive adopted in its graduate endowment scheme will not go away. To enter higher education still requires a leap of faith by the poorest of students and particularly adults who are entering the system for the first time as mature students. Fear of debt is a clear disincentive.

The Executive must revisit the £10,000 threshold for the graduate endowment scheme. If a threshold is necessary at all—which the SNP does not accept—the Cubie recommendation of a threshold of £25,000 per annum before the graduate endowment kicks in at least approximates to fairness and reduces the disincentive. The Executive pledged to undertake an income and expenditure profile of Scottish students after the new support system had bedded in. We are entitled to ask where the Executive is with that survey.

On funding HE, I am sure that I speak for the majority of MSPs in saying that the introduction of top-up fees, which is advocated in Government circles down south, would be anathema to the Scottish system. Allowing some universities to charge higher fees would create a two-tier system in which wealthy parents could buy advancement for the few at the expense of the many.

Assuming that the Executive rejects the creation of a Scottish ivy league, there is no doubt that such an English initiative would still threaten our system. It is inevitable that rich institutions in the south would draw prestige, research and talented staff away from Scotland. More than that, if Tony Blair succeeds in reducing or holding to the same level public expenditure on English higher education, the knock-on effect on Scottish funding consequentials will be severe. We are entitled to a clear explanation of the Executive's response to that threat.

15:31

David Mundell (South of Scotland) (Con): Churchill has been much in the news this weekend. Lifelong learning was particularly relevant to him. When he became Prime Minister at 65, he said that the whole of his previous life had simply been a preparation for his task in 1940. Indeed, the committee's work in preparing the report might be described as a Churchillian task, given the volume of evidence that was submitted and the time that was consumed in compiling the report. I paraphrase the well-known Churchill saying by noting that the exercise is not the end of the debate on lifelong learning in Scotland; it is not even the beginning of the end of that debate, but it is the end of the beginning of the debate. The debate must open up and, as other members have said, spread wider than the parameters that the committee was required to follow. It must consider the wider funding issues for students and our institutions.

Mr Lloyd Quinan (West of Scotland) (SNP): Will the member take an intervention?

David Mundell: Not at the moment.

I pay tribute to fellow committee members and our clerking team. I pay tribute in particular to Judith Evans, who was heavily involved in drafting and redrafting the report, and to our advisers.

I was particularly pleased that the Crichton campus in Dumfries was one of our case studies—I will dwell on that briefly before returning to the wider report. The Crichton campus is widely acknowledged to be one of the most innovative and exciting educational developments in Scotland in recent years. In less than five years and for a capital outlay of only £14 million, the institutions involved have developed a true campus that is characterised by a willingness to experiment, a desire to collaborate and a degree of mutual trust that is unusual in what otherwise might be seen as competing institutions.

However, the biggest challenge that the Crichton university campus now faces is the necessity to secure adequate funding to allow for consolidation and expansion. For example, recurrent funding

secured to date by the University of Glasgow and the University of Paisley covers the cost of less than one in three students of the current student body, which is growing with demand. That issue requires urgent and satisfactory resolution to meet and support the continued growth in student demand, to integrate HE provision further to add greater value to what might separately be on offer, and to permit the campus to play an important role in economic regeneration and reconfiguration of the area.

In the Executive's response to the committee's report, it stated that it has supported developments at the Crichton campus, but the minister is well aware of the fund-raising issues that the campus now faces. If he is truly committed to bringing higher education to rural areas where it has not previously been available, I urge him to resolve such issues urgently.

It is inevitable that when a report is produced by a diverse group of people from different political parties, it is a compromise. That does not mean that its value is diminished, but that each individual member would not necessarily have produced exactly the same report themselves. Accordingly, there are parts of the report with which I agree more strongly than I do with others. My colleague Annabel Goldie and I were happy to sign up to the report as a whole because we support its general thrust.

Andrew Wilson: On the subject of agreements and disagreements, will David Mundell confirm his party's position on top-up fees? Does he agree with Mr Monteith's reported comments that they are a good idea?

David Mundell: I am sure that Mr Monteith will speak for himself when he participates later in the debate.

My interpretation of the Executive response is that it, too, sees the report as forming the basis of a wider debate on lifelong learning. Such a debate must not be constrained by the agendas of the usual suspects or by self-interest in any part of the sector. Nor must it be constrained by politically correct notions or conventions that are wholly inappropriate to the 21st century.

The big idea in the report is the concept of entitlement and a learner-led system of lifelong learning. Not only am I personally enthusiastic about the concept, but the Scottish Conservative party fully supports it. As my colleague Annabel Goldie was always keen to highlight to the committee, it was impossible for the committee to make concrete proposals without being able to demonstrate how those would be resourced. The committee was not in a position to do that, because of the limited resources available to it.

The concept of entitlement and learner-led lifelong learning merits full investigation. The full weight of Executive resources should be put into analysing how that can be implemented in a way that does not cause immediate chaos among providers or create false expectations among students that they can study anything that they want wherever they want. That cannot and should not be the approach because there will still be a need for entry requirements, for example, and inevitably there will be constraints on available resources in fields such as medicine.

The report also refers to Scottish Enterprise. The Conservative approach to Scottish Enterprise is that it should take the leading role in the facilitation of skills development and training for business. That must be its prime and overriding task. It should become the oil in the machine that facilitates business training and development needs.

As other members have said, we are moving to a wholly different economic and employment environment in Scotland. For years, many politicians have sought the holy grail of full employment. Now, owing to population change and demographics, we may find ourselves struggling to have all the people whom we need with the relevant skills to carry out the essential work in Scotland. Rather than creating new employment opportunities, the challenge will be to fill those that already exist with people who have the requisite skills to do the jobs. That is why there must be a sea change in Scottish Enterprise's approach. Its primary function must be the development of skills and training but it must not run the tick-list programmes with which it has been associated in the past and which have so devalued its reputation in many areas.

Iain Gray: That seems to be a reasonable aspiration for Scottish Enterprise. I cannot resist the opportunity to ask Mr Mundell whether what he says is a sea change from the previously expressed view of the Scottish Conservatives, which was that Scottish Enterprise should be abolished and the money used to cut business rates.

David Mundell: Mr Gray will find that, in the process of developing policy, individual members of the party suggested that approach, but it will not be the party's policy.

We must see an end to young people being put on programmes so that targets can be met. Business must be supported in pursuing training and development opportunities. The new facilitative approach from Scottish Enterprise, combined with business learning accounts—if they prove to be successful in pilot projects—could make a significant difference to business learning.

The report also calls for a lifelong learning strategy to be developed and the Executive has said that it will do that. As I said in an article in *The Sunday Times* at the weekend—I was most encouraged by what the minister said in response to Phil Gallie's intervention—I hope that that strategy will challenge a seeming obsession with higher education and finally put to the test the much-vaunted shibboleth that economic success is inextricably linked to the number of youngsters who go to university.

For too long, all that parents have heard from our schools and politicians is that their child's aspiration should be to go to university. I used to subscribe to that view and it is still right for many people. I would not stand in the way of any school leaver who wants to go to university. However, that is different from arguing that almost all of them should go, especially at the age of 17 or 18 when a range of other opportunities exists.

The reality is that the needs of our economy depend more on having skilled youngsters on the shop floor than on having youngsters in the lecture hall. The laudable aim that background should not inhibit access to higher education, which has often been argued for at the committee, has somehow been translated into the view that the measure of Scotland's social and economic success is the percentage of people who enter higher education on leaving school. That concept is promulgated by the Government and the education establishment, but it must be challenged if there is to be a meaningful debate about lifelong learning and its relationship to our economic prospects.

We must continue to ensure that every child in Scotland has the opportunity to fulfil their potential and to go to university if they meet the entrance requirements and if such a move is right for them. However, we should not force young people from all backgrounds into believing that if they do not opt for a university education immediately after leaving school, they will fail their families, schools and communities. I accept that there are still major barriers to access, but we must face the fact that, although we have never had more students in further and higher education, Scotland is in recession for the first time in more than 20 years and the business birth rate has seldom been lower.

The Executive's lifelong learning strategy must start to tackle the social and cultural bias that leads our society to place more value on attaining higher education, whatever its form, than it places on a person's ability to contribute socially and economically. That attitude has led to a culture that devalues the skills that are essential for day-to-day living, such as plumbing and joinery, and which pushes young people into media studies courses, which have little or no intrinsic value to the individual or to society at large.

Many theories have been set out as to why in Britain we have a seeming aversion to jobs that involve service. I point out for our SNP colleagues that I do not believe that Scotland is any different. We must face up to that institutional discrimination if we are to achieve economic success and ensure that vital services are carried out. The class war might be over, but a new elite is in place that attempts to exclude those who have not sought betterment through higher education. That is why the real gem in the committee's report is the call to provide more support for alternative routes to degree-level qualification by removing the barriers to part-time and mature student learning. We need courses that can dovetail with individuals' careers or career aspirations.

Although politicians rabbit on constantly about there being no such thing as a job for life any more, we still expect youngsters to select a career at 16 and then to get the qualifications to make that possible. Instead, we should support people in taking an incremental approach to the development of a portfolio of qualifications and skills. I accept that studying when under other life pressures is a challenge and such pressures should never be underestimated. I know that studying shortly after my first son was born was a lot more difficult than when I was at university and had to worry only about whether I had enough money to go to the pub.

We must celebrate young people who choose to go into work when they leave school with the same fervour as that with which we celebrate those who go into higher education, provided that the choice to go into work is theirs and is not driven by poverty, a failure of the school system or a lack of awareness of the options. We must also support employers or, even better, those who run their own businesses, with development at work by allowing access to further and higher education as and when people choose to enter it. Such an approach will achieve the optimum outcome for the economy and will create respect for education, rather than turning it into a sausage machine. If that approach underpinned the Executive's lifelong learning strategy, that would be an economic and educational revolution for Scotland.

15:44

Tavish Scott (Shetland) (LD): David Mundell's speech was thoughtful and provocative. I look forward to the views that were outlined in the Conservatives' opening speech being widely contradicted in their closing speech by Mr Monteith.

The debate is broadly consensual. I associate myself with the comments of the convener of the Enterprise and Lifelong Learning Committee on the work of the clerks, the advisers and the former

minister, Wendy Alexander. I welcome the positive response from the present Minister for Enterprise, Transport and Lifelong Learning, Iain Gray, and thank all those who gave evidence, as did Alex Smith—sorry, I meant Alex Neil. I am dominated by thoughts of Ross County's new manager.

The Parliament recognises that a growing economy is central to its role in promoting active citizenship in both formal and informal education.

I will mention briefly some of the points that the minister made in his opening speech. It is a positive step that we are to push forward on ILAs in the forthcoming strategy. Many of us will look forward to that. I hope that, when the minister brings that matter forward, he will pay particular attention to the role of learning centres, which regard that mechanism as important in their work.

My second point is on the strategy recognising the role of the Scottish credit and qualifications framework and the principle of entitlement. Mr Ingram—who has now left the chamber—was slightly unfair. Paragraph 8 of the Executive's interim response states that it

"recognises the difficulties inherent in this concept".

I am convinced that Mr Gray is more than up to dealing with Sir Humphrey, as Mr Ingram described him, in progressing that concept and turning the committee's ideas—which we recognise are not easy and cannot be introduced overnight—into reality. That is an objective that the committee and Parliament share.

My third point is the one that the minister raised about building blocks. The committee always accepted that Careers Scotland, learndirect Scotland and Futureskills Scotland were building blocks for the on-going work to build a lifelong learning strategy. The minister's remarks are accepted in that context.

Paragraph 14 of the Executive's interim response deals with

"the connectivity between the demands of the learning and labour markets":

in particular, the need

"to meet employers' future skills needs",

and the importance of getting

"the right mix of different learning opportunities and routes through the learning landscape".

For the Liberal Democrats, the core issue in the lifelong learning strategy is balancing the demand for skills and the need to address skill shortages and skills deficiencies in Scotland's economy, which the Futureskills Scotland document has illustrated, against an individual's choice of learning. The ability to access learning, the barriers to learning and the routes are all issues

that need to be tackled, but balancing the economy's needs against individual choice is at the heart of a debate that the committee pondered over and discussed at length.

After all, the world moves on apace. I read the other day that Microsoft's global vision is now

"to empower people through great software—any time, any place and on any device."

I suppose that that is a play on the Martini advert. The point is that the culture of being chained to one's desktop and personal computer has gone. Microsoft is not alone in embracing mobility. In the past week, Dell, the world's largest PC maker, has launched hand-held computers. The pace of change is huge and the development of ever more advanced mobile processing and communication technologies is becoming ever quicker. The industry giants—Microsoft, in computing, and Nokia, in mobile telephony—now believe that the pocket communicator will overtake the PC, just as the PC overthrew the mainframe computer 20 years ago. Such changes, driven by the needs of consumers who are increasingly on the move, provide dynamic and exacting challenges to an emerging economy. The challenge for Scotland is to produce skilled people to fulfil the opportunities in the new technologies.

