

MEETING OF THE PARLIAMENT

Tuesday 7 September 2004

Session 2

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SCOTTISH MINISTERS AND DEPUTY MINISTERS

FIRST MINISTER—Right hon Jack McConnell MSP
DEPUTY FIRST MINISTER—Right hon Jim Wallace QC MSP

Justice

MINISTER FOR JUSTICE—Cathy Jamieson MSP
DEPUTY MINISTER FOR JUSTICE—Hugh Henry MSP

Education and Young People

MINISTER FOR EDUCATION AND YOUNG PEOPLE—Peter Peacock MSP
DEPUTY MINISTER FOR EDUCATION AND YOUNG PEOPLE—Euan Robson MSP

Enterprise and Lifelong Learning

MINISTER FOR ENTERPRISE AND LIFELONG LEARNING—Right hon Jim Wallace QC MSP
DEPUTY MINISTER FOR ENTERPRISE AND LIFELONG LEARNING—Lewis Macdonald MSP

Environment and Rural Development

MINISTER FOR ENVIRONMENT AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT—Ross Finnie MSP
DEPUTY MINISTER FOR ENVIRONMENT AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT—Allan Wilson MSP

Finance and Public Services

MINISTER FOR FINANCE AND PUBLIC SERVICES—Mr Andy Kerr MSP
DEPUTY MINISTER FOR FINANCE AND PUBLIC SERVICES—Tavish Scott MSP

Health and Community Care

MINISTER FOR HEALTH AND COMMUNITY CARE—Malcolm Chisholm MSP
DEPUTY MINISTER FOR HEALTH AND COMMUNITY CARE—Mr Tom McCabe MSP

Parliamentary Business

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DEPUTY MINISTER FOR PARLIAMENTARY BUSINESS—Tavish Scott MSP

Communities

MINISTER FOR COMMUNITIES—Ms Margaret Curran MSP
DEPUTY MINISTER FOR COMMUNITIES—Mrs Mary Mulligan MSP

Tourism, Culture and Sport

MINISTER FOR TOURISM, CULTURE AND SPORT—Mr Frank McAveety MSP

Transport

MINISTER FOR TRANSPORT—Nicol Stephen MSP

Law Officers

LORD ADVOCATE—Colin Boyd QC
SOLICITOR GENERAL FOR SCOTLAND—Mrs Elish Angiolini QC

PRESIDING OFFICERS

PRESIDING OFFICER—Mr George Reid MSP
DEPUTY PRESIDING OFFICERS—Trish Godman MSP, Murray Tosh MSP

SCOTTISH PARLIAMENTARY CORPORATE BODY

PRESIDING OFFICER—Mr George Reid MSP
MEMBERS—Robert Brown MSP, Mr Duncan McNeil MSP, John Scott MSP, Mr Andrew Welsh MSP

PARLIAMENTARY BUREAU

PRESIDING OFFICER—Mr George Reid MSP
MEMBERS—Bill Aitken MSP, Mark Ballard MSP, Bruce Crawford MSP, Patricia Ferguson MSP, Carolyn Leckie MSP, Tavish Scott MSP

COMMITTEE CONVENERS AND DEPUTY CONVENERS

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Communities	Johann Lamont	Donald Gorrie
Education	Robert Brown	Lord James Douglas-Hamilton
Enterprise and Culture	Alasdair Morgan	Mike Watson
Environment and Rural Development	Sarah Boyack	Eleanor Scott
Equal Opportunities	Cathy Peattie	Margaret Smith
European and External Relations	Richard Lochhead	Irene Oldfather
Finance	Des McNulty	Fergus Ewing
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Justice 2	Miss Annabel Goldie	Karen Whitefield
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Procedures	Iain Smith	Karen Gillon
Public Petitions	Michael McMahon	John Scott
Standards	Brian Adam	Mr Kenneth Macintosh
Subordinate Legislation	Dr Sylvia Jackson	Gordon Jackson

7 September 2004

Scottish Parliament

Tuesday 7 September 2004

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

Time for Reflection

The Presiding Officer (Mr George Reid): Welcome to Holyrood. Welcome to the new Scots Parliament. Our first item of business this morning is time for reflection, which is led by one of our new neighbours—the Rev Charles Robertson, minister of the Canongate kirk.

The Rev Charles Robertson (Minister of the Canongate Kirk): Thank you for your welcome. I, in turn, welcome you all to the parish of Canongate, where I hope that you will soon feel settled and happy.

You meet in new buildings, on a site that is already rich with history. This place has supported human activity from archaeological times until now. It has provided a town house for the Queensberry family; a shelter for wounded officers of the Jacobite army that fought at Prestonpans; a military barracks in the early 19th century; an isolation hospital for the city and district of Edinburgh during outbreaks of cholera; the venue for the first annual show of the Royal Highland and Agricultural Society of Scotland; a house of refuge and a soup kitchen for the destitute; and Scotland's largest independent geriatric hospital—not to mention a profusion of well-known and much-loved breweries.

Your new buildings succeed all that and bring their own history with them, constructed as they are from metals hidden deep since the dawn of time, from rocks slow forming through countless ages and from trees spanning the centuries with strength and beauty.

Human history is also already part of the buildings, for all sorts of people have been involved in the building of them—visionaries with the power to make their vision real; planners with the foresight to enable community to develop; artists with eyes and minds to see and fashion beauty; craftsmen with mastery over wood and iron and stone; and builders with perseverance that discounts even the vagaries of our weather.

They have all played their part to bring us here today into this place of wonder as well as of work, to a complex of buildings that will neither pall nor bore, in a setting that joins the tangible with the intangible. The kaleidoscope of reflections that pass across the glass panels lining the walls of the

chamber, the complexity and sophistication of the engineering marvel of the roof, the majestic sweep of the magnificent staircase that brings you here, or any one of the other many-splendoured things that makes this place the unique and precious thing that it is—the beauty of each and all of those will inspire and uplift you as, from this day forward, you go about your business in this place.

So today has grown out of yesterday and out of all the days that went to make yesterday what it was. And yet today is a new day—the newest thing in God's creation, the fruit of God's long patience and the gift of God's strong love. Here, in this new place with all its beauty, it is fitting that we lay no busy fingers on this new day with all its history until first, in the quiet, we take time for reflection.

What will we add to the history of this place? How can we enhance its beauty? Perhaps by simply taking to heart the words that we will walk over every time we come here—the words of St Paul that are carved on the forecourt at the entrance to Queensberry House:

"Gin I speak wi the tungs
o men an angels
but hae nae luve i my hairt
I am no nane better
nor dunnerin bress
or a ringing cymbal."

This place, of all places, is surely not the place for dunnerin bress or ringing cymbals. [*Applause.*]

Business Motion

09:35

The Presiding Officer (Mr George Reid): The next item of business is consideration of business motion S2M-1649, in the name of Patricia Ferguson, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, setting out a business programme.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees the following programme of business—

Tuesday 7 September 2004

9.30 am Time for Reflection—Rev Charles Robertson, Minister of Canongate Kirk, Edinburgh

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

followed by First Minister's Statement on the Programme of the Scottish Executive

followed by Debate on the Programme of the Scottish Executive

2.30 pm Continuation of the Debate on the Programme of the Scottish Executive

followed by Business Motion

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5.00 pm Decision Time

followed by Members' Business—Debate on the subject of S2M-1578 Mr Duncan McNeil: International Suicide Prevention Week

Wednesday 8 September 2004

9.30 am Parliamentary Bureau Motions

followed by Continuation of the Debate on the Programme of the Scottish Executive

12 noon First Minister's Question Time

2.00 pm Question Time—
Enterprise, Lifelong Learning and Transport;
Justice and Law Officers;
General Questions

3.00 pm Continuation of the Debate on the Programme of the Scottish Executive

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5.00 pm Decision Time

followed by Members' Business—Debate on the subject of S2M-1593 Brian Adam: North East of Scotland Sports Facilities

Wednesday 15 September 2004

2.30 pm Time for Reflection

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

followed by Debate on Finance Committee's 6th Report 2004—Relocation of Public Sector Jobs

followed by

followed by

5.00 pm

followed by

Thursday 16 September 2004

9.30 am Parliamentary Bureau Motions

followed by Executive Debate on Growing Scotland's Economy—Building on Progress

12 noon First Minister's Question Time

2.00 pm Question Time—
Education and Young People,
Tourism, Culture and Sport;
Finance and Public Services and
Communities;
General Questions

3.00 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions

followed by Stage 3 of the Tenements (Scotland) Bill

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5.00 pm Decision Time

followed by Members' Business—Debate on the subject of S2M-1306 Trish Godman: Children of Drug Abusers

Wednesday 22 September 2004

2.30 pm Time for Reflection

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

followed by Executive Business

followed by Business Motion

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5.00 pm Decision Time

followed by Members' Business

Thursday 23 September 2004

9.30 am Parliamentary Bureau Motions

followed by Executive Business

12 noon First Minister's Question Time

2.30 pm Question Time—
Environment and Rural
Development;
Health and Community Care;
General Questions

3.00 pm Stage 1 Debate on the Breastfeeding etc. (Scotland) Bill

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5.00 pm Decision Time

followed by Members' Business.—[Patricia Ferguson.]

Motion agreed to.

Scottish Executive's Programme

The Presiding Officer (Mr George Reid): The next item of business is a statement by the First Minister, Mr Jack McConnell, on the programme of the Scottish Executive. As the First Minister will take questions at the end of his statement, there should be no interventions. Copies of the statement will be available at the rear of the press conference room at the top of the black-and-white corridor when the First Minister has finished his delivery.

09:36

The First Minister (Mr Jack McConnell): We have been reminded in recent days of the importance of democracy as a system for resolving disputes and settling arguments. As events unfolded in Russia, we watched with horror as young children died or lived through a terror that will haunt their days. The mass murder of innocents in Beslan was barbaric and will impact on the local people there for generations to come.

On behalf of Scotland and, I hope, of everyone in the chamber, I have conveyed our condolences to the people of Russia through their Government. Here in Scotland, we have felt the pain and shock of mass murder in a school, so, as we offer the people of Beslan our prayers and sympathy, we have also offered any advice or experience that might help them at this terrible time. As we do that, we must respect the enormous privilege granted to us here. We should treasure our democratic traditions and remember that democracy is a force for good.