As the minister and other members have said, the frequent business surveys show that the number 1 concern that comes under the powers and responsibilities of the Scottish Parliament is skills shortages and deficiencies posing the greatest impediment to success. Therefore, it is important to consider the routes through learning and the choices that we ask not only of young people, but of people who return to learning throughout their lives. It is right to develop a genuine debate about the routes that young people take at school, for example. Not for all is academic brilliance, as many eloquent witnesses have told the committee. I emphasise that it is right to consider appropriate routes through education and to encourage with the right careers support both vocational and academic roads on an equal basis.

I turn briefly to the vocational route. In my constituency, there are several small businesses that are run by men and women who left school and took a craft apprenticeship. One such person, David Henry, comes to mind. He now runs an engineering business, and he won a Shell livewire prize just last year. His business, which tunes engines for fishing and marine vessels, is exactly the type that we need to support.

The vocational route can be paved with gold. To pick up on points made by Phil Gallie and by the convener, employment in the construction industry has grown by about 100,000 in the United

Kingdom as a whole since 1990. Output is up by 1.6 per cent in 2002, and a 2.4 per cent increase is forecast for next year in Scotland. The inevitable labour shortages have pushed up pay rates, hence our personal experiences in seeking to get hold of electricians, plumbers or other skilled workers.

The Construction Industry Training Board reckons that the industry needs to recruit 27,500 people over the next five years. Construction embodies the skills deficiencies of the Scottish economy, but a similar picture is painted for the oil and gas, financial and manufacturing sectors. The oil and gas institute of technology should be based in Aberdeen to examine those points. In fairness to the CITB, which is the responsible body for the construction industry, it recognises the requirement to attract new people into the industry.

Construction jobs have to be made attractive, which is why they are now advertised in *Loaded* and *Cosmopolitan*, as I read. As is the case in medicine, a fully trained plumber or electrician will not appear overnight, as apprenticeships commonly last four years. Changes are required for the medium and long terms; they will not be achieved by politicians by next May. That is why the committee was right to take a good length of time in which to come up with its conclusions and recommendations.

The vocational route must be developed in parallel with the academic route, with equal weight given to each. The principle of parity of esteem was repeatedly, and rightly, voiced by Marilyn Livingstone over the past year. Instead of talking down one route, as some might choose to do, I believe that Parliament should talk up both routes equally.

I do not observe any great ideological opposition to the direction that Wendy Alexander set out in "A Smart, Successful Scotland", which concentrates on building a knowledge-based economy. There is no incompatibility between having a knowledge-based economy and recognising the importance of vocational routes through learning. Rather, the approach is born of economic and social necessity.

The renewable energy sector can and should be a great Scottish economic success story, developing wave, tidal and other forms of new technology, using Scotland's intellectual capital and commercialising that knowledge. Scotland lost the wind-farm technology race to Denmark; we must not lose the races for other new technologies to other nations. We must be able to commercialise the knowledge in our universities and secure the huge economic spin-offs of the introduction of such new technologies. With engineering talent and through the work of companies from throughout Scotland, we can

develop those industries and the associated opportunities.

That approach is helped—Scottish Enterprise has certainly grasped this point—by the connection between learning and enterprise. The proof of concept fund, which moves university research into commercial projects, began with £6 million in 1999 and will reach £33 million in 2005. That must be the right approach.

Part of that approach must focus on attracting more young people into science disciplines, where there is a good Scottish story to tell, but where there is much more to be done, not least because the annual economic rate of return on academic research is estimated at between 20 per cent and 28 per cent. Many pounds spent means a big bang. That investment is badly needed to train new scientists against a background of a steady number of people sitting standard grade science and a worrying 15 per cent fall in the number of people sitting higher biology, chemistry or physics.

The knock-on effect of that in universities is significant, with a 34 per cent fall in applications and acceptances for degree courses in science. There is the challenge for public policy makers: science needs to be a career in the making and an alternative to others. However, when we debate such matters as Dolly the sheep, the measles, mumps and rubella vaccine or genetically modified crops, we do not give science a fair crack of the whip. The public policy debate on BSE was instructive. It was the best recent example of how not to make science an attractive career for young people. I hope that people will reflect on that. The problem is with the way in which policy makers evaluate scientific evidence, rather than with science per se.

Phil Gallie: Does Tavish Scott take the same view of the relationship between science and the fishing industry?

Tavish Scott: Absolutely. That was a clever try. As Mr Gallie knows, in fishing it is not enough to assess just one piece of science. That is the problem with the stance that the European Commission has adopted on the issue. If the member would like me to speak for 12 minutes on the science of the fishing industry, I can do so.

On Monday night I attended a board meeting of Firth and Mossbank Enterprise—FAME. The agency seeks to build new community initiatives. It deals with the people about whom many of us thought during the inquiry—for example, the single mother with three children who did not have the best start, did not receive a full education and now wants to gain from the learning experience. The strategy must help and focus on people of that sort. In the coming months Mr Gray will report to Parliament on the conclusions that he has reached

for the strategy. I hope that it will be targeted on those very people.

15:56

Brian Fitzpatrick (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (Lab): I associate the Labour party with the thanks that the convener of the Enterprise and Lifelong Learning Committee expressed to the committee clerks and support staff, to former and current members of the committee, and to both ministers with whom the committee interacted during the inquiry.

Particular thanks are due to the many organisations that commented on the issues that the inquiry raises. I found the lifelong learning convention both helpful and unhelpful in parts. The committee is considering how best to take evidence and making recommendations about practice across the Parliament. On the whole, the convention was a helpful method of providing organisations, their members and those whom they represent with real influence in shaping ideas and debate. Those who go in for biblical analysis will be interested in the difference between the interim report and the final report. It is a feature of the report that people's remarks and observations were taken on board.

My register of interests records that I am a member of Amicus-AEEU and of the Faculty of Advocates—both institutions that are learning providers. In listening to Alex Neil, I was reminded that many members of the Parliament are, as Neil Kinnock put it, the first in 1,000 generations to have access to higher education. No one is suggesting that access to higher education is the be-all and end-all—certainly the committee's report does not suggest that. However, no one should pretend that we have finished providing equity of access. Labour members, with others, will stick to the task of ensuring that, regardless of circumstances, able children and people across the life range have the greatest opportunity to achieve their full potential.

Alex Neil said that we have parked the issue of student support. That is an important issue to which we must return. Just as important is how we share the costs of tuition. We cannot run away from that matter. The notion that mass participation in higher education and increased quality come at no cost and that supporting quality in research and development can be done from within the same envelope cannot be sustained. On another day we must debate those issues seriously. The Cubie report shone some light on how we may proceed. I am hostile to top-up fees, because of the barrier that they may represent to students while they are studying or to those who are contemplating study. However, despite Adam Ingram's comments, these are complex issues.

We may find a simple solution, but we will do so only by working through complexity.

The committee has noted the achievements of people in Scotland. We tend to great glumness about our achievements. In paragraph 127 of our report, we acknowledge that having 50 per cent of Scottish young people in higher education is a world-class achievement—despite the problems and challenges that we still face. We should celebrate it, we should be prepared to look behind it to see who those children are and we should acknowledge the opportunity that it offers.

Graduate training versus vocational training or work-force development are false dichotomies. We are not in an either/or situation and some of the earlier speeches hinted at that. The context that we set for ourselves in the report is the imperative for change, which there is no running away from. We have big objectives in the debate, such as increasing participation in life-wide as well as lifelong learning, making learning not just for the many but for everyone, and not just having an economic obsession but concentrating on cultural, citizenship, social and sustainable-development issues as well.

I want to touch briefly on a couple of important issues in relation to the comments on work-force development and trade union learning. I encourage the minister to acknowledge the difficulties that are experienced by informal and community learning organisations and trade unions in relation to bid funding.

16:01

Mr Lloyd Quinan (West of Scotland) (SNP): I thank the Enterprise and Lifelong Learning Committee and its advisers and clerks for a very fine report and for the fact that they have addressed disability issues—specifically those that affect people with autistic spectrum disorder and Asperger's syndrome.

People with ASD and Asperger's syndrome have what is termed a hidden disability. Although we have some fine practice in this country, there is no question but that we require many more support agencies and trained individuals to assist in the development of an equal and fair opportunity in life for the sufferers of ASD and Asperger's syndrome and their parents and carers.

I particularly commend to the minister pages 30 and 31 of the report and the recommendations at paragraphs 166 and 169. The recommendation at paragraph 166 is to

“review the arrangements for supporting learners with disabilities in light of the evidence received during this inquiry.”

More important, the recommendation at paragraph 169 is:

“We recommend that Careers Scotland, as well as all publicly-funded learning providers, have clear guidelines to assist in early identification and referral for a range of special needs including dyslexia, dyspraxia and autistic spectrum disorders.”

I make some suggestions to the minister that are the product of a report that was written for Stevenson College on the 15-24 inclusiveness project, which is one of too few fine projects in this country. For far too long lifelong learning for people with ASD has been carried out in the home by their parents, who have also been on a journey of lifelong learning. Only with the creation of the Parliament was the issue highlighted to the extent that there is greater and highlighted public awareness of it. The principal issues are of transition. The transitions that sufferers of the syndrome make are, like learning, lifelong. The transition begins in the home, then we have to provide clear transitions to the nursery, to primary and secondary school, to college and university and into work. At present, apart from Stevenson College and the work of the Scottish Society for Autism, little is done in those areas.

Beaumont College in Lancaster is a college for people with not just ASD but other disabilities. Students there can get qualifications in transitional issues. I ask the minister to think seriously about recommending that the Scottish Qualifications Authority develop a programme of learning based around certificates in communication and supported living, in supported independent living and personal development and in vocational studies. The combination of those three qualifications for people with ASD would provide us with a great number of people who could assist in our work force. It is often said that people with ASD have a learning disability. I reverse that assertion: the reality is that we have an inability to educate people with ASD.

There is a baseline for my suggestions: the minister must reconsider providing full funding for the Scottish Society for Autism's excellent centre and school in Alloa. Without that, we cannot make progress.

16:05

Mary Scanlon (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I am pleased to support the Enterprise and Lifelong Learning Committee's report on lifelong learning, which I find comprehensive. I would like to highlight some of the points that it contains.

Although I did not contribute to the committee's inquiry, my speech is based on my experience in further and higher education as a lecturer in economics and business studies for the past 20 years. I taught mixed ages and abilities and never

taught the same subject two years in a row. I taught university-level courses for the university of the Highlands and Islands, the University of Abertay Dundee and the Open University. In further education, we were all expected to teach 24 hours a week, whereas someone who lectures at a university would be unlikely to be asked to teach 24 hours a month. I raise that point because, in the past two decades, further education has been flexible and innovative and, in many ways, has met all the challenges that have been set through business, industry and education. There is a concern that we are beginning to look to FE for education and degrees on the cheap.

Last week, I went to Inverness College's graduation ceremony. I heard the principal say how much he was struggling to get rid of the college's financial deficit at the end of the year. Some of my ex-colleagues from Inverness College told me that they were the lowest-paid lecturers in Scotland. When they see that teachers have a 21 per cent increase, their morale is affected. I am not saying that the teachers' increase is not deserved, but it is important that we think of other sectors. Many of us looked with envy at teachers who taught the same subject and often the same grade year after year.

I was delighted by the recommendation in paragraph 157 of the report, on the promotion of learning among elderly people. I recently visited a care home in Edinburgh for the Church of Scotland, where I discovered that internet access and e-mail had been set up for elderly residents. The fact that those facilities were set up at the request of the residents shows that they are moving forward.

The recommendation in paragraph 215 is on the development of lifelong learning through the workplace, which the minister and many other members mentioned. We need to do more about integrating and articulating business training. Many years ago, two young chaps came along for an interview for the national certificate, HNC and HND in accounting. Rather than undertake the course, one of them decided to take up a youth training scheme apprenticeship in the Royal Bank of Scotland. At the end of all his training, the one who took the qualifications in accounting went for a job in the Royal Bank. His manager turned out to be the person who started as a YTS trainee. That confirms much of what many members have said.

I felt passionate about the recommendation in paragraph 169, which is about the early identification of special needs. I can add nothing to what Lloyd Quinan said. It was shocking for many of us in further education, who had no training on dyslexia, to see garbled letters and words. The first time that students with dyslexia saw an

educational psychologist was at the age of 18 and 19. Much more has to be done about that.

As has been mentioned, paragraph 235 recommends the establishment of a centre of excellence for e-learning. Nowhere is more innovative than the University of Abertay Dundee.

I feel strongly about the recommendation in paragraph 141. I recognise that the committee has highlighted good practice in community education in North Lanarkshire and Fife. However, councils throughout the country should be asked why they are allowing community education to wither on the vine. Health and fitness centres are becoming the environment of the elite because they are so expensive to join, while community education facilities are grossly under-utilised.

I am not sure that access to learning for prisoners was highlighted in the report, but prisoners should have the same access to learning and self-respect as others have.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Mr Murray Tosh): You must come to a close.

Mary Scanlon: My final point is about class. For many people in further education, the issue was not the class that they came from but the fact that their confidence had been knocked out of them because they had been humiliated by a teacher in their youth. As an FE lecturer, I was delighted to help to bring back that confidence for many.

16:11

Nora Radcliffe (Gordon) (LD): I will make three brief points. The first is a pragmatic one. We should recognise the importance of the internet and how it can be used effectively. We need to look at why the roll-out of broadband is rolling to a halt and what barriers are in the way of providing broadband access across Scotland.

My second point is that it is important to get the people of the right intellectual ability into university. The right way of doing so is not to put everybody there.

My final and most important point is that Scotland will not prosper until we achieve the magical parity between manual skills and academic or intellectual skills. We must put our money where our mouth is and look at the status that we give to craftsmanship and manual skills. If we look at where the funding streams go, we find that, across the spectrum of learning, skills and education, everything is turned towards turning out far too many B-class academics and far too few A-class craftsmen.

16:12

Rhona Brankin (Midlothian) (Lab): Like my colleagues, I am delighted to be able to speak in

today's debate. I start by declaring an interest: I am on unpaid leave of absence from the University of Dundee.

I join my colleagues in welcoming the visitors to the gallery. I also pay tribute to the many individuals and organisations that engaged enthusiastically with the debate in what was quite a long process. However, here we are: we have a report that recognises Scotland's great strengths while squarely facing up to the challenges that lie before us.

As several members have said, closing the opportunity gap is one of the biggest challenges that face us in lifelong learning. Although more than 50 per cent of Scottish young people enter some form of higher education from school, the percentage of youngsters from working-class backgrounds who get that opportunity is still only 14 per cent. The further education sector and informal and voluntary sector routes into higher education are particularly important for students who do not have a tradition of university or college education in the family.

If I may take the liberty of taking a small diversion from the committee's report, as the MSP for Midlothian I want to draw the Parliament's attention to the work that is done by Newbattle Abbey College. The college is the only adult residential college in Scotland that provides a second chance at education for the many learners who still leave school without university entrance qualifications. The college accepts students in their 20s right up to their 70s and 80s. In many cases, it provides an important route out of poverty and has the power to change people's lives.

A huge amount of informal and voluntary sector learning takes place throughout Scotland. I welcome the development of the people's network, which is developing learning centres in the library sector.

The committee's recommendation on entitlement would mean that those who leave school with qualifications below level 6 in the SCQF would be entitled to learning provision that would bring them up to that level. The committee welcomes the work that has been done to date in setting up the SCQF. Scotland is leading the way in setting up a single, integrated qualifications framework. The committee and I believe that the SCQF is central to creating a link between the worlds of work and learning. I urge that the often bite-sized chunks of informal learning that are so important for second-chance learners gain credit in the SCQF. I welcome the minister's commitment to introducing a successor scheme to individual learning accounts.

Committee members will not be surprised that I would like to talk about quality in lifelong learning.

As we have heard today, much of the provision in Scotland is of the highest quality. However, the committee heard evidence about the cumbersome and sometimes burdensome quality systems that are in place. Lifelong learning is a paradise for acronyms, whether it is SQMS, SQA, SHEFC, HMIE—Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Education—or whatever.

Different quality systems have different purposes. The committee believes that existing arrangements do not represent value for money, provide sufficient consistency across the sectors, or ensure high-quality provision, particularly of vocational training. Our recommendation to create a single quality-assessment body that is independent of funders and providers and that reports directly to ministers is feasible and practical. There is no reason why we cannot have a common framework for quality assurance. Indeed, HMIE and Quality Assurance Agency procedures have many common features.

The central idea that underpins the committee's report is the placing of the individual, the social partners and the nation's employers at the centre. Our challenge is to move from a provider-led approach to one that is consumer driven. I am delighted to be able to support the final report on lifelong learning.

16:17

Robin Harper (Lothians) (Green): Yesterday lunch time, I met ALFiE—the adult learners forum in Edinburgh—and I pay tribute to its work. I will quote one recommendation from its briefing paper, and I will provide a copy of the bill of rights to the minister. The forum fully supports the committee's views on entitlement, but

"argues that entitlement should stretch to the right to be involved in the decision and policy making process at all levels. ALF has drawn up a bill of rights for adult learners which outlines the entitlements that adult learners feel are essential to their full involvement. Adult education, in all its guises, should be considered a right rather than a luxury."

I congratulate Alex Neil and the committee on their work. I also congratulate Mr Neil on his uncanny prescience in guessing the other issue that I am going to address this afternoon. There is a significant omission from the report that was raised on several occasions during the consultation. The importance of lifelong learning to the achievement of sustainable development has not been mentioned in the committee's report and is not mentioned in the Executive's interim response to the report.

The committee's report argues that the importance of lifelong learning lies in its contribution to economic development, social justice and citizenship. That is an important recognition of the breadth of the influence of

lifelong learning and it moves in the direction of acknowledging that lifelong learning is important for sustainable development, but it does not go far enough.

The Executive has acknowledged that sustainable development should be central to its policy making. The First Minister has personally supported the auditing of the activities of the Executive according to the principles of environmental justice and sustainable development.

Brian Fitzpatrick: Will the member give way?

Robin Harper: I would really rather not.

To meet the demands of sustainable development, it is vital for the stakeholders in Scotland's economy to participate in shaping our economic development towards sustainability. In its submission to the committee's consultation on lifelong learning, the organisation Education 21 argued that

"A Scottish strategy for lifelong learning can play an important role in achieving the Scottish Executive's policy of putting sustainable development at the heart of all policies. The challenge of sustainable development requires learning for innovation and enterprise in all sectors of society, including business, government, civil society and citizen."

Further evidence was given by Friends of the Earth Scotland, expressing the key concern that sustainable development should be included explicitly as an objective of lifelong learning. Friends of the Earth gave a considerable list of reasons for that, some of which I might read to members, depending on time.

Sustainable development incorporates the objective of economic development, but only economic development that is compatible with social and environmental justice. Sustainable development involves integrating the objectives that the report discusses separately—economic development, social justice and citizenship—and goes further than those objectives, by considering the interests of future generations. Sustainable development implies economic development that relies less on the over-consumption of energy and natural resources.

Whatever the reasons for omitting sustainable development—perhaps that was an oversight by the committee—I would like the minister to give a commitment that the Executive's lifelong learning strategy will incorporate sustainable development as a clear objective.

16:21

Christine Grahame (South of Scotland) (SNP): I congratulate the Enterprise and Lifelong Learning Committee on its report. I will focus on

the structure and methodology for funding further and higher education colleges, particularly in rural areas. I do that against the background of the Audit Scotland report that says that two thirds of colleges in Scotland are in financial difficulties. We all want education to be a lifelong experience, but the practicalities are making that extremely difficult.

I say that in the context of the situation in the Borders with the Heriot-Watt University campus at Galashiels and Borders College—particularly its campus in Hawick. It is proposed that Borders College should centralise its facilities in Galashiels and close the Hawick campus. That flies in the face of the worthy sentiments about social inclusion.

The proposal comes on the back of general financial difficulties throughout the area and particular difficulties in Borders College. I understand that, from 1976 to 1995, the unit of resource—what the college receives per student—lost 40 per cent of its value in real terms. The college now has 800-plus students, but less funding.

Social inclusion also seems to work against rural colleges. I understand that Borders College received £3,800 for that plus a remoteness component of £250,000. Social inclusion payments are calculated on a postcode basis. In Glasgow, each college will receive £330,000. The committee's report addressed some of those issues, which I will come to.

Borders College has had to make people redundant. The number of teaching staff has reduced from 105 to 72. Despite a petition with 8,000 signatures, retaining the Hawick campus will be difficult. That petition is winging its way to the minister with comments for his support.

I understand that the weighting system also works against rural colleges. For instance, 14 students are needed for a bricklayers course, 15 for hairdressing and 10 to 11 for land-based courses. When that is combined with the effect of higher still in rural areas, the result is fewer students. Unless Borders College can cross-subsidise, such courses will go, because the college cannot draw down the funding. That is why I fully support recommendation 180, which says:

"We recommend that the development of a future funding system for learning providers includes weighting to adequately reflect the costs of provision in remote and island areas."

That issue was also brought to my attention by Heriot-Watt University, which is trying to share facilities with Borders College. A bit of territoriality is involved in that, but the university acknowledges that it requires to co-ordinate more, because the institutions are complementary, not in competition with each other.

The Heriot-Watt campus in the Borders has had to reduce its capacity. It has 650 students. Its senior academics told me about the 40 per cent reduction in the unit of resource, which will mean 15 to 18 staff redundancies. The university has difficulties because of the way in which it runs its courses. It provides tuition on the basis of one tutor to one student, but the funding supposes one teacher to a number of students, so the university loses out.

Those concerns are great and present difficulties in a rural area that has the highest proportion of elderly people in its population, as has been said. Fifty per cent of people there will retire by 2010 and they will require to be retained. If young people leave the Borders to attend college or university elsewhere, the situation is simple: they do not return. I repeat that they do not come back—they stay where they are and, even worse, they emigrate, either south to England or to other countries.

I make a plea to the minister for funding for rural colleges and the campuses of universities in rural areas, both of which have particular difficulties.

16:25

Mr Kenneth Macintosh (Eastwood) (Lab): It is difficult to do justice to the report in four minutes, but that is a common complaint of all back benchers. I will look at only a couple of areas, but before I do so, I want to mention the background to the report.

As colleagues know, the report was a long time in its gestation. In many ways, the process of pulling the report together was as important as any of its individual findings or recommendations. I would like to think that the Enterprise and Lifelong Learning Committee managed not only to unite the disparate views of the 11 members of the committee but to reflect the concerns and views of the overwhelming majority of the Scottish education community. As members can imagine, that is no easy task.

I hope that we have helped to build a consensus for change. The Executive will still need to provide a lead, but the desire to implement a national lifelong learning strategy and the principles that underpin it are now clear. Alex Neil made the point in his opening address that no matter how radical some of the committee's proposals may appear, we are building on a success story.

The Scottish Parliament is a young parliament and one of our proudest achievements is to have put in place measures that enable and encourage more than half of our school leavers to go on to further and higher education. Our higher education sector in particular, which I suspect at one point may have felt under threat from the committee's

inquiry, is at the forefront of international scientific research and academic excellence.

We need to make progress on issues about widening access and allowing opportunity for all. However, we should not for one second decry or diminish the successes that are already there. The two main issues that I wish to address are illuminated by case studies that were undertaken by committee members.

The first case study examined the experience of one young student on a skillseekers programme who gave evidence to the committee. The young woman worked in a shop and when asked what her training consisted of, replied that she was not sure but that it seemed to involve being monitored once a fortnight by a supervisor who ticked boxes on her form. There was no engagement between the learner and the learning provider. When pushed during questioning, the student did not seem to be aware of any choice in the course that she had signed up to.

I hope that that student was the exception rather than the rule. I know that the committee as a whole found the modern apprenticeship scheme to be highly regarded. However, the student's experience showed up many of the problems that have to be overcome in the current system. As my colleague Rhona Brankin mentioned, quality assurance and audit systems proliferate, yet quality of education and training, particularly in vocational education, is not always assured. Huge sums of public money are being invested in education, but the students themselves are not necessarily liberated by that investment. One of the committee's key conclusions is that we must develop systems that allow funding to follow the learner rather than shoehorn students into courses that are of little personal or, to be frank, wider commercial benefit.

The second case study looked at the experience of students and providers at the John Wheatley College in Easterhouse. Alex Neil rightly said that early on in the inquiry we put to one side student support issues in the interests of agreement and to help focus the inquiry. However, the second case study found that student support was a fundamental problem for most of the learners and potential learners for the surrounding community in Easterhouse.

Students spoke of having to take a cocktail approach to funding—they had to trade one benefit against another. That is an issue that the Government in Scotland and across the UK will need to address. Another problem that was illuminated at John Wheatley College was one of culture and the pressing need to establish a culture of learning.

One of the biggest difficulties that the college faces is to get learners across the doorstep and

into the college. That was particularly the case with the older age group and with men more than women. The college found it difficult to reach out to local people and persuade them that learning was for them. The college found that the expectations of the young men who signed up were unrealistic. When asked what sort of job they would like to do, the young men talked about working as steel workers or riveters—jobs that hardly exist in Scotland any more.

The concept of entitlement—of a right to learn—is the most important contribution that our committee has made to the debate. Whatever reservations may exist about implementation, we must create a culture in which everyone, no matter what their background, aspires to make the most of their abilities by wanting to train, study, reskill and learn. That right, or entitlement, needs to be supported by the appropriate mechanisms.

When I woke up this morning, I was greeted by the welcome news of the success of schools in East Renfrewshire. I am proud of the achievement of the young people in my constituency and delighted that more than 70 per cent of school leavers in that area go on to further and higher education. However, I want to create an environment in which those who did not go straight from school to college do not give up on learning.

The opportunities and platform offered by the comprehensive schools of East Renfrewshire should be available to all our communities and age groups. I believe that the Enterprise and Lifelong Learning Committee's report marks a major step in the right direction and I urge the Executive to accept and implement our findings.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We will have a brief contribution from Phil Gallie.

16:30

Phil Gallie (South of Scotland) (Con): Thank you for shoehorning me in, Presiding Officer. I, too, offer congratulations and backslapping to Alex Neil.