This stunning building has been built, I know, with controversy and argument, but it has also been built to capture the promise of devolution and the challenge to us all to meet that promise. It is a credit to all those who have worked hard and long over many months to design and build it; I pay tribute to their skills and expertise and thank them for their hard work.

The building is also the realisation of a vision shared by two people: Donald Dewar and Enric Miralles. Their families will rightly be very proud of the legacy that they have left Scotland. However, for the people of Scotland, what really matters is not this building, but what we do in this building. We are here to help people to realise their ambitions, their hopes and their dreams. We are here because they have placed their trust in us. People want a Parliament of vibrant debate and passionate argument. They want a mature Parliament, in which we argue hard for our own beliefs but respect others' views and ideals. They want a Parliament in which we work together to build a Scotland of which we can be proud, a Scotland of ambition and enterprise, of fairness,

tolerance and respect. They want a Parliament that inspires people across Scotland and wins their respect by the quality of the work that we do and by the intensity of our commitment to work for others, not ourselves, to change lives for the better and to reach out with confidence to the wider world.

Today is a big day, so our business should be fitting. I want to mark that start by laying out the programme that the coalition Government will take forward in the coming year. The programme will tackle the next set of challenges that we face. It will modernise Scotland's laws and make modern laws for a modern Scotland. It will introduce legislation to protect children and family life, to strengthen communities and to support enterprise.

First, five bills introduced before the summer will complete their passage through the Parliament in the weeks ahead. The Fire (Scotland) Bill will improve fire safety and provide a modern framework for our fire services. Tenements legislation will put in place the final piece of our radical programme of property law reform, which, in November this year, will see the end of feudal tenure in Scotland. Other legislation will ensure high standards throughout our school education service. The Water Services etc (Scotland) Bill will establish a modern regulatory framework for water and sewerage services. New laws will protect our critical emergency service workers while they save the lives of others. Each of those bills will make a difference to the lives of people throughout Scotland.

In a few weeks, our Scottish budget will be outlined to Parliament before the introduction of the annual budget bill this winter. The budget statement will outline our investment in services for 2005 to 2008 and the improvements that we expect to see. In health and local government, in the justice system and elsewhere, investment will be linked directly to reform, modernisation and improvement. Investing in our public services is essential if we are to offer the opportunity and the safety net that we need from them. However, we also need our public services to focus directly on the needs of those who use them; we need them to move the money that they spend away from the back room and into the front line, to step up to the challenge of proving their worth in 21st century Scotland.

Our Scottish budget will be boosted by efficiency savings that will improve front-line services and deliver value for taxpayers' money—not aspirations, but decisions that will serve Scotland well. I am convinced that our public services and, more important, those who work in them are more than able to meet that challenge. We see examples every day of their innovation and expertise, their compassion and commitment. The challenge that we put to the private sector to

improve innovation and productivity is the same challenge that we are ready to accept for ourselves. However, today is not the day to detail budgets and public service improvements. In the first weeks of being in this new building, ministers will lay out their plans.

Devolution is working for Scotland's children and families: child poverty has been dramatically reduced; standards in our schools are up year on year; and healthy eating initiatives are changing diets and the habits that harmed the health of previous generations. My vision is for future generations of young Scots to have ambitions for themselves and the confidence to make their way in the world. Children might not have votes or the loudest voices, but our obligation to them is all the greater because of that.

For most young Scots, more and more opportunities are opening up before them, built on the prosperity that our country is enjoying. More jobs and fewer unemployed are the fruits of a stable economy. However, for still too many Scots, a cycle of deprivation and poverty starts when they are children. If we do not change that life cycle to one of prosperity and ambition, it will stay with those children and their children through generations to come—history, cold statistics and our own eyes tell us that. That is why we are determined to end child poverty. We made a start by lifting more than 210,000 children in Scotland from poverty. We are on track to halve child poverty by 2010 and to end it in a generation.

The powers of devolution mean that we can create laws to meet other challenges that our young people face in this modern world. Two generations ago, it was unthinkable that global communication would be only a click away. Those advances have delivered new opportunities in business, leisure and learning, but they have also allowed individuals around the world to exploit the imagination and curiosity of children for their own perverse ends. Today, our children are at risk from those who would use the internet to groom them for abuse and exploitation. Scotland needs new laws to tackle that threat and we need them urgently. Within weeks, we will introduce a bill further to protect Scotland's children from sexual harm. We will outlaw internet grooming. The bill will tackle the means that sexual predators use to entice and prepare children for abuse. Legislation will close loopholes and make it an offence to contact, meet or travel to meet a child with the intention of committing a sexual assault. It will give new powers to the police and impose additional restrictions on the movement of those who prey on our children, banning them from loitering near children's playground areas, schools or centres.

There will be further legislation to protect and support Scotland's children. Everyone in Scotland has a right to live free from abuse, intimidation and

fear—young and old, male or female, of all cultures and religions. That right is there even if someone is sent abroad so that those who would abuse them can escape our law. Female genital mutilation is a grotesque crime that is illegal in Scotland, but there are those who send young girls out of Scotland to avoid prosecution here. The bill that we will introduce will make that act a crime, too. It will increase the penalty on prosecution from a maximum of five years' imprisonment to a maximum of 14 years' imprisonment.

I do not believe in Government intervention for its own sake, but I believe that Government has a responsibility to act to protect its citizens and its most vulnerable citizens most of all.

Strong families provide the security, stability and support that children need to become confident in themselves and ambitious for their future and every child deserves the best start in life that strong families provide. We will continue to give the highest priority to supporting and protecting children and, when it is appropriate, we will help parents to meet their responsibilities to their children. Our starting point in framing the legislation on family law that we will bring before the Parliament later in this session is about safeguarding the best interests of the child, not arbitrating in adult disputes but offering practical support and recognition to allow those disputes to be worked through by the adults concerned with the minimum possible damage to the child. The legislation will recognise the diverse reality of family life in Scotland today and we will publish our final plans shortly. In this year, we will also enact European regulations to protect children across borders, continue our reforms of child protection and make progress in securing the future of children's hearings.

It is because of our belief in the vital importance of the early years in a child's life that we have been building the foundations to support children and family life. We will legislate this year to protect Scotland's children, but we will also build on previous legislation to help young Scots to succeed. We have made one of the biggest advances in a century of education by providing universal pre-school and nursery education for Scotland's three and four-year-olds. We have brought primary class sizes to an all-time low and we plan to go even further. We have invested in teachers and equipment and set new standards for our schools. We are making the biggest investment to modernise our school buildings in more than a century and we are seeing the results, with rising attainment year on year. Devolution has already made a difference for Scotland's children, but there is more to do.

Scotland has a proud tradition in education—on the world stage we outperform most other

nations—but my ambition is that we can, we should and we will do even better, particularly in the early years of secondary, where we still see too many young people lose their motivation and begin to disengage from learning. During the coming weeks, we will unveil the most comprehensive modernisation programme of our secondary schools for a generation. We will have the rich, diverse and colourful comprehensives that Scotland deserves. We will explicitly raise expectations of the standards that we expect. We will give pupils more choice and schools more freedom.

We will ensure a regime of tough accountabilities. Our schools can and must do more. For those doing well, we need to spur them to aim even higher, for more improvement and higher attainment. All that will be recognised by a new inspection standard—the excellence standard—to reflect the scale of ambition for our schools. We want schools with the best of leadership, the highest of ambition and the widest choices for pupils; we want schools in which the good work today will be bettered tomorrow.

We have seen the best schools at work—we have many of those in Scotland—and we are impatient for all to reach that standard. I am determined that we will narrow the gap between the highest-performing schools and those that need to transform to perform. We will do that by bringing those at the bottom to the top. We will not hold back those that are already there or that are on their way up.

There are those who say that excellence is achieved only if others fail and that to select only a few to succeed should be our choice. To them I say that devolution was not devised to take Scotland back. Scotland will not succeed if only a few prosper. We need to have ambitions for all and opportunities for the many, not just for the few.

There will be centres of excellence, but I make it clear that there will be no elitist selection of pupils and that choice and diversity for different talents and ambitions will be available to all. I reject the calls to return to the divisive failures of the past, when children in Scotland were rejected at an early age. The future of Scotland—the only successful future for our country—is to spread know-how, to build aspirations and to help even more people to realise their goals.

Some schools are already there, many are on the way, but too many are not close enough. We will deliver a programme to bring about the transformation that some need and back the ambition of those that are aiming higher. By 2007, we will have 20 of our secondary schools most in need of transformation on our schools for ambition programme. Schools will not be able to opt out of

improvement or escape our attention. With our local authorities, we will expect them to reach high standards of leadership, achievement, discipline and attendance, with standards met and exceeded throughout the school year on year. In return, we will commit the support and resources—enhanced by the private sector—that they need and we will ensure that they have the freedoms that they need to take decisions and chart the direction necessary to become schools of excellence.

Our vision is of communities where our children can learn and grow in safety, our elderly live in peace and our families see the rewards of their efforts. We will act on crime, health, housing, the environment and reforming Scotland's charity law. In too many of our communities, violent crime and regular antisocial behaviour are hurting ordinary, hard-working people and eating away at our confidence and our way of life. Devolution has seen a reduction in crime, more crimes solved and more police officers in Scotland and, last year, we acted swiftly in this Parliament to crack down on antisocial behaviour. Now, one year on, we have the new laws that allow us to say to the law-abiding, hard-working majority, "The law has changed. This time it's on your side."

In the coming year, we will take that forward with further action on antisocial behaviour, action on violent crime and action to cut reoffending, not only by introducing the laws to curb antisocial behaviour, but now by bringing forward a licensing bill to overhaul Scotland's licensing laws. The bill will crack down on the irresponsible promotions that encourage binge drinking, end the saturation of off-licences, pubs and clubs from which too many of our communities suffer and give local people more say in what goes where. This is legislation to bring Scotland's behaviour on alcohol and the use of alcohol into the 21st century.

We have put in place new provision and new investment to protect vulnerable witnesses and we continue to invest in our police forces to tackle serious and violent crime. In the coming year, we will consult on a new Scottish police bill, increasing the powers that police officers have to deal with knife and violent crime, building on the success of the Scottish Drug Enforcement Agency, reforming the complaints system and putting common police services on a statutory footing.

Since devolution five years ago, we have invested heavily in the courts and prosecution services, to reform the efficiency and effectiveness of those vital public justice services. We have led from the front with radical legislation to reform our High Court, to tackle the culture of delay and to increase the focus of justice for the victim as well as the accused. We are encouraging co-operation across borders, speeding up the process of

prosecution and trial, and supporting witnesses. However, if we do all that and we ignore the challenge to reduce reoffending, we will not succeed.