The report is a widespread one and I acknowledge that I have not had time to go through its detail in the way that members of the Enterprise and Lifelong Learning Committee have done. However, I was disappointed in the report's introduction because it seemed to remove economic development as an objective. I think that economic development is important for the overall objectives of lifelong learning. However, I acknowledge that later in the report several economic objectives are set out that the committee seems to have addressed.

I want to pick up on only two issues, which come back to questions I have asked about craft

training. I refer to old-style craft training because, whatever we say, people such as tilers, plasterers and bricklayers do not have to gain paper qualifications to bring about their expertise. That is gained through developing hands-on experience day by day. Those kinds of workers find a new learning experience every day in their trades. We must give support to companies and business people who want to provide apprenticeships in traditional trades.

Adam Ingram referred to the fact that engineering companies offer apprenticeships that cost £42,000 per apprentice, but they get support of only £7,000 for each apprentice compared with £15,000 south of the border. I would like the minister to address that issue and explain why that should be the case. The reality of the situation is that a small engineering company strives daily to keep afloat and does not have time to take on board and train an apprentice only to see that apprentice, after four years, disappearing over the dyke.

In the past, larger companies, such as those in the power, shipbuilding and aircraft industries, used their training facilities to train young people, who then went out as journeymen to use their skills elsewhere. The Executive should bear that in mind when considering the money that it will provide for training. It should find a way of feeding money in to employers who are willing to take on board apprentices along the traditional lines to which I referred.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: My apologies to the member who has been squeezed out by the clock, but I must go to closing speeches.

16:32

Donald Gorrie (Central Scotland) (LD): The report is excellent. I have seldom read a report that has such a steady stream of practical, commonsense, constructive suggestions. The report deals well with areas such as further education and training. It also, incidentally, deals sensitively with the issue of sustainable development.

The region that I represent in Parliament has no universities—although Bell College aspires to become one—but it has six excellent colleges, which I visit reasonably regularly. They are good, varied institutions, which co-operate with each other and are well run in their different ways. However, they need secure funding to enable them to be more flexible and they need less bureaucracy. Some training schemes multiply bureaucracy amazingly. If the colleges have schemes that are helped by the European Union, Scottish Enterprise, the Executive or Uncle Tom Cobbleigh, they are incessantly overrun by

auditors. That prevents the colleges from doing any work.

It is good that the report states that we should give up the skillseekers programme. I am sure that that programme was well meant, but it was a bad way of trying to get young people into jobs. Funding for individual students, whether they are at universities or colleges, must be targeted and flexible. We have made a good if limited start in supporting students in a way that is better than the way that it is done in England. We must build on that start.

We must have flexible apprenticeships. The report's idea of a second chance is a good one. However, a lot more than a second chance is needed. I am a bit of a slow starter and I needed five chances before I got into Parliament. A lot of people need help at ages other than 16 or 18. The idea of entitlement and the idea that the colleges introduced of having lifelong learning accounts—which has also been subscribed to by political parties, including mine—are worth pursuing.

The underlying problem is the lack of esteem in which skills and science are held. If somebody is an incompetent garage mechanic or electrician, they can kill people. However, if somebody is an incompetent MP—I would not suggest that there were any incompetent MSPs—no one will notice. Further, our prosperity is built on science. Skills and science are vital and we must improve the esteem in which they are held by careers guidance teachers, parents and the community.

The report talks about the costs of not learning. That hits the nail on the head. Whenever the Executive is costing things, the cost of not doing the thing has to be set out. If somebody gets turned around, whether that is done by a teacher, a youth club, a sensitive employer or a training officer, the community will be saved hundreds of thousands of pounds over a lifetime and that person will get a truly worthwhile life, which is what we should be trying to achieve. The problem for many people is taking the first step on the ladder—there are a lot of good ladders but people find it hard to get on one.

I particularly appreciated the committee's proposal that there should be a protected percentage of the budget for informal learning, community learning and voluntary sector learning, which are grossly undervalued by our system. It is possible to learn a lot in a voluntary organisation, such as a citizens advice bureau, for example, and come away with marketable skills that are helpful to society.

The report deals well with the aspect of citizenship, as well as the idea of community initiatives. Somehow, we have to create a society in which communities pull themselves up. In order

to do that, the training of people so that they are more confident and have more skills is vital. This is a good report. All we need now is some action.

16:37

Mr Brian Monteith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): The Conservatives welcome this broad and thorough report. It was no doubt exhausting to produce, but it is not exhausting to read, for it is full of interesting conclusions and recommendations. As David Mundell said, it will start off a debate that is crucial to the future of Scotland and its economy.

I am sorry if I disappoint members, but I must say that I found nothing to disagree with in David Mundell's speech and thought that his Churchillian metaphor was worthy. I am happy today to play the role of Brendan Bracken to David Mundell's Churchill.

Andrew Wilson: I would like to ask a question in the interest of ensuring that the clarity and unity of the Conservatives on all matters is displayed. We know that Mr Monteith agrees with Mr Fraser, not Mr Mundell, on the matter of fiscal autonomy, but does he agree with Mr Fraser or Mr Mundell on the issue of abolishing Scottish Enterprise? Further, does he agree with himself or Mr Mundell on the issue of top-up fees?

Mr Monteith: Mr Wilson would hardly expect me to tell him that today. My thoughts on the funding of top-up fees are important and I will deal with that subject later. Mr Wilson will not be disappointed.

Alex Neil said that the higher and further education sectors in Scotland have much to be proud of. I wholly agree with that and think that that is a good starting point for the report. However, it is important to guard Scotland's reputation and build on it. Scottish education has a good reputation not only because of the schools in every parish that ensured that literacy was the prevailing condition in Scotland, or because of the large number of universities that we had in Scotland before universities became the norm in the United Kingdom; the reputation of our education and universities is built on the democratic and meritocratic access policies that have been available throughout the history of our education system. It was the policy in Scotland that people who were able could progress in education. That built a reputation for our education system as it was different from what was known in other parts of the UK and Europe. We must take care not to lose that reputation.

In our ambition to expand quantity, we must guard against reducing the quality of teaching and of degrees. David Mundell and Nora Radcliffe argued the case well that we should drop our

fixation on encouraging all school students to enter higher education on leaving school. The point at which they leave school is the important aspect. If lifelong learning is to mean anything, surely it must mean allowing youngsters and adults to learn at different levels and stages in life and to have access to higher and further education throughout their lives—during which they might change careers and interests. At some stage, youngsters might decide to become teachers, and pass on their skills. The report examined higher and further education in Scotland in that light and the debate will explore further what we can do to protect quality and our reputation.

The report is right when it talks about parity of esteem, and many contributors to the debate raised that topic. It is clear that trying to change a diploma subject into a degree qualification does not achieve parity of esteem; it must be built in at an earlier stage.

The report is also right when it emphasises putting the needs of the consumer above those of the provider. That will have a particular resonance when we discuss finance, which I seek to do in my closing remarks.

We must look forward to Whitehall's review of higher education and to the new strategy that our Scottish Government will introduce. However, there is no doubt that there will still be a debate about fees. There is much talk about top-up fees, but when one considers the proposals, one finds that they concern full fees and not top-up fees. The people who argue for full fees—including Richard Sykes of Imperial College, London—suggest that full fees should be charged and that public funding should be used to provide full bursaries for those from underprivileged backgrounds. I do not support that suggestion and neither does the Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party.

I do not know of any politicians who advocate top-up fees. Some Conservative members have recognised that higher education institutions are independent, private organisations that have the ability to go down the road of top-up fees if they so choose. We need to consider what can be done to deal with that situation and what might happen if top-up fees are introduced in England. There will be knock-on effects. That debate is yet to come and we will work with other parties to ensure that top-up fees are not introduced.

16:44

Andrew Wilson (Central Scotland) (SNP): We all welcome Brian Monteith's U-turn on top-up fees.

The debate has been solid and has been based on considered positions rather than the party

battle, despite my best efforts. That reflects the quality of the evidence and the passion of the representatives of the learning sectors who gave evidence to the committee. I was greatly struck not only by them, but by the learners, particularly in adult education. The sheer vocational drive in that sector is remarkable.

There have been excellent contributions from committee members and others, in particular from Mary Scanlon, Christine Grahame and Lloyd Quinan. We had an historically brevity-driven speech from Nora Radcliffe, who made her points in less time than it takes most ministers to answer a question at question time.

I have a keen interest in the debate. At the age of 35 and with three children, my brother has decided to end his current employment and return to full-time education, which is a remarkably courageous decision and one of which we are all proud.

I echo all members' comments that the efforts of the clerking team—Judith Evans in particular—and the Scottish Parliament information centre have been remarkable. The two mammoth folders that are on the desk at the back of the chamber next to the clerking team should strike fear into the hearts of anyone who is involved in lifelong learning and similar areas. I am usually sceptical of committees that congratulate themselves. I came to the debate and the committee relatively late and cannot claim much credit for the excellent outcomes of the inquiry, but those members who have been with the committee throughout the inquiry deserve credit.

Adam Ingram and others touched on the heart of the matter: the concept of entitlement and what that means. That is obviously open to debate, but the key—which the committee thinks is clear—is that it must mean that all people should have access to education, irrespective of background, and that the job of those of us in the public sector and in leadership positions should be to reduce barriers where they exist. That is a basic ideal, and one that the committee and others should promote. It is about maximising the contribution that people make, and the earning and learning potential that they have, so that we improve the quality of life and standard of living for everyone in Scotland.

Resources are always scarce, and there are real long-term challenges for the Executive and the whole system as we move forward. Alex Neil pointed out—as he does consistently—the existence of a demographic time bomb. We need to train to deal with that, but also to acknowledge that we cannot deal with it in isolation from the economy's underlying performance. There is a risk that we will become victims of our education sector's success if we educate our people

excellently to be economically active elsewhere. That is critical. We must balance both. The economy is key to everything. We must hope that the worry of the previous Minister for Enterprise, Transport and Lifelong Learning that the Government's leadership does not take the Scottish economy seriously is no longer true.

We hear that the Executive will produce in the new year a lifelong learning strategy in isolation from a higher education strategy. The logic for that remains to be seen. We wonder why it takes until three months before an election for a Government strategy on such a key area to be published. However, we welcome greatly the positive tone of the Executive's comments on the committee's report. I hope that that is reflected in the Executive's strategy, when it is published in response to the report.

Alex Neil touched briefly on student finance, which could not be dealt with in detail for the sake of consensus. Inequities remain in the system, not only in relation to student tuition and funding, but in relation to benefits, which unfortunately remain a reserved matter. How is it fair that the Benefits Agency treats student loans as income in benefit calculations when they are, in fact, debt? How does that make sense? Why can we not tackle that issue in Scotland?

Mr Monteith was, for once, correct on the detail. The direct consequences of a United Kingdom decision on top-up fees or tuition fees are critical to the funding that is available to the Scottish Executive. If a decision is taken to reduce dependence on direct funding from the public sector and to increase charging outwith it, that will have consequences for the funding that is at our disposal. To me, that shows the absolutely ludicrous nature of the funding mechanism for devolution. The Scottish Parliament is set up to recognise the diversity of policy decision making, whereas the funding is set up to produce convergence. How is that sensible? How can it possibly be sustainable? Higher and further education funding must be for us to decide in isolation from decisions that are taken elsewhere. That needs to be considered in great detail.

The report is a first-class effort by all those who were involved. I congratulate them as one who came late to the inquiry. Massive issues are still to be dealt with, particularly in relation to social inclusion. As Alex Neil pointed out, those in the wealthiest seventh of society are five times more likely than those in the poorest seventh to go to university. University access is a major issue.

Despite the dominance of the economy in my speech, the last thing that we should say is that education is for economic outcomes. Obviously, it is also for the pursuit of happiness. Much of the evidence that the committee took shows that many

people get much happiness out of access to education, and happiness is always to be encouraged.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: They do not get much more consensual than that last comment.

16:49

Marilyn Livingstone (Kirkcaldy) (Lab): To close the debate on the committee's behalf gives me great pleasure. I thank Alex Neil and Annabel Goldie for asking me to take on the role. It shows the co-operation in the committee.

I welcome all those in the public gallery from a wide range of lifelong learning sectors and thank them for staying for the debate. The attendance reflects the public's interest and the interest within the sector, and demonstrates the benefits of the committee's approach of involving as many people as possible in developing the committee's final report. I think that the lifelong learning convention, which was held in March and which we have heard much about, was a first for a committee. It invited 180 stakeholders to discuss the findings of our interim report.

The committee believes that the report is radical and exciting. It sets out a strategy for the next 10 years. We have pointed out that our final report took on board all the views that were put to us at the convention and we think that it is stronger for doing so.

Our strategy has the social justice agenda at its heart and shows new ways of working in the Scottish Parliament. On behalf of the committee, I would like to mention the large number of positive responses that we received from the full spectrum of people involved in the lifelong learning sector. It is important that we invite them to continue to inform the debate as it moves forward towards delivery. I am sure that the minister would welcome that, too.

In particular, I welcome the minister's response to our interim report and his recognition that the committee has tackled and articulated some of the most difficult and complicated issues at the heart of the lifelong learning agenda. I ask the minister to recognise that those issues must be addressed if we are to achieve our vision.

Like the convener, I congratulate people on the excellent work that has been and is being done. Sometimes, we are guilty of not talking up what is happening in the sector, but many members have commented on that today.

We are all aware that learning has a positive effect on individuals, their families and communities as a whole. There is a changing role for learning for life and we must support that cultural change.

From the evidence and from what we have heard today, it appears that if we are to include everyone in our society, it is crucial to find imaginative ways of breaking down barriers for those who are most disaffected by learning and who think that learning is not for them. Alex Neil spoke about the demographic changes that will soon affect us. We cannot afford to have people in our communities who are disaffected by learning.

We have heard many excellent examples of how non-traditional learners are brought back into learning and we congratulate the FE, informal and community learning sectors in particular on their pioneering work.

We have heard much from members about extending entitlement. Entitlement will allow every citizen to have access to a wide range of learning opportunities throughout their life. That approach reaffirms the philosophy of entitlement that was first proposed in the committee's interim report. We know that entitlement exists in the educational system, but we believe that the approach will empower the learner and create a more learner-led system of provision, which will enable part-time learners to have the same access to fee support as full-time learners. The approach will start with the suggested pilot groups—single parents and low earners. That is important if we are to be truly committed to redistribution of resources.

On economic growth, we are facing technological change at a pace that we could never have believed—many members, including David Mundell, have mentioned that. There is a huge shift in our economic base. Now, more than 63 per cent of Scotland's gross domestic product comes from the service sector. Some 20 per cent of it comes from the financial and business sectors. All those sectors report skills shortages in a range of areas. If we are to sustain and grow a prosperous economy, the development of skills in the workplace must go hand in hand with business development.

That is why we have recommended that economic development agencies' involvement in lifelong learning should shift away from their current role of funding and managing volume training programmes—as Ken Macintosh said, the committee was unanimous in saying that that was not the best way into learning for some of our young people—into what we believe is more appropriate activity. More appropriate activities include: building capacity for learning, particularly in the small and medium-sized enterprise sector; providing guidance and support to employers; and making the move from volume training to the building of capacity, in particular in our SME sector.

We believe that the role of trade unions is crucial in the promotion of workplace learning. My

colleague Brian Fitzpatrick mentioned that. We believe that the trade unions have a role to play in promoting a culture of lifelong learning. We must build on the expertise that trade unions have obtained in breaking down barriers. We hope that our recommendations to continue the support for the trade union learning fund will be accepted and will receive support from the minister. We believe that we need to move to core funding, as our recommendation proposes.

The need to increase the focus on developing and sustaining community and voluntary learning to support excluded and adult learners was key to the convention. One of the biggest changes to our report was the focus on developing and sustaining community and voluntary learning. I welcome the proposal to protect a percentage of spend for informal community and voluntary learning and to examine ring fencing for that sector.

On the national lifelong learning strategy, the committee believes that there is an absence of an overarching strategy—and that has been borne out today. As I have said, much good work is going on, but many institutions seem to be working in isolation. The convention left us in no doubt that there is a demand for an overarching strategy. We believe that such a strategy should promote economic development, social justice, equality and citizenship. We suggest the creation of a lifelong learning advisory council, which would include learners' representatives. Robin Harper raised the issue of learners being involved in the decision-making process. We have recommended that learners should be at the heart of decision making at all levels, throughout the strategy.

Phil Gallie: Marilyn Livingstone has put considerable emphasis on individual involvement. She will recall that individual learning accounts seemed to drop off the agenda some time ago. Did the committee give any thought to those and make any recommendation?

Marilyn Livingstone: Yes. Today we got a commitment from the minister that individual learning accounts are firmly back on the agenda. We welcome that. The challenge for us is to ensure that all sectors in our society use individual learning accounts, including people from disadvantaged backgrounds.

I will go back to what I was saying about Robin Harper. It is important that learners representatives work with us. Some of the best evidence that the committee received was from the National Union of Students Scotland. I put that on record in the Parliament today.

We recognise that, within a national strategy, there must be room for local flexibility. Sometimes, when control from the centre is too rigid, it stifles innovation from the localities.

I will cover another point that Phil Gallie raised. The committee recommended the abolition of the skillseekers programme and its replacement by a programme that meets the needs of individuals and employers. In saying that, we were very complimentary about the modern apprenticeship programme, and we would like to see it developed to provide a qualification at level 2, not only at level 3. Non-traditional skills have been mentioned. We suggest that there should be an extension of the modern apprenticeship programme.

Our report focused on social justice, equality of opportunity and parity of esteem, with the learner being the driver.

Reallocation of resources is important. I go back to Linda McTavish's evidence about those who get on, those who get by and those who get nowhere. Committee members believe that the cost of not learning is too great. We recommend investing any additional funding that becomes available in future on levelling up, as distinct from converging funding across the range of lifelong learning opportunities.

We welcome the minister's response and his statement that he will listen to the Parliament and take our views on board. I say to Andrew Wilson that the reason why the minister has not yet come up with a lifelong learning strategy is, I hope, because he was waiting for our report. We ask the minister to consider the redistribution of funding and to ensure that any new funding is targeted at the areas that are prioritised in the report.

We look forward to the production of the Executive's full strategy, which is to be published early in 2003.

Presiding Officer's Ruling

17:00

The Presiding Officer (Sir David Steel):

Before we come to the business motion, I revert to the point of order that Mr Sheridan raised earlier. The standing orders that require notice for a motion to change business do not apply in the case of motions to appoint ministers. Therefore, I inform members that I have agreed that the motion to appoint a new minister will be taken tomorrow at 2.15 pm, which is before question time at 2.30 pm.

Business Motion

17:00

The Presiding Officer (Sir David Steel): The next item of business is consideration of business motion S1M-3643, in the name of Patricia Ferguson.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees—

(a) the following programme of business—

Wednesday 4 December 2002

2:30 pm Time for Reflection

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

followed by Ministerial Statement on Local Government Finance Allocations

followed by Finance Committee Debate on its 5th Report 2002, Public Private Partnerships

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5:00 pm Decision Time

followed by Members' Business—debate on the subject of S1M-3504 Bill Butler: Provision of Dedicated Mother and Baby Services for Women with Post-Natal Depression

Thursday 5 December 2002

9:30 am Stage 1 Debate on Building (Scotland) Bill

followed by Financial Resolution in respect of Building (Scotland) Bill

followed by Executive Debate on Criminal Justice Bill—UK Legislation

followed by Executive Debate on Crime (International Co-operation) Bill—UK Legislation

followed by Business Motion

2:30 pm Question Time

3:10 pm First Minister's Question Time

3:30 pm Executive Debate on The Future of Europe Convention—the Scottish Dimension

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5:00 pm Decision Time

followed by Members' Business

Wednesday 11 December 2002

2:30 pm Time for Reflection

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

followed by Stage 1 Debate on Mental Health (Scotland) Bill

followed by Financial Resolution in respect of the Mental Health (Scotland) Bill

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5:00 pm Decision Time

followed by Members' Business

Thursday 12 December 2002

9:30 am Scottish National Party Business

followed by Business Motion

2:30 pm Question Time

3:10 pm First Minister's Question Time

3:30 pm Executive Debate on Fisheries 2003

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5:00 pm Decision Time

followed by Members' Business

and (b) that Stage 2 of the Protection of Children (Scotland) Bill be completed by 20 December 2002 and that Stage 2 of the Title Conditions (Scotland) Bill be completed by 24 January 2003.—[*Patricia Ferguson.*]

The Presiding Officer: Mr Sheridan wishes to oppose the motion.

17:01

Tommy Sheridan (Glasgow) (SSP): I wish to oppose the business motion because there is no facility within it for a proper debate on the firefighters' dispute, which is now in its eighth day and which affects the whole of Scotland. One minister has already been forced to resign because of his disgraceful comments about the firefighters. We should have a proper debate about how the Scottish Executive is handling the dispute. We need to know whether Mr Simpson was the only minister who held those views about the firefighters. We also need to know what the Executive is doing to take up this morning's proposal by the Scottish Trades Union Congress, which suggested that the Executive should be imaginative and show the colour of its money in meeting the reasonable and justified demands of the Fire Brigades Union. The Executive should take the initiative to solve the dispute and give the firefighters the professional pay that they deserve.

I oppose the motion and ask that a proper one-hour debate on the firefighters' dispute be added to the agenda.

The Presiding Officer: I say to the member who has requested to speak that only one member may speak for the motion and one against it. Does Patricia Ferguson wish to respond?

The Minister for Parliamentary Business (Patricia Ferguson): I moved the motion, which is sufficient.

The Presiding Officer: The question is, that business motion S1M-3643 be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.**The Presiding Officer:** There will be a division.**FOR**

Adam, Brian (North-East Scotland) (SNP)
 Alexander, Ms Wendy (Paisley North) (Lab)
 Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Barrie, Scott (Dunfermline West) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Edinburgh Central) (Lab)
 Brankin, Rhona (Midlothian) (Lab)
 Brown, Robert (Glasgow) (LD)
 Butler, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (Lab)
 Campbell, Colin (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 Chisholm, Malcolm (Edinburgh North and Leith) (Lab)
 Craigie, Cathie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (Lab)
 Crawford, Bruce (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP)
 Cunningham, Roseanna (Perth) (SNP)
 Curran, Ms Margaret (Glasgow Baillieston) (Lab)
 Eadie, Helen (Dunfermline East) (Lab)
 Ewing, Dr Winnie (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness East, Nairn and Lochaber) (SNP)
 Ewing, Mrs Margaret (Moray) (SNP)
 Fabiani, Linda (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Ferguson, Patricia (Glasgow Maryhill) (Lab)
 Fitzpatrick, Brian (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (Lab)
 Gibson, Mr Kenneth (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Godman, Trish (West Renfrewshire) (Lab)
 Gorrie, Donald (Central Scotland) (LD)
 Grahame, Christine (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Gray, Iain (Edinburgh Pentlands) (Lab)
 Hamilton, Mr Duncan (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Henry, Hugh (Paisley South) (Lab)
 Home Robertson, Mr John (East Lothian) (Lab)
 Hughes, Janis (Glasgow Rutherglen) (Lab)
 Ingram, Mr Adam (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Jackson, Dr Sylvia (Stirling) (Lab)
 Jamieson, Cathy (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (Lab)
 Jamieson, Margaret (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (Lab)
 Jenkins, Ian (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD)
 Kerr, Mr Andy (East Kilbride) (Lab)
 Lamont, Johann (Glasgow Pollok) (Lab)
 Livingstone, Marilyn (Kirkcaldy) (Lab)
 Lochhead, Richard (North-East Scotland) (SNP)
 Macdonald, Lewis (Aberdeen Central) (Lab)
 Macintosh, Mr Kenneth (Eastwood) (Lab)
 MacKay, Angus (Edinburgh South) (Lab)
 Maclean, Kate (Dundee West) (Lab)
 Macmillan, Maureen (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Martin, Paul (Glasgow Springburn) (Lab)
 Matheson, Michael (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 McAveety, Mr Frank (Glasgow Shettleston) (Lab)
 McConnell, Mr Jack (Motherwell and Wishaw) (Lab)
 McLeish, Henry (Central Fife) (Lab)
 McLeod, Fiona (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 McMahon, Mr Michael (Hamilton North and Bellshill) (Lab)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow Kelvin) (Lab)
 Morgan, Alasdair (Galloway and Upper Nithsdale) (SNP)
 Morrison, Mr Alasdair (Western Isles) (Lab)
 Muldoon, Bristow (Livingston) (Lab)
 Mulligan, Mrs Mary (Linlithgow) (Lab)
 Munro, John Farquhar (Ross, Skye and Inverness West) (LD)
 Murray, Dr Elaine (Dumfries) (Lab)
 Neil, Alex (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Oldfather, Irene (Cunninghame South) (Lab)
 Paterson, Mr Gil (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Peacock, Peter (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Peattie, Cathy (Falkirk East) (Lab)
 Radcliffe, Nora (Gordon) (LD)

Raffan, Mr Keith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (LD)
 Reid, Mr George (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP)
 Robison, Shona (North-East Scotland) (SNP)
 Rumbles, Mr Mike (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (LD)
 Russell, Michael (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Scott, Tavish (Shetland) (LD)
 Smith, Iain (North-East Fife) (LD)
 Smith, Mrs Margaret (Edinburgh West) (LD)
 Stephen, Nicol (Aberdeen South) (LD)
 Stevenson, Stewart (Banff and Buchan) (SNP)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Swinney, Mr John (North Tayside) (SNP)
 Thomson, Elaine (Aberdeen North) (Lab)
 Ullrich, Kay (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 Wallace, Mr Jim (Orkney) (LD)
 Watson, Mike (Glasgow Cathcart) (Lab)
 Welsh, Mr Andrew (Angus) (SNP)
 White, Ms Sandra (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Whitefield, Karen (Airdrie and Shotts) (Lab)
 Wilson, Allan (Cunninghame North) (Lab)
 Wilson, Andrew (Central Scotland) (SNP)

AGAINST

Canavan, Dennis (Falkirk West)
 Harper, Robin (Lothians) (Grn)
 McAllion, Mr John (Dundee East) (Lab)
 Quinan, Mr Lloyd (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 Sheridan, Tommy (Glasgow) (SSP)
 Wallace, Ben (North-East Scotland) (Con)

ABSENTIONS

Aitken, Bill (Glasgow) (Con)
 Davidson, Mr David (North-East Scotland) (Con)
 Douglas-Hamilton, Lord James (Lothians) (Con)
 Elder, Dorothy-Grace (Glasgow) (Ind)
 Fergusson, Alex (South of Scotland) (Con)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Gallie, Phil (South of Scotland) (Con)
 Goldie, Miss Annabel (West of Scotland) (Con)
 Harding, Mr Keith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 McGregor, Mr Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 McIntosh, Mrs Lyndsay (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Monteith, Mr Brian (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Mundell, David (South of Scotland) (Con)
 Scanlon, Mary (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Scott, John (Ayr) (Con)
 Smith, Elaine (Coatbridge and Chryston) (Lab)
 Tosh, Mr Murray (South of Scotland) (Con)
 Young, John (West of Scotland) (Con)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 86, Against 6, Abstentions 18.