Scotland's reoffending rates remain appalling. On current figures, 60 per cent of prisoners will reoffend within two years of release. Whether from prison or from community sentence, too many offenders leave only to reappear in the police cells and courts and then back in prison. That cycle is wasteful of time, of money and of lives. It is especially wasteful to each new victim's life. Tackling the scale of reoffending and having a clear objective to reduce it is not easy. Perhaps that is why successive Governments have ignored it for so long. The job is not for Government alone, however. It will take the hard work and the effort of people working in our prisons, in our local services and in our voluntary organisations, but this Government will not duck the challenge. We will reform sentencing, reform our prisons and reform the organisations responsible. We need tougher action against the most dangerous offenders and more serious rehabilitation for the vast majority of other offenders. In the autumn, we will publish our proposals to reduce reoffending and we will ensure that any necessary legislation is introduced as early as possible in 2005.

In the coming year, we will introduce legislation, in the health bill, to tackle some of the other areas that have caused distress and anxiety to many in Scotland. The legislation will improve the legal framework for organ and tissue donation and transplants, ensuring that families are treated with respect and dignity. It will allow us to transfer resources on a continuing basis for payments to support those who have contracted hepatitis C from blood transfusions or blood products. We will also begin the process of legislating further to protect vulnerable adults.

In health, we tackled first the issues for those most at risk. We focused our resources and have reduced deaths for those under 75 with coronary heart disease by 23 per cent, deaths from cancer by 6 per cent and deaths from stroke by 14 per cent. That was the right thing to do and we have made a difference to the lives of ordinary men and women up and down the country. We have increased the numbers of hospital doctors and consultants and the numbers of nurses and midwives and we have set clear targets to go further.

In our health service, there is very much more for us to do. In the coming weeks, the Minister for Health and Community Care will outline the action that he will take further to reduce treatment waiting times and to drive up standards in hospital cleanliness.

Our vision is for healthier Scots who live longer and who live a life free from unnecessary ill health. We continue to be held back by a health record that for generations has been poor. We know that, really to improve our national health, we need to improve diets and exercise levels and to reduce alcohol consumption and smoking. In the next month, we will conclude our consultation on smoking in enclosed public places. In this Parliament, we will take action to reduce the terrible toll that smoking takes on our people.

Good-quality housing is central to our success and to the regeneration of communities throughout Scotland. Families need housing—of the right size, in the right area and with decent services. The economy needs skilled people who are able to live in the right areas and to move where the jobs are. It needs young people who are able to take up work on the first step of the employment ladder. That is why affordable housing is so important. It supports our hard-working families and removes a barrier to a growing economy. Houses are more than walls and roofs, however; they are homes, too. Having one's own home gives people security and confidence—a place to live and to be who they are, in a neighbourhood where people look out for one another and take pride in the home that they live in and the street that they walk down.

We have done a lot to improve housing since 1999. Our investment has been substantial, whether through stock transfer or through our support for low-cost home ownership. We are tackling homelessness and introducing new rights for housing tenants. We have introduced new funding, through the prudential borrowing regime, for local social housing. Taken together, our strategy, our investment and our insistence on quality add up to a housing renaissance for Scotland. In the coming weeks, we will announce our plans to go further, with increased investment and more homes for rent and low-cost ownership.

We are determined to help those in private property and in private tenancies, too. Our modernisation of housing will build on that strong foundation with the introduction of the next housing bill to modernise the buying and selling of homes throughout Scotland, to raise standards in Scotland's private housing stock, to strengthen the rights of private sector tenants and to help local authorities to deal with areas of disrepair and decline.

We have seen too many communities suffer from poor decisions whose environmental impact was ignored. That is why we will introduce legislation in the current parliamentary year to put new environmental responsibilities on the public sector in Scotland. The new legislation will introduce a strategic environmental assessment,

requiring all the public sector to take account of the environmental impact of all new strategies, plans and programmes and giving the public a new right to comment on what is proposed and to have their views taken into account.

The charity law bill will increase public confidence in charitable giving. Scotland has a large charitable sector and a strong tradition of volunteering, which we have to nurture. Charities build community infrastructure, create opportunities, deliver vital public services—often to our most vulnerable people—intervene when the market fails and make a significant contribution to growing our economy.

The strength of charities and volunteers is not just that they work for the benefit of others or that they give up their time for free; their strength lies in the ethos and the values that they enshrine. Volunteers tend to take action where others have given up. They seek solutions and common ground and they want to get things done. They persevere to build, to organise and to change things where many of us gave up years ago and they believe that one person can make a big difference.

More than one in four people in Scotland volunteer and we stand among the best in Europe. With project Scotland, we will build on that, giving every young person the opportunity to make a real contribution in our communities—in doing so, they will reap a real benefit in their own lives.

Our goal—a Scotland where we encourage ambition, reward success and open up opportunities for all—means that we must reignite Scotland's enterprising spirit. The Scottish Government has growing the economy as our first priority, but not growth at any cost—it should be growth that encourages people to make the most of their talents and that respects our wider environment. However, a bigger private sector creates the wealth that our country needs to build strong communities, to tackle crime, to pay for excellent schools and to improve the care of those who are sick.

Most of all, economic growth opens up the opportunity of employment for all. Having a job means that people can pay their way, look after themselves and the ones whom they love, plan a future and realise dreams. It brings independence, self-respect and the pride of a good day's work rewarded fairly. Unemployment in Scotland is at its lowest for a generation and youth unemployment—the waste of so many young lives in the 1980s and 1990s—has been virtually eliminated. Full employment is finally within our grasp, but the closer we are to it, the harder it is to reach. Therefore, our task now is to reach out to those who are still unemployed and offer them the chance to gain the skills, the experience and the

confidence to take up the jobs that are there, to see a way out of the dead-end days on the dole and to use the opportunities that we offer to take responsibility for themselves and their families. To do that, we must help to create the conditions in which our companies can grow.

Last week, Jim Wallace and I launched the updated version of "The Framework for Economic Development in Scotland". It sets the priorities for higher growth and challenges us to go further than ever before. We must address Scotland's key challenge: productivity. Business and public services in Scotland need to become more and more productive, getting greater value from the resources that they invest in their products and services. We will do that by innovating and investing in skills and knowledge. Quality modern apprenticeships, more vocational education and opportunities to learn while earning will enhance the level and the relevance of skills throughout the economy. To reignite Scotland's enterprising spirit, every school pupil in the country is getting the chance of enterprise education, to learn about calculated risks, to learn from mistakes and, ultimately, to build the confidence to have a go.

Scotland's universities are world class. They punch well above their weight in quantity and quality of research—their research is increasingly relevant, too. This year, there has been a 20 per cent increase in applications from overseas. Our universities are our national strength. Their reputation and the national prestige that they bring enhance Scotland's mark on the world. Now is the time to strengthen their position in the United Kingdom, in Europe and in the world. So, too, is it time to recognise the contribution that Scotland's colleges make to our economy and to local communities and, most of all, in embedding the notion of lifelong learning throughout Scotland. In this Parliament, we will introduce a further and higher education bill to ensure the strategic development of those two critical education sectors for the economic, social and cultural benefit of Scotland.

To make the best of all those skills and that spirit of enterprise, we need better planning and transport systems. We will publish our detailed plans for legislation to modernise and improve Scotland's planning services. Good transport links are vital for connecting our communities and supporting business, linking people to jobs and Scottish jobs to the world. We need a high-quality integrated transport system that is accessible, reliable, safe and efficient, so we are investing heavily in infrastructure—roads, railways, sea and air routes, and broadband—but now is the time to take the next step.

In this Parliament, we will introduce a transport bill to continue our modernisation programme for

Scotland's transport system, to align our transport infrastructure better with the needs of a modern Scotland and to meet the demands of business and communities. The bill will take a strategic approach and will introduce regional and national partnerships to bring real improvements to the planning and delivery of transport services. In particular, it will bring an end to poorly co-ordinated roadworks—which can cause traffic congestion, cost business money and cause needless delays for all road users—and, yes, it will provide the mechanism to deliver on our commitment to introduce a Scotland-wide concessionary travel scheme for pensioners and others. Devolution moves on, too, and in this year we expect to fulfil our agreement with the UK Government to improve Scotland's railways. The UK Government will devolve new powers to this Parliament to make our rail track and infrastructure work for Scotland.

Devolution brings the flexibility for Government to meet the needs of Scotland in other ways. Five years ago, the decline in Scotland's population was considered inevitable—Governments were planning for it, not reversing it—but now, in a world where some think that movements of people are a threat, Scotland is bold enough to say that it is in our national interests, in every way, to welcome fresh talent, alongside the development of home-grown talent. Fresh talent is about more than just growing our population; it is about our national ambitions, which are that Scotland will be the best place in Europe to live and work and the most welcoming place. We will welcome all those who want to make their lives in Scotland. We value their contribution. We welcome students from overseas, seasonal workers, professionals and those who are fleeing persecution in unstable states. Our groundbreaking relocation advisory service, which will be open by the end of next month, will demonstrate our welcome in practical and constructive ways.

This Parliament has helped to renew Scotland's profile internationally. We have always had a big voice for such a small country and the new Parliament building will create greater interest. The devolved Government will grasp the opportunity that presents itself. We will stand up and promote our country, businesses, universities, artists, musicians and sportspeople, to talk up our successes and increase confidence at home and abroad.

We will value the arts and culture, support excellence and improve access for all. Presiding Officer, as a Gaelic learner, you, among many, know the specific value of Gaelic in our national life. The Gaelic language is a unique part of our culture and heritage. Throughout Scotland, there are strong and clear links between our geography, natural heritage, people and values. For many

Scots, Gaelic is our first tongue. It is about much more than our past or our place names. For some, Gaelic is a barely living echo of the past. However, it is a living language today and a gateway to a rich culture, both ancient and modern. The language has helped to shape many aspects of Scottish life and society and continues to do so today, but it is a language that faces the challenge of survival. It is vital that we do all that we can to ensure that our Gaelic not only survives, but thrives. As Sorley MacLean said:

"If Gaelic dies, Scotland will lose something of inexpressible worth".