Motion agreed to.

Decision Time

17:04

The Presiding Officer (Sir David Steel): There is only one question today, which is that motion S1M-3625, in the name of Alex Neil, on behalf of the Enterprise and Lifelong Learning Committee, on the committee's ninth report, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to.

That the Parliament welcomes the 9th Report 2002 of the Enterprise and Lifelong Learning Committee, *Final Report on Lifelong Learning* (SP Paper 679), and invites the Scottish Executive to take the report into account when developing the new strategy.

A9

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Mr George Reid): The next item of business is a members' business debate on motion S1M-3565, in the name of John Swinney, on the A9 from Perth to Inverness. The debate will be concluded without any question being put.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament notes with concern the unacceptable level of death and injury caused by road traffic accidents on the A9 from Perth to Inverness; recognises that the design of the A9, particularly the frequent switching between single and dual carriageway, contributes to this level of danger; welcomes improvements made to the road design to improve safety, particularly measures already agreed at the Bankfoot and Ballinluig junctions, but recognises that, until the A9 from Perth to Inverness is re-constructed as a dual carriageway with safe junctions, it will continue to present road safety dangers to the local community and the significant number of visitors to the area.

17:06

Mr John Swinney (North Tayside) (SNP): One of the privileges of party leadership is that party leaders get many occasions to speak in Parliament. Some people may think that it is a disadvantage if they are on the receiving end and listening to those speeches. However, this is the first occasion since the Parliament was established on which I have had the opportunity to raise an issue under members' business. I take great pride in doing so in relation to a matter that is of significant interest in my North Tayside constituency. I express my thanks to the Parliamentary Bureau for making the debate possible and to the SNP's business manager, Fiona Hyslop, for arguing the case for the debate.

Earlier today, I was surprised to hear that the Government was making an announcement about road improvements on the A9. I thought, "My goodness! One members' business debate and the Government has caved in already." However, the Executive was announcing road improvements at Helmsdale, which is slightly north of my constituency. Nonetheless, I am sure that those improvements will be welcomed by members who represent the Highlands and Islands.

The purpose of the debate is to express concern over the safety record of the A9—the principal route from Perth to Inverness and the Highlands—and to welcome the improvements to that road that the Government has made and is committed to making. I shall also discuss the perpetual shifting between single and dual carriageway that I believe is a design weakness of the road. I shall argue for the reconstruction of the A9 as a dual carriageway and, most important, for the creation of safe junctions for motorists in our communities.

On the issue of dualling the A9, I welcome unreservedly the improvements that have been made by the Government to a number of key junctions in my constituency where there are design weaknesses. I am sure that others, especially my colleague, Mr Ewing, who represents the neighbouring constituency of Inverness East, Nairn and Lochaber, will comment on the safety of the road north of the boundary at Drumochter. I welcome especially the improvements to which the Government has committed itself at the unsafe junctions at Ballinluig and Bankfoot. I also welcome the minor works that have been carried out at junctions such as Kindallachan. However, the improvement work at Kindallachan was undertaken in the light of a fatality at what many of us consider to be a minor junction on the A9.

Mr Keith Raffan (Mid Scotland and Fife) (LD):

Does Mr Swinney agree that the problem at Kindallachan will get worse if plans go ahead for the construction of 35 to 40 houses? It is a dangerous junction, and the hamlet that is there at the moment is potentially going to become bigger.

Mr Swinney: The same issue will arise in many different areas along the A9. One of the unsurprising aspects of the community that I have the privilege to represent is the fact that many people want to live there. There is an expansion of housing development in Perthshire, and the situation will get worse. The point about the dangers at junctions such as Kindallachan is well made.

Having welcomed the Government's improvements, I wish to make the case for why the entire A9 between Perth and Inverness should become a dual carriageway. I will make three particular points. The first is on the accident rate. Since 1979, 215 people have been killed on the A9 between Perth and Inverness, and there have been a further 419 other serious incidents. When I questioned the Deputy Minister for Enterprise, Transport and Lifelong Learning on the subject on 14 November, Mr Macdonald replied:

"If Mr Swinney were to check the accident rates on the A9, he would find that they were very far from the extreme end of the range. In fact, the rates are very close to the average for trunk roads of its type in Scotland."—[*Official Report*, 14 November 2002; c 15404.]

Statistically, that is undeniable, but does that make it in any way acceptable for 215 people to lose their lives on the A9 if it is statistically consistent with "roads of its type"? That does not mean that it is justifiable or acceptable, and it is no defence of the current state of the road.

Secondly, there is the matter of switching between single and dual carriageway. In my constituency, between the Inveralmond boundary with the neighbouring constituency, which is

represented by my colleague, the member for Perth, Roseanna Cunningham, and the boundary with Mr Ewing's constituency at Drumochter—which is a distance of about 55 miles—the road switches between single and dual carriageway five times. I drive that road frequently, and there are occasions when I have to pinch myself before I can decide whether I am on a single or a dual carriageway.

I will share with Parliament the comments of a family whose lives have been blighted by the problem of switching between single and dual carriageway. Mr and Mrs Steven Strang of Perth lost their son in an accident at Aviemore about six years ago. Mr Strang told his story to one of our local newspapers, *The Courier and Advertiser*. He explained that his son, along with his girlfriend, was killed in a head-on collision with a car that was driving on the wrong side of the dual carriageway. As the newspaper reports, Mr Strang said that a party from France had

"travelled up from Brittany but it wasn't until they got to Perthshire that the road started to get confusing.

'All the way up to Dunkeld it was motorway or dual carriageway and then it was changing from single to dual carriageway and back again, over and over.

'The driver was tired, he was a foreigner and he was confused by the road.'

The article continues:

"Mr Strang said, 'I feel strongly that something needs to be done with that road.

'One of the shortfalls with it is the fact that it changes so many times from single carriageway to dual carriageway and back. It's an element of danger the road has.'

That gives a vivid personal illustration of the agony that too many people suffer as a result of the way in which the A9 is constructed.

The third argument for making the road a dual carriageway relates to the strategic link between Perth and Inverness. Inverness is an expanding city, with a much larger population than it had in the 1970s and where economic activity is much higher now than it was then. The A9 road is the principal tourist route between the central belt and the north. In addition, many people—I add that they are very welcome—now come off a ferry at Rosyth and turn left on to the M90 to head for the Highlands, only to meet a confusing situation when they reach Perth.

Dr Winnie Ewing (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): Is Mr Swinney aware that tourists ask people like me, "Where is the A9?" when they are on it already?

Mr Swinney: I am not at all surprised by that question.

We have to understand the significance of the road to the economic spine of Scotland, and as a

link to the Highlands and Islands and other areas in the north.

I re-emphasise those three points: the accident rate; the switching between single and dual carriageway; and the impact that a more effective strategic route between Perth and Inverness would have on the economy of Scotland, particularly on that of the Highlands and Islands.

There has been growing support for the call to make the entire A9 between Perth and Inverness a dual carriageway. On 18 November, along with my colleague, the member of the Westminster Parliament for North Tayside, Pete Wishart, and under the chairmanship of Norman McCandlish, chairman of Mid-Atholl, Strathtay and Grandtully community council, who was instrumental in leading the campaign for junction improvements at Ballinluig, I attended a meeting that drew together a substantial number of members of the local community, including representatives of Perth and Kinross Council, Tayside police, the fire service, the Scottish Ambulance Service and community councils—a cross-section of opinion—to make the case for the A9. If I had time, I would read out supportive comments that members of the accident and emergency services made at that debate.

The conclusion of that discussion in Pitlochry town hall was that we should represent our community's views directly to the Scottish Parliament. I welcome the opportunity to do that in front of the minister. I also welcome the vigorous campaign that *The Courier and Advertiser* has waged in support of improvements to the A9. The newspaper played a key role in influencing and leading public opinion in the campaign to improve the Ballinluig junctions.

I ask the minister not to commit himself to immediate action to dual the A9, but to give a commitment to examine the case for doing so and to consider including the measure in the Government's programme in the short, medium and long term. I ask him to recognise that a patchwork of solutions, however welcome—as I said earlier, I welcome unreservedly the measures that have been taken—is not enough to give security to the local and visiting populations alike. Is he prepared to meet a delegation from my constituency representing the shades of opinion that have come together to argue for the dualling of the A9? That group would like to make its case directly to him, so that he may respond positively to its concerns about the risks that local people must take on a daily basis and to which we expose many of those who visit our community and whom we welcome.

17:17

John Farquhar Munro (Ross, Skye and Inverness West) (LD): I know the A9 intimately, because I travel up and down it each week. I am well aware of the road's problems.

When most people think of the A9, they think of the trunk road from Perth to Inverness. In fact, the A9 continues beyond Inverness. It serves Ross and Cromarty and the eastern coast of Caithness and Sutherland, terminating at Wick—as everyone knows. When we suggest improvements to the A9, we should consider the entire length of the road, rather than one section in isolation.

I accept that improvements to the A9 are urgently required and acknowledge the fact that the Executive has implemented traffic control measures in key problem areas. Those measures are contributing significantly to the reduction of traffic accidents and—more important—to the safety of the travelling public.

However, much more is required. The distinction between dual and single carriageway about which we have heard must be easily identified and regularly repeated, to ensure that motorists are constantly aware of the type of carriageway on which they are travelling. We need clear and unambiguous signing and an extension of the intermediate short sections of dual carriageway, which have become dangerous racetracks as motorists attempt to overtake on no more than 200m or 300m of dual carriageway. I refer, of course, to the two sections at Crubenmore and the northern entrance to Pitlochry.

As I said, the A9 extends beyond Inverness. Unfortunately, the road contributes its fair share to our road accident statistics. The A9 is still substandard in the Ord of Caithness and the Berriedale braes. Appropriate funding has not been allocated to it in those areas, despite substantial campaigns that to my certain knowledge extend back over a quarter of a century.

The notorious Kessock junction, just north of the toll-free Kessock bridge, has been classified as particularly dangerous and as a distinct impediment to the free and safe flow of traffic.

Although I am willing to support any campaign to improve road safety, I realise that making the A9 a dual carriageway along its entire length would require many millions of pounds. Much smaller sums, sensibly applied, could make a tremendous difference and ensure that we were able to travel in comfort and safety on this strategic road that serves our Highland communities.

17:20

Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab): I congratulate John Swinney on securing the debate. I am sure that he had a huge amount of difficulty persuading his business manager to accept his motion for debate tonight. I agree with much of the motion. The number of accidents on the A9 is unacceptable, but that is the case on many of our other roads.

The design of the A9 contributes to the number of accidents, because frustration builds up, which leads drivers to take unacceptable risks, putting themselves and others in danger. For me, that is the crucial point. When we debate the A9 it is important that we do not absolve drivers of responsibility. A lot can be done to improve the road, but drivers have to take responsibility for ensuring their safety and the safety of others using it. We need to educate drivers to pull in when they are travelling slowly and we need to impress that responsibility on all who use the road.

The motion calls for the dualling of the A9 between Inverness and Perth. I am sure that everyone agrees that that would make a considerable difference, but it would not necessarily affect dangerous driving. The Government could consider other measures, such as the use of crawler lanes, more lay-bys, better signage, realignment of bends and the simple option of cutting back trees. That would not cost the vast amount of money that dualling would require, but it could make a substantial difference to safety.

Mr Jamie McGrigor (Highlands and Islands) (Con): Will the member take an intervention?

Rhoda Grant: I am sorry, but I do not have a lot of time and I have a lot to say.

Any Government would have to identify vast amounts of money to make the decision to dual the A9. Indeed, it would have to make decisions about which other transport projects or policy areas it would have to shelve to ensure that that finance was available.

I welcome the announcements that the minister has already made about the A9. We heard about the Ballinluig junction, which although not in my constituency affects a lot of my constituents. I also welcome the consultation that was launched today on the A9 north. That is really important, because the road up there is very much worse than the A9 between Inverness and Perth. In fact it makes that stretch of road look like a runway rather than a trunk road.