My ambition is to see Gaelic grow once more in its everyday usage throughout Scotland and to be something that more Scots can feel part of and proud of. A year ago, on the 100th anniversary of the Mòd, we launched our consultation on a draft bill to secure the status of the language in Scotland. One year on, in this legislative programme, we will introduce and pass into law a Gaelic language bill, to build on the work that we already support in broadcasting, the arts and education.

This is a programme for the year ahead in government: making good laws, setting budgets and acting to improve the opportunities for young Scots. However, the greatest thing that devolution has created for Scotland is a sense of national ambition. There are truths here for every one of us in the chamber: we cannot create a law that instils aspiration in the hearts and minds of Scotland's teenagers and we cannot create a fund to pay them to have ambitions, but every one of us can help to create the conditions for confidence and ambitions. We can celebrate the success of Scots, champion achievement and promote this wonderful nation. We can lift our heads when we walk into this phenomenal chamber and collectively raise our game to set out a vision for Scotland, to debate and to work together for a Scotland of enterprise and ambition and of tolerance, fairness and respect, where future generations are proud of their Parliament, but also proud of themselves and their country because it is the best small country in the world.

The Presiding Officer: The First Minister will now take questions on the issues raised in his statement before we move on to the formal debate. I intend to allow around 35 minutes for questions, after which we will have a short suspension.

Nicola Sturgeon (Glasgow) (SNP): I share the sentiments that were expressed by the First Minister in relation to the horrific tragedy that unfolded in Beslan on Friday. Our thoughts and prayers are with the injured, the bereaved families and, indeed, all the people of Russia at this terrible time. Such a mindless act of barbarism disgusts

and appals peace-loving people the world over and serves to remind us all of the fragility of democracy and life itself.

I want to take this opportunity to thank MSPs on all sides of the chamber for their good wishes on my election as deputy leader of the Scottish National Party and, indeed, leader of the nationalist group in the Scottish Parliament. If press reports are to be believed—and, on occasion, that is a big if—some Labour back benchers have spent hours in recent days dreaming up playground taunts and infantile insults to hurl at me across the chamber. I am just glad that, after five years, we have at last found something for them to do. I am looking forward to hearing the fruits of all of that brain activity and, of course, anything that Duncan McNeil might have to add.

This is an important and momentous day for Scotland. Would the First Minister agree that this building, which has been mired in controversy, now stands as our best hope of restoring confidence in Scottish self-government but that that will happen only if all of us start to live up to the grandeur of our new surroundings and start delivering real change for the people of Scotland? Does he agree that, as we stand at the start of the 21st century, Scotland faces immense challenges? We have low economic growth, a population that is in rapid decline, persistent inequalities of health and income and public services that are not delivering the quality of service that people in this country have a right to expect. Does he understand that the disappointment that many will feel about the programme that he announced today is that, although many of the proposed bills are worthy of support, the programme does not add up to more than the sum of its parts? It fails to lay out a clear and coherent strategy for meeting the challenges that we face as a nation.

Despite the length and flowery rhetoric of the First Minister's statement, it was a vision vacuum. For example, while I welcome the proposals to reform family law and protect children from the evils of internet grooming, I ask the First Minister to tell us exactly what his Executive intends to do to lift children out of poverty and meet the targets that he has set. While I endorse the extension of free bus travel to pensioners, I ask him why he will not demand—as the Liberal Democrats have done this morning—an end to the indignity of means testing and the payment to our older folk of a decent citizens pension, as a right. That is something that could be delivered each year for less than half the cost of this new Parliament building. Further, although I think that the Gaelic language bill will help to preserve an important part of our national heritage, I ask the First Minister what he is going to do to attract to Scotland the 10,000 new people that we need

each year if we are to stop our population falling below 5 million.

Finally, will the First Minister consider that perhaps the best way of marking the opening of this fabulous new Parliament building and ensuring that it represents the fresh start that each and every one of us wants is to demand for it the powers that will match its price tag?

The First Minister: I congratulate Nicola Sturgeon on her election, which I warmly welcome, and wish her all the best in her new position. She is in an unusual situation for a politician; she is probably the only person in the chamber who is already looking forward to the election of her successor, when Mr Salmond may, at some point in the future, join us again. We look forward to his return.

We in the chamber have many responsibilities, and I believe strongly that although we will continue to adapt and develop the devolution settlement—we will do so during the coming months, with the devolution of further powers over rail infrastructure and track from the United Kingdom Government to this Parliament here in Scotland—we also have an absolute responsibility to use the powers that we have to make a difference every day, not to navel gaze or argue about those powers constantly but to take the responsibility that we accepted when we were elected and to use our powers to meet the very objectives that Nicola Sturgeon outlines. I am grateful for her support for the key objectives that I laid out in my statement: to deliver higher economic growth, because that will help to lift Scotland's children out of poverty; to reverse population decline, because that is not just a signal of our ambitions but the way to secure prosperity decades from now; and to tackle inequalities in housing, health, education and many other areas in which there are still inequalities in 21st century Scotland. The policies that I have outlined today will make a difference in those areas and they will also improve our public services and modernise our laws.

I hope that, in the months ahead, we will have a passionate debate in this chamber about the future of Scotland. I am sure that both Nicola Sturgeon and I will contribute to that debate, but I also hope that when we agree on objectives, and when steps can be taken to work together, we will find time to share those objectives and to work together for a better Scotland.

David McLetchie (Edinburgh Pentlands)
(Con): I associate my party with the comments of the First Minister and Nicola Sturgeon on the appalling atrocities that we have witnessed in Beslan. We convey our deepest sympathies from this side of the chamber to the families of the victims and to the people of Russia as a whole.

As the First Minister rightly said, today is a new beginning for the Parliament. As a patriotic Scot, it upsets me that our Parliament has become a source of shame when it should be a source of pride. Does the First Minister agree that we have spent the past five years building offices for the Parliament and that we must spend the next five years building respect for the Scottish Parliament? That is what people in Scotland expect of us.

There are aspects of the legislative programme that we on the Conservative side certainly welcome. In particular, I thank the First Minister for taking forward the work that my colleague Margaret Mitchell has done on the subject of internet grooming, and for bringing forward child protection measures in Scotland that are commensurate with and comparable to those that apply down south. I fear that much of the rest of the programme is a question of too much hype and not enough substance. For instance, when will the Scottish Executive do something about the waiting lists and waiting times for hospital treatment in Scotland, which have actually increased since 1999, notwithstanding the billions that have been poured into the service? Is the truth of the matter not that the Scottish Executive is so ashamed of its record on the national health service in Scotland that it has given up on it? That is summed up in the fact that only 10 paragraphs of the copy of the First Minister's statement are devoted to the health service, compared with the 11 paragraphs that are devoted to the Gaelic language. In relation to the Gaelic language, there is nothing about promoting Gaelic-medium education, which is one of the best ways of sustaining the language.

The First Minister referred to the budget measures that will be announced shortly. Is there any prospect of putting in place measures to enable our councils to reduce substantially the burden of council tax for all council tax payers in Scotland and to reduce significantly the level of business rates suffered by our businesses, to remove the competitive disadvantage that they labour under at present? Does the First Minister agree that it is about time that our council tax payers and business rate payers in Scotland get the breaks and reductions that they deserve?

The First Minister: I welcome Mr McLetchie back to our jousts. I suspect that he and I may find it harder to agree than Ms Sturgeon and I will do in the months and years ahead. I welcome that prospect.

Although I suspect that it may have been a nuance, I do not agree that we need to build respect for the Parliament. We need to earn respect for the Parliament and we will not do that by counting paragraphs in speeches and trivialising the issues that are in front of us.

Of course there is more to government than the legislative programme each year, but this legislative programme will modernise Scotland's laws to reflect modern Scotland. It will do that to help to protect our children, to promote enterprise, to provide the infrastructure that we need and to support stronger communities, in particular those that have faced so many difficulties over the past two decades. I say to Mr McLetchie that, yes, we will act—not just on council tax or business rates but in other ways to support families and businesses.

We will act—as we are acting—to improve our national health service, but what is needed is action right across our programme to ensure better public services and improved legislation. We must also ensure that, in the actions that we take at home and abroad, we make this Parliament building not a national embarrassment but a national icon in which the level of our debate reflects the aspirations of those who sent us here and allows us not only to enjoy the intensity of the debate but to make the right decisions and the maximum difference for the maximum number of young Scottish children.

Robin Harper (Lothians) (Green): I support the comments that have been made about the grievous wound that has been inflicted on the community of Beslan and the Russian people. On behalf of my group, I extend our heartfelt sympathies to everybody in Beslan and to the people of Russia.

I must also express a sense of awe about how privileged I feel to stand in the chamber and make one of the first speeches in this building, which is incontestably a work of architectural genius. I am quite sure that it is a building of which the people of Scotland will become immensely proud.

In previous speeches, the First Minister made commitments to environmental justice, sustainability and tackling climate change and yet, significantly, all those subjects were absent from his presentation this morning. I welcome much of the programme that he outlined, particularly, of course, the commitment to the protection of Scotland's children.

I also welcome the introduction of strategic environmental assessment, but I have to ask the First Minister the following questions. First, were the principles of strategic environmental assessment applied to the legislative programme in any way? Secondly, will the proposals for strategic environmental assessment be monitored independently; in other words, will that work be carried out by an independent body? Lastly, the First Minister made a considerable commitment to growth in the Scottish economy. Can he give a commitment that that growth will not be at the expense of the environment and climate change?

The First Minister: I welcome Robin Harper back to the chamber and thank him for his contribution. What is important about this devolved Government's approach to the environment and to sustainable development is that we see that approach as something that runs through every department, every piece of legislation and every action that we take, not as an add-on that requires to be listed or described on every occasion. We will pursue our housing and transport policies in a way that is more sustainable than has been the case in the past. That will be at the core of our plans for strategic environmental assessment. We will expect those who are making the decisions in every Government department and agency to assess the impact of those decisions on the environment.

I do not accept the historical separation that has existed for far too long in Scottish and British politics between economic growth and job creation on the one hand and environmental sustainability and sustainable development on the other. I believe that we in Scotland can marry the two, partly because of our natural resources and our skills, expertise and innovation. We can have economic growth and job creation as well as sustainable development and environmental protection.

A positive approach and commitment to sustainable development and environmental protection can enhance the opportunities in Scotland for economic growth and job creation in the modern world. The best example of that is in renewable energy. If the pilot project in the Moray firth that I announced in Aberdeen two weeks ago is successful, Scotland will have the world's first and largest deepwater offshore wind farm, more than 12 miles from the shore—it will be out of sight but will provide enough electricity to assist households and businesses in one fifth of Scotland. That shows huge commitment and massive potential, on the back of successful private companies in Scotland, successful research and innovation and the Government's commitment to economic growth and the environment.