I want to flag up the issue of the A82, which I see as more of a priority than the A9. Councils in the Highlands have said that that road must be their top priority. I know that I am taking licence by

mentioning it here, but when I travel on that road I see the evidence of cars being pulled out of ditches. When I spoke to members of the Lochaber chamber of commerce, they told me that large vehicles had difficulty passing each other when they were on certain parts of the road and that some carried spare wing mirrors because of the problem of having their wing mirrors knocked out. I ask the minister to give some priority to the A82 when he is considering the motion. It is an important road that serves the west of the Highlands.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I shall allow a little licence, but not too much please.

17:23

Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I commend John Swinney for his motion and for securing the debate. It follows on from a motion that I lodged on A9 dualling back in March of this year. I also congratulate *The Courier and Advertiser* on the way in which it has highlighted the campaign and drawn it to the public's attention. It has sought to bring together public opinion on this matter and I think that it has done a tremendous job so far and that it will continue to do so.

I speak from personal experience of the dangers of the A9. I was involved in a head-on accident 12 years ago on a single carriageway section of the A9 just north of Carrbridge. It was a serious accident; both cars were destroyed and I suffered multiple fractures, which resulted in a long period on crutches. The other driver suffered similar injuries. I do not complain, because I was fortunate to survive. Many others have not been so fortunate.

At the meeting in Pitlochry to which John Swinney referred, we heard testimony from Steve Strang, who lost his son in a car accident, which was caused by a French driver. No one who was there could fail to have been moved by the courage of that man in standing up in a public meeting of that nature and recounting what had happened. We owe it to people like Mr Strang to ensure that such accidents are minimised in the future, even if they cannot be eliminated totally.

When the A9 was constructed in its present form in the 1970s, it was designed to cope with the traffic volumes of the time. Since then, although there has been at least a fourfold increase in traffic on the A9, the road has not had the necessary programme of upgrading.

The design of the A9, which switches from single carriageway to dual carriageway and back again, causes particular problems. The fact that it is easy for drivers to get confused about which type of road they are on might have been a factor

in my accident. The situation is bad enough for locals, who know the road, but it is courting disaster when we have visitors to the area, particularly those from overseas. The road was designed with sweeping curves, which limit visibility and cut down on overtaking opportunities. That causes driver frustration and leads to accidents. The simple fact is that the road was not designed to cope with modern traffic levels.

Tayside police, who are at the sharp end of dealing with the aftermath of accidents on the A9, are clear about what needs to be done. They have identified three specific problems: driver frustration, confusion and tiredness. They believe that a fully dualled road is necessary to eliminate driver frustration and confusion. We need improved junctions, which should be grade separated where necessary, and proper rest areas to combat driver fatigue. The fact that the current lay-bys are unsafe because they are too close to the busy road was tragically demonstrated only recently.

All that will cost a great deal of money. Previous Conservative Governments spent huge sums on the A9 and I am proud of our record. In the 1980s and 1990s, we dualled the Perth to Stirling stretch, completed the dualled Killiecrankie bypass and carried out many improvements further north, such as the Kessock bridge, which is in John Farquhar Munro's constituency. We also completed major road projects in other parts of Scotland.

However, any trunk road needs continuous improvement to cope with growing traffic levels. When Labour came to power in 1997, it imposed a moratorium on new road construction and improvements. Even under the Scottish Executive, road spending falls far short of what it was under the Conservatives.

Although dualling the A9 will be expensive and will take many years, if we do not make the commitment to do it, accidents will continue to happen and lives will continue to be lost. I do not want anyone to have to go through what I went through on the A9. I am even more concerned that no one else should lose a daughter or a son or a family member on the A9. I urge the minister to listen seriously to the debate and to take the steps that are necessary to ensure that the A9 is a safe road and one that the people of Perthshire, Inverness-shire and beyond deserve.

17:27

Fergus Ewing (Inverness East, Nairn and Lochaber) (SNP): Without a hint of ingratiation, I offer entirely sincere congratulations to my parliamentary colleague John Swinney on securing the debate. The constituencies of North Tayside and Inverness East, Nairn and Lochaber

are contiguous. Although the boundary at Drumochter pass is marked on the south by a hill that is called the sow of Atholl and on the north by a hill that is called the boar—that is, B-O-A-R—of Badenoch, I assure members that neither name has any bearing on the character of the representatives of those constituencies.

Without rehearsing them, I fully endorse John Swinney's arguments about safety and strategic importance. I agree with Rhoda Grant that many other roads, such as the A82, desperately require upgrading. I agree, too, with John Farquhar Munro that we need to look at the northern part of the A9.

I urge the minister to examine carefully the detailed operation of the freight facilities grant scheme from 1997. Although the scheme has an admirable aim of taking lorries off the road, it is not working out well in practice. Some recipients of grants are treated much more equally than others—for example, Forth Ports plc at Rosyth received £11 million for taking only 2.4 million lorry miles off the road. I hope that the minister will give close scrutiny to that situation.

The Deputy Minister for Enterprise, Transport and Lifelong Learning (Lewis Macdonald): Does Mr Ewing accept that freight facilities grant awards have taken 1.5 million lorry miles off Highland roads?

Fergus Ewing: I accept that and I welcome it. However, Safeways receives about £1 for every mile forgone, whereas the ratio for Forth Ports is about £4 for every mile forgone. That does not seem to be equal.

The main issue, which two members have raised, is how we afford the necessary improvements to dual status for which we are arguing. I would like to suggest one method of allowing us to do that. Thanks to *The Scotsman* and Mr Fraser Nelson's work, it has emerged that the Office for National Statistics has miscalculated the information on which the submission to the European Commission for objective 1 aid was based. As a result, we lost out on objective 1 status when we should have qualified. No doubt the statistics must be completely recompiled and resubmitted, but it appears that we should have had objective 1 status.

Rhoda Grant: Will the member accept an intervention?

Fergus Ewing: Hang on a second.

The SNP's position is that we must move heaven and earth to get back that objective 1 status. That is not necessarily because we are losing out now, but because we will almost certainly lose out following 2006, when we move from objective 1 transitional relief to possibly zero.

If, on the other hand, our existing aid was reclassified as objective 1, we would automatically qualify for transitional relief, which would entitle us to perhaps between £200 million and £250 million. That would help fund an upgrade of the A9. The A830 is receiving money from that fund, so why should not the A9 also receive funding?

The SNP will move heaven and earth, strain every sinew, go every mile and visit every commissioner to get the money back. I just hope that Peter Peacock—who has said that trying to do so is not even an option—will be overruled by the First Minister, when I question the First Minister tomorrow.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: There will be another crack at that subject tomorrow.

17:31

Mr Keith Raffan (Mid Scotland and Fife) (LD): I will follow Mr Swinney rather than Mr Ewing. I congratulate Mr Swinney on obtaining tonight's important debate on the A9.

It is important that the minister take on board the strong feeling about the A9. The deaths and serious accidents that have occurred on the A9 are a matter of cross-party concern. I welcome the improvements that have been and will be made, such as the £370,000 that is being spent at the Bankfoot junction and the £4.2 million that it is proposed will be spent at the Ballinluig junction.

I absolutely endorse Mr Swinney's points about the dangers involved in the fact that the A9 switches from single to dual carriageway. I also echo Mr Fraser's points about the volume of traffic on the road. It is amazing at Kindallachan, where one can go off the existing A9 up the broad road that is the old A9—it almost looks wider than the current one. Walking up that wide road, one almost feels that it is high noon.

Mr Swinney: On the subject of the width of the road, like me, perhaps Mr Raffan has noticed that there is an awful lot of surplus land between the fences on either side of the existing single carriageway stretches. My point is not a pedantic one about fencing but that perhaps sufficient land was bought at the time of the road's construction to expand the single carriageway into dual carriageway. Will Mr Raffan comment on that?

Mr Raffan: I am not a minister, so I am not the one to comment. I am sure that the minister will be able to enlighten us and that he will comment on that important point.

As far as the A9 not being a particularly dangerous road is concerned, then we have a lot of dangerous roads that are a serious problem which we really ought to address. I am not sure that statistical measures are other than rather

rough and rather crude, given the fact that roads are starred on the number of deaths and serious accidents per billion kilometres. However, the European road assessment programme, which graded more than 800 British roads, found that two thirds of deaths on major roads outside built-up areas occur on single carriageways. It also found that 25 to 30 per cent of fatalities on major roads occur at junctions, and that the safest roads are those with split-level or grade-separated junctions and separate carriageways.

I endorse Mr Swinney's point about the need for a review. As a result of a written question, I found out that the last estimate—which came from the old Scottish Office—for the cost of dualling the whole stretch of the road from Perth to Inverness was £281 million. That was at 1994 prices. We need to know what we are talking about, we need up-to-date estimates and we need to look at phased improvements and a phased increase in dualling.

Let me end on this point. As some members know, I once represented another part of the UK in another place, when I was an MP for north Wales. At that time, I saw the dualling of the A55, which is a not dissimilar road to the A9. The A55 goes across north Wales between Chester and Holyhead and is a major tourist and freight route, but there are no communities on that road that are the size of Perth or Inverness. I will leave that with the minister. He need not come back to me. I know Wales well, so I know that the road connections between the north and south are not great, but the A55 road is infinitely better than anything that we have between Perth and Inverness. The A55 is the standard that he should set himself.

I hope that we will receive a positive response from the minister this time rather than that inadequate answer he gave to an oral question a fortnight ago, when he said that the A9 was no more dangerous than other stretches of road. One death is one death too many. One serious accident is one accident too many. I look to the Executive for action. We want up-to-date estimates, a plan for phased improvements and a look at the possibility of phased dualling over a limited number of years.

17:34

Mrs Margaret Ewing (Moray) (SNP): I start by congratulating John Swinney on achieving this members' business debate. I do not only say that in the spirit of courtesy that normally dominates members' business debates but because, as leader of the Opposition and as leader of the SNP, John Swinney has never lost sight of the needs and concerns of his constituents, the people who elected him to the Scottish Parliament and,

previously, to Westminster. Many people were grateful for the fact that Bill Walker was knocked off the political agenda as a result of John Swinney's victories.

For many years, I have listened to John Swinney advocating issues in connection with the A9, sometimes at far less civilised hours than the time at which we are conducting tonight's debate, and he has had to listen to me mentioning the A96 and the A95, which are also important routes in the north of Scotland. We share the general concern that the key routes to the north are often ignored. That certainly seems to be the perception of our constituents. That concern has emerged from Westminster in the past, and is now emerging from the Scottish Executive under the alliance between Liberal Democrats and the Labour party.

We must ensure that there is the same urgency about issues of the north as there is about issues of the south. I remind the minister and the Parliament that the north of Scotland's contribution to the economy is extremely significant. Transport and communications fit into that contribution because of inward investment into the area and the contribution to the gross domestic product made by the products that emerge from the area.

The A9 is a key link to my area of Moray, although I tend to turn off at Aviemore and go via Grantown-on-Spey or Carrbridge on my way home to Lossiemouth. The road still frightens many people. Those of us who use it regularly know where we can sensibly overtake and we also know where it is just plain stupid to try to overtake. Other people using the road do not have the same knowledge. Lorry drivers who use the A9 regularly find the switches from dualling to single carriageways very confusing. Regulations require many of them to drive at only 40 mph and that leads to what they call platooning on the A9. That is when many accidents occur.

As John Swinney said, it is not only tourists that do not know the road. The SNP regularly holds conferences in Inverness and pours millions of pounds into the economy. Members will recall that the wife of one of our national executive members was killed en route to our conference in Inverness several years ago, exactly at a spot where the dual carriageway changed to single carriageway. We know the pain that can be caused to many families.

I echo the logical requests that John Swinney has made during the debate. He has used very measured and persuasive arguments. All I ask of the minister is that he proves to the Parliament that the north-south link is every bit as significant as the east-west link.

17:38

Mary Scanlon (Highlands and Islands) (Con):

I am grateful to John Swinney for raising the debate and for giving members from the Highlands and Islands and elsewhere an opportunity to discuss the issue.

Whenever I have surgeries and conduct surveys in Strathspey, Badenoch and Inverness, the main concern is always roads. As a member of the Health and Community Care Committee, I tend to think that people are concerned about health and education, but in the Highlands the main issue is undoubtedly roads.

Someone mentioned that Inverness is the fastest growing city in the United Kingdom. Planning permission has been given for another 10,000 houses and the part of the proposed national park that contains Badenoch and Strathspey has planning permission for over 700 homes.

When they look at the old A9, people can be forgiven for thinking that the current A9 is actually quite good. When one drives through Kincaig, one can see the advantages of the new A9. When the Conservatives were doing the upgrade of the A9, the emphasis was not on dual carriageways; it was mainly on bypassing villages such as Dunkeld and Pitlochry that were chock-a-block with traffic. Perhaps more emphasis should have been placed on the future and on dualling the A9.

I will answer a question that I think Keith Raffan asked. A year or two ago, I met Gordon Campbell, an ex-Secretary of State for Scotland, who said that sufficient land had been purchased on both sides of the A9 to allow it to be dualled without the purchase of additional land.