Tommy Sheridan (Glasgow) (SSP): I associate the socialist group with the First Minister's comments about Beslan. I hope that our deepest condolences can be passed to Russia and to the communities that were worst affected.

I have two questions about the First Minister's statement. First, there was a distinct lack of reference to pensioners—particularly the 43 per cent of Scotland's pensioners who try to survive on an income of less than £10,000 per annum—and to low-paid workers. Does the First Minister agree that one of the priorities for the next 12 months has to be for the Parliament to find a

fairer, progressive and income-based alternative to the acutely unfair council tax and water rates, which continue to hammer the poorest sections of our communities, particularly our pensioners and low-paid workers?

Secondly, will the First Minister reflect on his comment that Scotland should welcome all those who are fleeing persecution? Does he agree with the majority of people in Scotland who believe that it is wrong to continue to imprison asylum seekers and their children who are fleeing persecution? Will he join us in calling for the closure of Dungavel?

The First Minister: Mr Sheridan makes points that he has made consistently in the Parliament. I have two things to say in response. First, Mr Sheridan does not make it clear that his plans to abolish—as he would put it—the council tax would involve increased taxation for average working families in Scotland. That would then lead to those families finding themselves with a worse quality of life, lower family income and fewer opportunities for their children. If we are going to have a debate about the future of taxation in Scotland, we should have an honest debate, set out our plans clearly and be honest about their implications for every section of Scottish society. Yes, we should help our pensioners, but not at the expense of the hard-working families that Mr Sheridan seeks to penalise.

Secondly, Mr Sheridan also distorts the picture in relation to asylum seekers. Scots have been welcomed all over the world for centuries. We have made our homes elsewhere and have contributed to growth of countries throughout the world. In the same way, Scotland should be a welcoming country for those who want to come to our shores. However, we should do that through a proper process and a legal immigration system that is fair to all and accurate in its deliberations, not based purely on emotion.

I believe that it is important that we have a fair system for determining which of the asylum seekers who come to Scotland are genuine refugees. When they are designated as genuine refugees, they should be welcomed and integrated into our communities and they should be given the opportunities to prosper that Scotland can offer them. However, it is also important that the system ensures that those who, for whatever reason, need to go back to their previous country do so. Whatever they have done—in some cases, they have been involved in very serious acts—those people must be part of the system too. They cannot opt out of it and simply enjoy a life in Scotland.

We need a fair immigration system. It must be based on principles and be welcoming to those who can come and genuinely make a contribution

here in Scotland, but it must also deal properly with those who try to abuse it.

The Presiding Officer: I ask members for shorter questions and answers, please.

Des McNulty (Clydebank and Milngavie) (Lab): If we are to deliver the improvements in public services, jobs growth and the enhancements in productivity across the public and private sectors that are required for the ambitious programme that the First Minister has outlined, we will need a strong partnership with employees and their representative organisations, which are the trade unions. Does the First Minister agree that the trade union movement must play an important part in a modern devolved Scotland? Will he and his colleagues continue the dialogue with the trade unions and other partners to ensure that the progress we make is, as far as possible, consensual and inclusive?

The First Minister: It is important that we build on the partnerships that have been developed during the first five years. We must ensure that we work not just with the business organisations, individual businesses, the voluntary sector and local community organisations but with trade unions and representatives of those who work in Scotland. We need to do that in a positive environment, but we should do so with the clear objective of improving our public services and securing the efficiencies that are required to transfer resources from the back office to the front line, where those who need our public services can benefit from them most.

Alex Neil (Central Scotland) (SNP): I draw the First Minister's attention to his promise to expand the business sector in Scotland. How does he reconcile that with this morning's figures from the Committee of Scottish Clearing Bankers that show a further 7 per cent reduction in the number of new businesses being created in Scotland? What specific measures will the First Minister take in the next year to boost the creation of new businesses in Scotland?

The First Minister: We can take, and we are taking, a number of measures, but we should be clear about an important philosophical point. I do not believe that Governments, whether local or national, create private businesses. The way to grow Scotland's private business sector is to encourage and enhance its opportunities to grow. We need to support it by providing the infrastructure and by ensuring that the grants schemes that we operate are designed to support growth and opportunities and, in particular, research and innovation.

If Scotland's private sector is to grow further, we need not only more business start-ups but more research and innovation and higher levels of productivity in the private sector as well as in the

public sector. That means that we need to provide the skills, knowledge and lifelong learning by supporting universities, by developing partnerships and by providing the business growth fund and all the other schemes that we have to help businesses that are ambitious, but it also means that private companies themselves must unlock their own potential. They need to secure growth by tapping into those measures and by taking up the challenge of securing the research, innovation and improvements in productivity that can make a difference for them.

Nora Radcliffe (Gordon) (LD): I beg the Presiding Officer's indulgence to associate the Scottish Liberal Democrats with the sympathy that has been extended to the shocked and bereft people of Beslan.

We also concur with the First Minister's appreciation of this magnificent building and those who built it. We all share his aspirations for the work that will go on inside it.

The consultation on smoking in enclosed public places will be concluded next month. Does the First Minister agree that recent evidence that ventilation does not mitigate the effects of passive smoking should count as a factor that weighs heavily? Will he assure us that the Scottish Executive will move swiftly to analyse the results of the consultation and swiftly thereafter to take action in the light of that analysis of the comments that have been made?

The First Minister: Smoking-related diseases kill approximately 13,000 people in Scotland every year. Every one of those deaths affects family, friends and many people in the wider community. More than a million Scots smoke and 70 per cent of them say that they would like to give up smoking but find that very difficult indeed. I believe, and the Executive believes, that further moves to prevent smoking in enclosed public places provide one opportunity to reduce the number of smokers in Scotland, to reduce deaths and illness from passive smoking and to help people to give up the habit that can cost them their lives. We shall make a decision on how far we go with a ban on smoking in enclosed public spaces at the end of the consultation, but action there must be and action there will be.

Bill Aitken (Glasgow) (Con): The First Minister has highlighted the problem of declining population and has stated, quite rightly, that one of the ways round that is to attract people to work and settle in Scotland. Does he agree, however, that a greater priority should perhaps be to take steps to persuade the thousands of young graduates who have left Scotland in recent years—to escape the high-tax, low-public-service environment that the Executive has created—to return?

The First Minister: If that were true, those people would be making a big mistake; they would be leaving the best small country in the world to go elsewhere, where in the main taxes are higher and public services are significantly worse. This is a country with huge potential but also with a great quality of life today. We have some of the most vibrant smaller cities in the whole of Europe. We have a landscape and countryside that are outstanding. We have business sectors in Scotland—in bioscience and financial services, and still in some sectors of manufacturing and in many other areas—that are challenging for young people, provide good jobs for them and can be among the best in the world.

It is because people such as Mr Aitken run down this country and describe it in the way that he does that people get scunnered with it. If we all walked out of this chamber more often and talked up this country and its benefits and the fantastic quality of life that we have—while realising that there are challenges and that there is more to be done—and told the world what a great place Scotland is, Scotland would be more successful as a result.

Dr Sylvia Jackson (Stirling) (Lab): Does the First Minister agree that an important aspect of the huge investment that the Government has made in school buildings is what the associated community facilities can contribute, not only to lifelong learning but, through sports facilities, to the health of the community?

The First Minister: Of course I agree with that, and I believe that schools should be at the centre of their communities, providing facilities and resources that can be used by all, not just by those who study in them between 9 and 4.

Tomorrow evening I will have the pleasure of hosting a reception for Scotland's Olympians, including the four medal winners, so I would also like to take this opportunity—if it is not too opportunist of me, Presiding Officer—to congratulate those athletes on their success. I believe that each of those outstanding individuals can be a role model for successful young Scots in the years to come. Each of them makes a contribution back into their own sport and to other sports in a way that I think is very important. Each of them has performed admirably and done themselves, their families and their country proud. I look forward to taking to them tomorrow evening the congratulations of the whole Parliament.

The Presiding Officer: I now suspend this meeting of Parliament until 11 o'clock.

10:38

Meeting suspended.

11:00

On resuming—

Scottish Executive's Programme

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Trish Godman): Our next item of business is a debate on the First Minister's statement on the programme of the Scottish Executive.

11:00

The Deputy First Minister and Minister for Enterprise and Lifelong Learning (Mr Jim Wallace): It is with real pride that I open this, the first debate in our new chamber. Today, a Scottish Parliament convenes in a new Scottish chamber to debate a programme of Scottish legislation to address Scottish issues.

Like, I am sure, many in this Parliament—regardless of party affiliation—I was drawn to politics by a vision of and a commitment to improving the lives of people in Scotland. When he was elected First Minister five years ago, Donald Dewar said in his speech immediately after that election:

"This must be a Parliament of Scotland's people. We must look beyond the walls of this place to the people of Scotland." —[*Official Report*, 13 May 1999; Vol 1, c 25.]

Therefore, this must be a Parliament that is as relevant to the needs and hopes of my constituents in Orkney as it is to those on its doorstep in Edinburgh—a Parliament for all Scotland's people.

In this Parliament and in this chamber, we must develop policies to build our economy, to equip our young people with the skills and confidence that they need to lead successful, enterprising and ambitious lives, to support confident communities and to place a better environment and better health at the heart of our plans for action, putting the long-term interests of the Scottish people first. If we can do that, we will be true to the reasons why we created and stood for the Parliament. We will be living up to the vision that is embodied in the powerful architecture of this chamber. More important, we will be living up to the expectations of the people of Scotland.

Working with the Parliament, the Liberal Democrat-Labour Government has already done much to improve people's lives; let us not forget our achievements in the Parliament on the Mound. We improved opportunities by abolishing tuition fees and by supporting Scotland's transformation into a modern knowledge economy. We provided the foundations for better health by promoting improved diets and more physical activity.

Stewart Stevenson (Banff and Buchan) (SNP): Will the minister take an intervention?

Mr Wallace: I want to get into my stride, and then I will give way to Stewart Stevenson, who deserves the first intervention.

We have invested in Scotland's future success with historic levels of support for new schools, new equipment and more teachers. We have done all that while protecting our environment by investing in public transport, renewable energy, waste reduction and recycling to ensure that Scotland develops in a sustainable way.

Stewart Stevenson: Does the Deputy First Minister agree that it comes as a great shock to many of the constituents who call at my surgeries that, for the first time, they will next year have to pay considerable amounts of money for the graduate endowment and that, in their minds and in the minds of people throughout Scotland, that does not represent the abolition of tuition fees?

Mr Wallace: I was glad to give way to the man in waiting for the leader in waiting.

Stewart Stevenson: He will wait a while.

Members: Ooh!

Mr Wallace: It was worth taking the intervention just to hear that.

The proposals for tuition fees were put fairly before Parliament, and they were debated and passed by Parliament. Let us remember that the graduate endowment is not in any way payment for tuition—all students domiciled in Scotland who undertake their first degree at a Scottish university have their fees paid by the Scottish Executive. The graduate endowment is ring fenced in legislation to provide support for future generations of Scottish students so that they too can have access to the benefits of higher education.

The legislation that has been passed by Parliament is already beginning to bear fruit. As the First Minister said, historic legislation to abolish our ancient feudal land laws will come into force on 28 November. Traditional rights to walk responsibly across our hills are enshrined in legislation, with the Land Reform (Scotland) Act 2003 now being hailed around the globe as a model for other countries.

We have worked to protect the most vulnerable people in our society by legislating to provide free personal care for the elderly and by ensuring that proper care is available to all who need it, while working to ensure that as many people as possible can continue to live with dignity in their own homes. Today, those measures are benefiting about 48,000 people in Scotland. I remember that we introduced one of the first bills to be passed in the old Parliament building. That bill brought in

new measures to protect the rights and welfare of adults with incapacity and now supports as many as 100,000 people and their families.

I am proud of all those achievements and there are many more examples of how devolution has been working for Scotland. From 1999 to date, the Scottish Parliament has enacted 62 bills that address Scottish issues. In marked contrast, before devolution we might have expected just four or five purely Scottish bills to pass through Westminster each year.

Home rule has enabled us to address Scottish issues in a distinctively Scottish way. It has brought government closer to the people whom it serves and it has made it more accountable than ever. That process is not complete, because a modern, democratic Parliament should be as open and accountable as possible—openness should be our defining characteristic. In that spirit, in January next year we will see the full implementation of the Freedom of Information (Scotland) Act 2002, which will ensure that people have the fullest possible access to the workings of their Government. I look forward to that increased openness and I believe that we will all benefit from the improved governance that it will bring.

Alasdair Morgan (South of Scotland) (SNP): I accept the First Minister's criticism of Mr McLetchie, that it is not really legitimate to count the number of paragraphs in a speech, but is it any more legitimate to count the number of bills in the legislative programme?

Mr Wallace: There is a fundamental difference. After all, we should remember the first section of the Scotland Act 1998, which says:

"There shall be a Scottish Parliament."

It contains very few words, but in terms of legislation it means an awful lot, so when we are talking about substantial legislation, it does matter.

The programme that has been announced today will create the conditions for improved opportunities for all in Scotland, for better education and for growing the economy. We will put in place measures to promote better health outcomes for thousands of Scots, to support and protect children and families, to secure the future of Gaelic and to secure the long-term protection of our environment. In short, we want to create the opportunity for a prosperous, sustainable and socially just future for everyone in Scotland.

Phil Gallie (South of Scotland) (Con): Will the member give way?

Mr John Swinney (North Tayside) (SNP): Will the member give way?

Mr Wallace: I am spoiled for choice. We have already heard from a nationalist, but I will not ignore Mr Swinney in future.

Phil Gallie: This morning when the First Minister laid out his programme, we heard him boast—as the minister is currently doing—about Scotland's right to create its own legislation. However, the First Minister missed out any reference to the European constitution. Does the minister agree that the European constitution would weaken this Parliament's right to legislate and does he think that that would cut across the principles of devolution on which the Parliament is founded?

Mr Wallace: Fundamentally I do not, because what has been achieved through the European constitution, not least through the work that was done by the First Minister during his presidency of Regleg—the regions with legislative power—is a far greater role for devolved Parliaments to be involved in European legislation as it progresses. In that way, I am sure that the legislation that we pass will be against a backdrop of European legislation that better reflects the particular needs and circumstances of devolved Administrations.

Last week we published "The Framework for Economic Development in Scotland" and I will soon publish an updated version of "A Smart, Successful Scotland". Those documents emphasise our commitment to and key role in driving forward economic growth in Scotland. We will shortly have an opportunity to debate the economy in this new building.

Mr Swinney: Does the minister share my concern that one of the biggest impediments to economic growth in Scotland is the stance that is currently being taken by Scottish Water in relation to investment in sewerage infrastructure in Scotland? In my constituency, that stance is stopping any development in a number of major settlements and I cannot get a positive response on the matter from the Minister for Environment and Rural Development, who is sitting beside the minister. Does Mr Wallace share the concerns of Angus Council and Perth and Kinross Council—where Mr Wallace's party and my party now share power—about the lack of capacity within Scottish Water to support economic growth? Is it not about time that Mr Wallace took some action to bang heads together in relation to Scottish Water and to support the process of economic growth in Scotland?

Mr Wallace: The sum of £1.8 billion represents the biggest single programme of investment in our water in generations. It is important to remember that the current investment priorities of Scottish Water reflect the consultation that took place in the early days of the Parliament. I understand that Perth and Kinross Council did not respond to that consultation.

It is my understanding that the issues of development constraint—genuine concerns that I know are being expressed by members from all

parts of the country—were not flagged up in any prominent way at the time of the last consultation. That is why we are currently consulting on the next programme of investment and why it is important that all local authorities and businesses take the opportunity to highlight the importance of investment to ensure development in the future. I hope very much that, when we see the result of the consultation, it will allow us to address some of the concerns that Mr Swinney and many others in the chamber have expressed.

We are investing record amounts in major public transport projects, including new rail lines, tram lines and airport links. In the year before Parliament was established, less than one quarter of the transport budget was spent on public transport. The amount will soon be more than two thirds and we want to do more, which is why we will introduce legislation to improve the operation of Scotland's transport networks. The proposed legislation will create regional transport partnerships to improve regional planning and delivery of transport services, and it will help to tackle congestion by improving co-ordination and quality of roadworks.

Roads, railways, buses and ferries are important parts of Scotland's infrastructure. However, as we drive forward Scotland's shift to a knowledge economy, skills and education will be equally important in ensuring our long-term success. In recognising the long-term importance of a properly organised and focused approach, we will introduce legislation to improve Scotland's education and skills infrastructure by establishing one strategic body for funding further and higher education in Scotland, and by helping to establish parity of esteem for different types of learning and providers, while respecting the different strengths of different institutions.

Our strategy in "The Framework for Economic Development in Scotland" has stressed the important role of good health as part of our nation's economic infrastructure. Since 1999, we have invested record amounts in Scotland's health care services and worked to reform and improve them. However, taking the long-term approach, alongside our efforts to treat ill health we must work harder to prevent it and to become a healthier nation where fewer people become ill in the first place. We have already taken significant steps forward, from promoting healthy eating to establishing well man clinics in order to tackle the problem of men being reluctant to seek early advice on their health.

We now intend to take forward a key partnership agreement commitment to improve people's health. Routine eye and dental checks can identify a range of health problems, thereby enabling early treatment, and I can tell the Parliament that we

have decided to legislate to make eye and dental checks free for everyone in Scotland by 2007.

Shona Robison (Dundee East) (SNP): Will the minister take an intervention?

Mr Wallace: No—I think that I have been pretty generous in giving way.

We are discussing with Scotland's dental profession whether we can make progress even before the new legislation, by exploring with the profession the possibility of providing under the current arrangements free dental checks for people over 60. As the First Minister said, the health bill will also modernise legislation that handles the sensitive issue of organ and tissue donation and transplantation. In addition, I will obviously be considering the Executive's response to the consultation on smoking in public places, to decide how best we can help to tackle the serious damage done to the health of people in Scotland by smoking.

Among the proposals that the First Minister announced this morning are measures to protect the most vulnerable people in our society. We will strengthen the law that protects our children and, to fulfil an earlier commitment to Parliament, we will introduce legislation to strengthen protection against internet grooming of children, with the introduction of a maximum sentence of 10 years for that predatory behaviour. Also, in a further step to protect our children, we will introduce legislation to strengthen existing law making female genital mutilation an offence.

One of our major achievements since 1999 has been to reverse decades of decline in our social housing stock by transferring control to tenants and unlocking hundreds of millions of pounds of investment to transform those homes. We will now move on to address concerns about the state of some privately owned housing, with a bill that will increase local authority powers to require or carry out work on private property that is in disrepair. Significantly, the bill will also contain powers to build on the current pilots of single seller surveys and to introduce a requirement for energy performance certificates to be made available to new owners and tenants.

In support of communities across Scotland, we are determined to address the negative and damaging culture of under-age and binge drinking. Excessive drinking and the antisocial and often violent behaviour it encourages are reducing the quality of life of many individuals and communities on a daily basis. We will therefore introduce a bill that will create a simpler and more rigorous national licensing framework, with greater flexibility for local licensing boards to tackle local problems.

I think that we all recognise that families are at the core of our communities. The pattern of family

life has in many cases changed dramatically in recent decades. We will therefore introduce a family law bill that will pursue three objectives: safeguarding the best interests of children; reflecting the reality of modern family life; and supporting family stability. The bill will introduce legal rights for unmarried fathers and legal safeguards for cohabiting couples, while trying to ease the transition for separated families by reducing the period of separation required for divorce. With the legislation, we will seek to ensure that women and children in particular are not left vulnerable because of the type of family in which they live.

Scotland's charitable sector plays a vital role in our national life, supporting some of our most vulnerable citizens and providing vital social networks. Indeed, about 25 per cent of Scots give up some of their time to participate in voluntary or charitable activity, which contributes £4 billion annually to the economy, while the voluntary sector as a whole employs more than 100,000 people in Scotland.

We want to enable the social economy in Scotland to reach its full potential. We will therefore introduce legislation to modernise the legal and financial frameworks of the voluntary sector and to develop its infrastructure. Those measures are intended to improve public confidence in Scotland's charities and, ultimately, to encourage greater public donations with the reassurance that those donations will be well spent.

Tricia Marwick (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP): Does the minister agree that, given the good will towards Parliament and the need for charity legislation, confidence in the charities sector perhaps would not have been undermined if the Executive had introduced a bill in the previous session and not waited until now?