I will quote from a letter that I received from Mr Fraser in Inverness. He has surveyed the full length of the A9 and he says that, starting from Inverness,

"It can be seen that for the initial 16 miles there is 10.6 miles of dual carriageway"

and in the 47 miles north from Perth, there are 13.4 miles of dual carriageway. However, if we remove the 0.75 miles of overtaking opportunities at Crubenmore, overtaking is impossible for 44 miles in the middle of the A9. We should emphasise that today.

I support the A9 upgrade, but we should not consider it in isolation. I hope that the minister will progress other incentives, such as those to get freight off the road. Now that we have three Tesco supermarkets in Inverness, the road seems to carry a convoy of Tesco lorries whenever I travel up and down it.

I ask the minister to encourage and provide more incentives for public transport. I am probably

the greatest fan of Great North Eastern Railway travel. Not only is railway travel cheaper, but GNER considers customer safety and makes rail travel more attractive. When the minister considers future franchises, I ask him to look towards GNER. It is undoubtedly an incentive to take traffic off the road.

17:42

Stewart Stevenson (Banff and Buchan) (SNP): I thank John Swinney for the opportunity to debate this important topic. I have an emotional attachment to the A9, as we used to travel every year from Cupar to Achmelvich in west Sutherland, which was a 12 to 14-hour journey using the A9. In those days, one could measure the disasters on the A9 simply by looking in the yard of the garage at Calvine. Only in recent times has that ceased to be the measure of the carnage on the A9 for me.

Even today, the A9 is an important road. The absence of an Aberdeen bypass means that—paradoxically, because of the greater length—it is quicker for me to travel cross-country to join the A9 from Whitehills outside Banff to go down to Edinburgh than it is to travel the A90 via Aberdeen.

I will develop that point by reference to an experience that I had 10 days ago. I was in the control room of Scottish and Southern Energy in Peterhead. The company had problems in delivering an electricity supply to its customers, because of flooding in the Keith area. It had to take a 1MW generator from its depot in Inverness to Keith. The police forbade its travelling along the coastal road, so it had to travel down the A9 to Perth, from Perth to Dundee, from Dundee to Aberdeen and from Aberdeen to Keith. Instead of the journey of one hour and 54 minutes for the 55.5 miles from Inverness to Keith, the generator took a journey of seven hours and 24 minutes and covered 247.4 miles.

In the sparsely enroaded area north of the central belt, the A9 plays an important relief role when other connections are unavailable. That brings us to the nub of an aspect of the argument. The A9 is an important regional road that has national implications for safety when other roads are blocked and for economic development, because alternatives are few.

I ask the minister to consider whether our evaluation of roads investment is too narrow, as it is based simply on cost. Roads are costs. Does not an alternative way of considering the matter exist? We should see roads as investment. To do so would allow communities such as Inverness to realise their potential. I ask the minister to think not of the cost of upgrading the A9, but of the cost

of not upgrading it. Think not of the cost to the economy, think of the cost in lives. Let us make the first phase of the campaign to join the duals. Let us then have the whole thing.

17:45

Alasdair Morgan (Galloway and Upper Nithsdale) (SNP): My interest in the A9 might not be obvious to every member. I was born and brought up in Aberfeldy, which is only 10 miles or so from the junction at Ballinluig about which we have heard so much. I continue to travel frequently to the area, as my mother still lives there. I remember the opening of the improvement to the old A9 at Kindallachan. Stewart Stevenson mentioned the garage at Calvine and I also remember seeing the wrecks there.

I cut my driving teeth on the old A9. I remember one summer, when I was a student, driving one of Fisher's laundry vans from Aberfeldy to Aviemore. That memory is relevant, as I am not sure that the journey was all that slower then than it is today. The A9 has improved significantly since around 1979, when it was completed, but traffic has increased proportionately.

I think that journey times are returning to what they were in the past, particularly because of the large amount of commercial traffic that is now on the road. Although we have managed to attract some traffic back to rail, we have not been very successful in that respect. We do not see many freight trains on the line from Perth to Inverness. I suspect that a lot less freight is carried on that line now than was the case when the improvement to the A9 was made.

I welcome the scheduled improvements to the junction at Ballinluig, although I am conscious that it has taken a protracted campaign and some very nasty accidents to get us to this stage. My family knows of people who were killed in accidents at that nasty junction.

Many members mentioned the switches from dual to single carriageway. Those of us who know the A75 in the south-west of Scotland might find it ironic that what my constituents would see as an improvement on that road are, in the context of the A9, seen as a mixed blessing. Some of the stretches of dual carriageway are ridiculously short, which make one wonder why they are there at all.

Members have mentioned driver error, which is a factor. However, we need to plan roads that are forgiving of driver error and that do not make driver error worse.

I add my voice to the case for improvement. Keith Raffan mentioned the effect that the dualling of the A55 has had on north Wales. Various

studies have shown the economic benefit that that road has brought to the economy of north Wales. I am sure that dualling the A9 would have a similar effect on the economies of north Tayside and the Highlands and that dualling the A75 would have a beneficial effect on the economy of south-west Scotland.

17:48

The Deputy Minister for Enterprise, Transport and Lifelong Learning (Lewis Macdonald): I am glad, if a little surprised, that the leader of the SNP has used a members' business debate to introduce this subject. I am grateful that he has offered the Parliament the opportunity to debate the A9, as that gives me an opportunity to set out clearly what ministers see as the priorities on that major strategic route.

We have heard about unacceptable levels of death and injury on the A9. As Keith Raffan and other members said, any deaths or injuries that result from road traffic accidents anywhere on the Scottish road network are unacceptable. That is why I reconvened the A9 road safety group in April this year. I believe that there are things that we can do to improve safety on the A9.

Complacency is as unacceptable as alarmism, but it is important that we get the facts into perspective. The facts are clear and this afternoon I made the most recent figures available in the Scottish Parliament information centre. I am happy to share that information with members, as I know that we will return to the issue again.

Let me summarise the information. The rate of injury accidents on single-carriageway sections of the A9 is, in fact, half the Scottish average accident rate for single-carriageway trunk roads and less than the Scottish average for dual carriageways across the network. The whole A9 route between Perth and Inverness has a lower accident rate than the average for either single or dual carriageways across Scotland as a whole. Therefore, the facts show that the A9 is far from the worst road, as I said in the chamber a couple of weeks ago.

Accident rates in Scotland as a whole are too high and must be reduced. That is why we are vigorously pursuing a road safety strategy and have adopted within that a tough target of cutting deaths and serious injuries on Scotland's roads by 40 per cent by 2010. Road deaths have been lower in each of the past three years than at any time since records began, so progress has been made. However, there is a good deal still to do, not least on the A9.

Mr Raffan: The minister started by saying that the A9 is a major strategic route, which it is. Can he tell members the estimated increase in traffic

volumes on the A9 over the next five and 10 years? That will give us a truer indication of what we face if action is not taken.

Lewis Macdonald: Keith Raffan is right to say that accident rates are only part of the picture and that traffic volumes are another part. I shall come to the latter issue later in my speech. I will deal first with the safety issue, because it is central.

As I have mentioned, I recently reconvened the A9 road safety group to review the measures that are already in place and to consider what more can be done. The group includes Tayside police, Northern constabulary, Perth and Kinross Council, Highland Council, Executive officials and BEAR Scotland Ltd, which is the trunk road operating company. The group has access to the technical expertise of the former Transport Research Laboratory. In April, I chaired the group's first meeting, to show the importance that ministers attach to the group's work. I expect to meet the group again when its work is nearing completion.

The safety group will commission Highland Council, working with Perth and Kinross Council and BEAR, to examine several safety issues on the A9 and to provide short, medium and long-term proposals to improve safety for all users. Those proposals might include: the use of average-speed cameras as a route speed-enforcement measure; additional variable message signs to enhance driver information, which is particularly essential in the summer months when many strangers drive on the A9; and a review of the provision of rest areas, including refreshment facilities. It has been mentioned that driver fatigue is a key issue on the A9, so a review of the provision of rest areas is essential. The proposals might also include: improved overtaking opportunities, which might include dualling particular stretches or building climbing lanes, to which members referred; and measures to improve drivers' awareness of junctions and accesses by improving visibility and signage, not just for daytime driving, but for night-time driving.

We will continue to introduce measures for cost-effective, targeted improvements to the A9 that will help in maintaining and improving safety. We will consider each of the road safety group's proposals on its merits.

Mr Swinney: Will the minister give greater detail of the time scales within which the road safety group will report and the frequency of the reporting? In addition, what priority will the minister's department give to the group's suggestions over the next five years?

Lewis Macdonald: I expect the road safety group to set its own agenda and timetable, but through Executive officials it has direct access to ministers. The group is commissioning work that I

expect to be brought forward over the next few months. That will be welcome. We will also continue to conduct our examination of the A9 and other roads across the network to identify where improvements can be made.

I expect the road safety group's approach to reflect the Executive's strategy, which is one of smart, targeted improvements to bring the biggest benefits for road safety and the driving experience, not only on the A9, but across the network. For example, there is the improvement at Ballinluig—which John Swinney welcomed in April this year—where a stretch of dual carriageway that is too dangerous to use because of the junction alignment will be brought back into full use by a £4 million junction improvement.

Another improvement is the one at Helmsdale—where I was this morning—towards the northern end of the A9, where we committed £4 million to road improvements earlier this year. Today I invited the Helmsdale community to comment on options for a further single-carriageway upgrade, costing perhaps a further £4 million, which will again bring significant improvements. Another improvement is the one at Bankfoot, at the southern end of the A9, where there will be a new junction on a single-carriageway stretch of the A9.

In Helmsdale, as in Ballinluig, we are listening to and consulting the community. We will act in concert with the community as far as we can to identify priorities for the route as a whole. Our approach will continue to be to make targeted improvements, not grandiose gestures.

Constructing a dual carriageway will be the right thing to do where it demonstrates effective and cost-effective benefits. Already, as has been mentioned, a quarter of the A9 between Perth and Inverness is dual carriageway. Traffic flows are important and, while we are examining the prospects, it is a good idea to state the current situation. Between Inverness and Drumochter, there is an average flow of around 7,500 to 8,000 vehicles per day. At Dunkeld, average flows are around 12,000 vehicles per day. Closer to Perth, flows exceed 15,000 vehicles per day. I believe that that information was given to Murdo Fraser in a written answer this week.

The whole of the existing road is within the maximum capacity as determined by the current design and construction standards for rural roads. A high-standard single carriageway—and the stretches on the A9 are generally good—provides for a maximum traffic flow of 22,000 vehicles per day. The northern half of the Perth to Inverness route is not even at 50 per cent capacity. There is certainly a case for examining the creation of enhanced overtaking opportunities, but there appears to be no case for wholesale dualling of the full length of the route, certainly not in the foreseeable future.

The point has been made that having a mix of single and dual carriageways is incompatible with road safety. I do not accept that point. I noticed that Murdo Fraser criticised the mix of single and dual carriageways on the route and then claimed for his party the credit for short, isolated stretches of dual carriageway, such as that at Killiecrankie. The important thing is to emphasise to drivers the difference between single and dual carriageways. As John Farquhar Munro said, signage would help in that regard. We have already put in place 60mph repeater signs, to warn people when they are entering a single-carriageway area, and proper warnings on the road surface. We would expect the road safety group to examine such issues.

Rhoda Grant alluded to the priority that councils in the Highlands and Islands give to the A82 route. That is an important point. It is our policy to support transport partnerships, to encourage their formation and to help them to identify priorities. The work of the Highlands and Islands transport partnership has allowed us to identify the A830 and the A9 at Helmsdale as key priorities. We have responded to what HITRANS said on those matters.

Even if a case for complete dualling of the route could be made, it would need to compete for funding with other priorities across our transport network, including the rail links to airports and the increased support for lifeline services, never mind the other roads priorities.

Stewart Stevenson talked about the economic benefits and I assure him that economic benefit is part of our consideration. All transport projects are appraised for economic benefit as well as for cost.

Keith Raffan's figure of £281 million for the cost of dualling the A9 from Perth to Inverness was correct, but that was the 1994 figure and did not include VAT. The best estimate now suggests that, including inflation, increased standards, for example for sustainable drainage, and VAT, the cost would be somewhere between £450 million and £500 million. That is a cool £0.5 billion, which is quite a significant sum. To achieve a £500 million saving in our roads budget, we would have to cancel the three towns bypass in Ayrshire, agreed schemes on the A1, A75 and A77, the new Kincardine bridge and eastern link road, two junctions on the A90 between Perth and Dundee, the Fochabers bypass, the new junction at Ballinluig, upgrades at Helmsdale, and the M74 northern extension and the M77 to Kilmarnock.

If we did not want to cancel those commitments, we would have to raise the money from somewhere else, but from where? Stewart Stevenson mentioned the peripheral route to Aberdeen, which is close to my constituency. Cancelling that, as well as the planned upgrading of the A8 and A80 to motorway status, would save

something like half a billion pounds, although those projects have not yet been costed. We will not do that. Instead, we will continue with our policy of targeted improvements across the network, including the targeted improvements on the A9.

I expect to consider further route improvements soon, to discuss them with the road safety group and to include in our roads programme those schemes that can deliver the greatest benefits in the places in which they are needed most.

Meeting closed at 18:00.

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