Mr Wallace: Those of us who have been involved in the development of the legislation know how intricate and difficult the matter is. The bill that will be introduced by Margaret Curran will illustrate the detail into which the legislation goes and the very strong provisions that it will make to ensure proper regulation of our charities, as well as including a new definition of charity that takes our charity law into the 21st century.

As the First Minister said in his statement, we will introduce legislation to address the needs of Scotland's 60,000 Gaelic speakers by creating a statutory Gaelic development board to support Gaelic development in education, broadcasting and the arts.

I turn to a bill that I believe will have a key impact on protecting our environment, and which will have a direct impact on Parliament and the

Executive. The partnership agreement committed the Government to promoting Scotland's sustainable development by weaving a green thread through the Government's policies so that they help to protect our environment and embed sustainability. A key part of that commitment is to ensure that all new public sector strategies, programmes and plans are properly assessed for their full environmental impact. By so doing, we can ensure better environmental outcomes for Scotland by reducing or—better still—by avoiding negative environmental impacts. The strategic environmental assessment bill will, therefore, require public authorities to consider the full range of alternatives when they develop their strategies and programmes by making clear the environmental impacts of each.

In his maiden speech to the House of Commons in March 1950, my predecessor as MP for Orkney and Shetland, Jo Grimond, talked about self-government for Scotland and stated that Scotland would gain confidence if we had more control over affairs in our own country. Over the past five years, the evidence has supported that statement—Scotland is a nation growing in confidence. As the measures outlined today demonstrate, the Executive is addressing the key challenges that face Scotland today. This Government will give people more and better opportunities in a growing economy by supporting improved transport links and providing a more strategic approach to education and skills. This Government will promote excellent public services, particularly our health services, by putting an emphasis on promoting good health, as well as on treating ill health. This Government will work to protect our unique and precious environmental heritage by ensuring that the public sector puts sustainable development at the heart of everything it does. We will support stronger, safer communities by protecting children and supporting stable family life.

It is a serious and considered programme, which is appropriate to mark a new start for the Scottish Parliament in its new home. The legislation that we will introduce will help to continue the process of real change we have instituted in Scotland. Devolution is working, this partnership is working and the Scottish Government is delivering.

11:18

Nicola Sturgeon (Glasgow) (SNP): I agree with the Deputy First Minister that this is indeed a momentous day for Scotland. The controversy surrounding the building, the inexcusable delays and the cost escalations, and the disappointment that many people feel about the early days of devolution, undoubtedly temper the sense of pride that we might otherwise feel today. However, the

new parliament is now a reality. It is granite, bricks and mortar; it is living and breathing. The challenge now for all of us is to live up to it, and to ensure that what is delivered within this fabulous chamber matches the grandeur of the surroundings. Today is a chance to start afresh, to experiment with new ideas and to break from the past. That is a challenge not just for Government but for Opposition.

As the new leader of the SNP in the Scottish Parliament, I give this pledge: we will, as is our absolute duty, hold this Executive to account. We will shine a light on the failings of the Executive in delivering for the people of Scotland—and in my view there are many failings. After five years of this Labour-Liberal Executive patients are still languishing on hospital waiting lists for far too long. Hospitals are closing around the country without rhyme or reason, and in almost every case against massive public opposition. One in five of our pensioners and one in three of our children are living in poverty while Trident nuclear bombs costing billions of pounds—the real weapons of mass destruction—still lurk on the Clyde.

We will hold the Executive to account on all those issues and more, but we will do more than simply oppose. We will be constructive and we will offer alternatives. We will work to build confidence in this Parliament and in all of us who are honoured to serve in it. We will articulate a vision of the country that we seek to build, and inspire the people of Scotland to dwell not just on what is wrong with our country but on how much better it can be and how much more we can achieve as a country if we equip our Parliament with the powers to match its price tag—the powers that every other country in Europe takes for granted.

George Lyon (Argyll and Bute) (LD): In the spirit of building confidence in this Parliament, does the member agree that we need to take tougher action against absentee lairds who might wish to interfere and meddle in matters that should rightly be decided here in Scotland?

Nicola Sturgeon: I was listening to the First Minister on the radio, I think on Sunday morning, and he said that the people of Scotland were heartily sick of yah-boo politics and that they expected something more. I guess that George Lyon was still in his bed at the time.

Scotland is a country with enormous potential. We have a talented population—with some obvious exceptions that we have just seen on display—and we have won the lottery in terms of our natural resources. North sea oil and gas—half of which is still to be exploited—is currently earning the United Kingdom Treasury £8 billion a year, which, according to one of Labour's former economic researchers, debunks the myth that an independent Scotland could not stand on its own

two feet and prosper. Of course we also have the potential to generate 40 per cent of Europe's wind energy and 10 per cent of its wave power. We have everything going for us as a nation, but we are not making the most of our advantages and we are not fulfilling our massive potential.

We face huge challenges as a nation and our job as Scotland's national Parliament is to meet those challenges head on. We have an economy that is underperforming, with one of the lowest growth rates in Europe, in spite of the First Minister saying that economic growth is his number 1 priority. We have a rapidly declining population, which is set to dip below 5 million by the end of this decade and to decrease by 10 per cent within the next 40 years. We have low life expectancy and appalling inequalities of health and income. We have public services that, despite generous spending increases in recent years, do not deliver the quality of service that the public, who after all are paying through taxation and through the nose, have a right to expect.

Those are the challenges that this Parliament—if it is to deliver for the people of Scotland and live up to the building that now houses it—must face up to. Our job is to build a Scotland that is confident about itself and its place in the world; a Scotland that is positive about wealth creation; a Scotland that champions equality and looks after the vulnerable, but encourages those with exceptional talent to thrive; a Scotland that is clean, green and sustainable; and a Scotland where success is built on a combination of individual endeavour and Government action.

What is disappointing about the Executive programme is not that any of the proposed bills are particularly objectionable. On the contrary, many of them are eminently supportable, particularly, as I mentioned earlier, the measures to protect children from the evils of internet grooming. However, taken together, this legislative programme does not tackle the big challenges that we face as a nation. It lacks vision and a clear sense of purpose and direction for our nation.

For example, I welcome the principle behind the proposed charity law reform bill, but I am left wondering how the Executive intends to modernise our national infrastructure and get our economy moving. I welcome the reform and modernisation of family law, but I want to hear much more about what this Executive proposes to do about child poverty.

Similarly, I am sure that all members will support the long-overdue Gaelic Language (Scotland) Bill, which was mentioned earlier, but we have heard nothing about what more the Executive will do to reverse Scotland's declining population, given that we know that the fresh talent initiative is inadequate. Of course, the First Minister will say,

rightly, that there is more to government than legislation, but in the past few days he has stumbled on each occasion on which he had tried to articulate new ideas about the future direction of the country. He says that he wants the private sector to finance our schools, but he will not say by how much and what for; he says that he wants more diversity in education, but refuses point blank to give any detail; and he says that he wants to cut the size of the public sector and grow the private sector, but he shows no sign of knowing how to achieve that.

Those are supposed to be the First Minister's big ideas, only of course they are not his ideas; they add up to nothing more than Blair-lite. It is as if Mr McConnell knows that he has to say something that sounds big, bold and different, but he does not really have any ideas of his own, so he borrows some from Blair. The only problem is that he does not really believe them, so he backtracks before the ink is dry on the press releases. That is government by headline, not substance, and it is not good enough given the challenges that we face. The nation is crying out for clear ideas and policies to meet those challenges.

Christine May (Central Fife) (Lab): Nicola Sturgeon commented on the First Minister's wish to see the private sector grow and criticised that wish. Is she saying that the SNP does not want the private sector to grow? If that is the case, where would it put investment and how would it achieve its vision for Scotland, which I am still waiting to hear?

Nicola Sturgeon: The member will hear that in a minute. I want our economy to grow, but I have a belief, which I think people out there share, that when the First Minister of our country gets up and articulates grand visions, he should know how he will bring them about. Patently, this First Minister does not know that.

We need clear policies and ideas to meet the challenges that we face so that, as the First Minister said, our country can go forward into the 21st century with confidence. For starters, I will suggest a few policies that would make the Parliament worthy of the name, not to mention the money that has been spent on it, and which might start to tackle the problems of low economic growth, inequality, failing public services and the gaping chasm that exists between the public and decision makers. If the only reason why the Parliament cannot put some of these policies into practice is that we lack the powers to do so, perhaps it is time that we started demanding those powers. Devolved and reserved competencies do not mean that much to most people. People want politicians to deliver for them—to decide what needs to be done and to do it—rather than make

excuses for not doing very much at all. In short, to quote Jack McConnell, we need to “raise our game”.

Phil Gallie: Will Nicola Sturgeon take an intervention?

Nicola Sturgeon: I have been generous with interventions—perhaps I will take one later.

Let us start raising our game by bringing our infrastructure up to 21st century standards. We are a small country on the periphery of Europe and if we are to compete successfully with our European neighbours, we must compensate for our physical remoteness with first-class infrastructure. It takes longer to travel between Glasgow and Edinburgh by rail today than it took 30 years ago. That beggars belief, but it is true. A Scottish trust for national investment could transform national networks by investing revenue underspends in long-term capital projects and issuing bonds for particular projects—the kind of initiative that brought water to the city of Glasgow. We could have a bullet train between Glasgow and Edinburgh and a rail link between our central belt airports and we could dual the A9 and the trunk road network in the south-west and the north-east. Let us raise our game by bringing our infrastructure up to scratch.

George Lyon: Will the member take an intervention?

Nicola Sturgeon: Not just now.

Let us raise our game by doing more to tackle population decline. Our population will drop below 5 million by the end of the decade and below 4.5 million within 40 years. It is also getting older. Within 40 years, there will be 50 per cent more people who are over 65 and 30 per cent fewer who are under 16. Just to keep our population steady at 5 million, we need 10,000 new people coming to live in Scotland every year. I support the fresh talent initiative, but even at its best it will attract only 8,000 people a year, which means that our population is set to decline.

If we were to pioneer a green card scheme, as Quebec and some Australian states have done, we could attract young, skilled migrants to come not just to the UK, but to Scotland. Of course, that would mean that this Parliament would have to have more power over immigration but, after all, that would be what we might call a Scottish solution to a Scottish problem. Scotland is the only part of the United Kingdom with a declining population. We cannot wait on others to solve our problems for us. That is what we are here to do. We should raise our game by tackling population decline.

We should also raise our game by tackling pensioner poverty. In an oil-rich nation, it is a

disgrace that many pensioners live in poverty. Many do so because they do not know about or will not apply for means-tested top-ups to their basic pension. For £200 million a year—less than half of the cost of this Parliament—we could abolish means testing and pay all our old folk a decent pension. Yes, that might mean having financial powers for this Parliament, but in my book, powers that would make a real difference to the lives of the most vulnerable in our society are powers worth having and are powers that this Parliament badly needs.

Finally, we must raise our game in relation to the delivery of public services, starting with the national health service. Health service reform is inevitable, but the haphazard, piecemeal approach to hospital closures that is being taken by various health boards that are united only in their lack of accountability to the public is not acceptable. We need a halt to the madness and the adoption of a clear national strategy. While we are at it, we could add another bill to the legislative programme, one that will introduce elections to health boards to ensure that the public have a say in the shape of their national health service.

There you have it: some big ideas for a big Parliament in a country facing some mighty big challenges. The question that each and every one of us must ask is whether Mr McConnell is big enough to take them on board.

In his radio interview earlier, Mr McConnell said that he would listen to good ideas, wherever they came from. I welcome that sentiment. The ideas that I have outlined are good ideas that would begin to help this country of ours to deal with the enormous challenges that it faces in order that, as a nation, we can begin to fulfil the enormous potential that we know that we have. I challenge Mr McConnell to take on those ideas and to do much more than he has shown this morning that he is willing to do; to start making a real difference to the lives of people in this country; and to turn the big story of Scottish politics into one that is not about this building, its costs and the associated disappointments, but the wonderful things that can happen within it if we have the vision, the ambition and the determination to make them happen.

11:33

David McLetchie (Edinburgh Pentlands)
(Con): It is a great pleasure to speak in this debate as a real leader of the real Opposition in the new Scottish Parliament building. However, I congratulate Nicola Sturgeon on her election. No doubt, she will be looking to win an award in this year's political Oscars for best supporting actress.

To mark this new beginning, the First Minister has adopted a brand new persona. He started as

the ruthless party boss and godfather, Jack the knife, who made his political enemies disappear. Then we had Jack the hard man, who claimed he would wage war on neds in Scotland and proved how hard he was by giving Jim Wallace and all of those Liberal Democrat wimps a good kicking on that issue. Now, however, we have Jack the reformer—by far the least convincing of his roles to date. We have heard much in recent days of his plans to reform our schools, revitalise our economy and run a leaner and more efficient Government. However, have we not heard all that before? I would like to remind Mr McConnell of what he said on Thursday 22 November 2001, when he was elected First Minister. He said that the people of Scotland want

“jobs, less crime, better health, quality education and transport services that work”

and that

“It is time to deliver all those.”—[*Official Report*, 22 November 2001; c 4153.]

Mr McConnell has said, “Judge me on my record,” with the accent and emphasis on “my”. However, is his recent burst of media activity not an explicit admission of his failure as First Minister over the past three years—a longer period in that office than those of Mr Dewar and Mr McLeish combined? Is all the bluster not just a smokescreen to hide the truth, which is that the First Minister is, as Macbeth said,

“full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing”?

In all walks of life, the best predictor of future behaviour is past behaviour. That being the case, how can we have any confidence in the First Minister’s ability to turn things around? For instance, his so-called commitment to cut the cost of government is pure window dressing. The First Minister has been all over the place on that issue. On 21 March, his official spokesman told the *Mail on Sunday*:

“All government departments have been asked to make savings. Whether they do that without redundancies is up to them.”

However, by 28 June, in a speech to the Fraser of Allander Institute, the First Minister had changed his mind and decided that public sector cuts were not necessary. He said:

“We need to rebalance Scotland’s economy - not by shrinking the public sector, but by growing the private sector.”

Following the Chancellor of the Exchequer’s announcement, in his spending review, of targets to cut civil service jobs in Whitehall, *The Herald* reported that an e-mail had been circulated to all Scottish Executive staff telling them that their jobs were not at risk. The First Minister’s latest call for 2 per cent savings across the departments is

completely unrealistic. We are supposed to swallow the idea that our savings will be proportionately greater than those proposed by Gershon for the United Kingdom Government as a whole and that they will be achieved by job reorganisations, with only the vaguest possibility of a reduction in staff numbers in the process. It is time for the First Minister to come clean on the issue—he cannot have it both ways. He can either try to give his targets some credibility by announcing the reductions that will be necessary, or placate the unions and miss his targets by the proverbial mile.

There is, of course, plenty of room for reductions. Scottish Executive staff numbers have risen from 3,336 in 1999 to 4,393 at the last count—that is an increase of 32 per cent. The First Minister is directly responsible for those staff, but where are the specifics? Why does he not set an example? If he simply reduces the budgets to agencies, quangos, councils and other public bodies, they will simply cut service provision rather than administrative costs, as they have done in the past. What is different this time round? Very little, I suggest.

Tommy Sheridan (Glasgow) (SSP): Does Mr McLetchie agree that, in a bidding war with Mr Brown, Mr McLetchie’s counterpart at Westminster has been specific on the number of jobs that he would cut? Will Mr McLetchie be specific and tell us how many jobs he would cut in Scotland?

David McLetchie: I agree that there is a good deal more honesty in the targets that have been announced by both Her Majesty’s Government and Her Majesty’s Opposition at Westminster than is the case with the Executive here in Scotland. We said in our most recent manifesto—as Mr Sheridan will see if he reads it—that we would cut the size of government in Scotland back to the levels that pertained in 1999. That is our record and I am happy to reiterate that in the chamber today.

I move on to the Scottish Executive’s new-found determination to improve our economic performance, which consists of launching a new framework for a development strategy that failed to make a difference the first time round. How typical. This is an Executive that has more launches than Helen of Troy, most of which sink without trace. The poverty of our performance has been made clear in an authoritative new study of international economic competitiveness, which placed us 36th out of 60 and in the bottom third of comparable small countries. The study is particularly damning about whether Government policies are conducive to competitiveness—in that category we are ranked 39th. Of course, that is hardly surprising, considering that our businesses have to pay a higher business rate poundage than

their counterparts in England—another damaging policy for which the First Minister is personally responsible and which he shows no signs of rectifying.

Then we have the proposed education reform. So far, it has thrown up more questions than it has answered. Who will run the pilot schools? Will they be independently run and free from local authority control? Will they be able to select pupils and, if so, on what criteria? The First Minister is going round the country stirring up confusion on the issue. What he has said bears all the hallmarks of a miniscule change that will make very little difference indeed.

I doubt if even those few new schools will be given the freedom from local authority control that they require in order to prosper. I am certain that they will not be given it by an Executive that went out of its way to end such a freedom for St Mary's Episcopal Primary School in Dunblane—an act of political spite and educational vandalism that was signed off by Mr McConnell when he was education minister.

The health service is the Scottish Executive's greatest embarrassment and no wonder—the latest figures tell us all that we need to know. Extraordinarily, increased spending to the tune of £2 billion has led to longer waiting lists and increased waiting times for in-patients and emergency patients. That national scandal surpasses even the Holyrood scandal and is entirely of the Executive's own making.

I will remind the First Minister of something else that he said when he became our First Minister. He said that he would be prepared to

"learn and to change when it is right to do so".—*Official Report*, 22 November 2001; c 4154.]

It is time that he acted on those words. The move into our new Parliament building offers the perfect opportunity for a fundamental change of approach. It is certainly the intention of the Scottish Conservatives to champion a change from the failures that have gone before.

Our health service is not failing the people of Scotland because Malcolm Chisholm is uniquely incompetent—how could he be, given the rest of the Cabinet? Changing the minister in charge will make no difference. The fundamental problem is that the structure of the national health service in Scotland is a centralised and nationalised state monopoly. Pouring more money into such a poorly designed organisation will never produce the results that our people expect and deserve and for which they have paid dearly in their taxes. All the problems in the system—the lack of capacity, poor service, queues, cost inefficiency and lack of innovation—stem from that central design fault. Those problems are the hallmarks of state monopolies everywhere.

George Lyon: How would Conservative plans to rob the NHS of much-needed resources in order to fund the passport for private patients improve the service in Scotland? Surely that would make the service worse for the majority.

David McLetchie: Our plans would generate additional investment in the health service in Scotland and the United Kingdom as a whole. We would lever further funding into the provision of health services and increase the range of providers who could set to work to cut the waiting lists and waiting times. The Liberal Democrats wear a badge of shame because of the Executive's disgraceful performance over the past five years.

In order to correct that situation, restoration of choice and competition are at the heart of the Conservative agenda for reform of the health service. We want the purchasing power to be in the hands of patients so that taxpayers' money can follow them through a system that is accountable to them. That would mean that, for the first time, the less well-off would be on a level footing with the better-off. Providers of health care would be given far greater freedom to respond to and cater for the choices of our people, free from political control and bureaucratic targets.

We need to apply those same principles of choice and competition to education, which is an area that it can be argued is of even greater importance. Again, we need the purchasing power to be in the hands of the consumer—in this case, the parent—as that would free schools to cater for their choices. So fundamental do we think that education is to extending opportunity that, under our proposals, low-income families and parents of children with special educational needs would be given an even greater degree of purchasing power, which would ensure that their children would be more attractive to schools and that schools would draw pupils from all parts of the social spectrum. That would prevent children from being trapped in the failing schools of their catchment area prisons, as they are at the moment.

That is why, to make the policy work, we need to increase capacity in the education system by taking advantage of falling school rolls and enabling good schools to expand and new schools to be established. That will give parents in Scotland the real power to choose a school as opposed to a school choosing its pupils. Such a fundamental reform is the way to help the many and not the few with whom the First Minister is so concerned.

Ending monopoly provision and ensuring that our public services are responsive to consumer choice would lead to better services and better value for money for our taxpayers. A good

example of that is our proposal to combine education reform with substantial cuts in taxes for our council tax payers. We would use some of the planned increases in the Scottish Executive budget over the next three years to enable individual councils to make substantial reductions in council tax of between 28 and 45 per cent—a payback for all Scotland's hard-pressed council tax payers. At present, our councils spend more than £3 billion per year on our schools, around 18 per cent of which is funded from council tax at a cost of about £550 million per year.

Shona Robison: Will the member give way?

David McLetchie: I am sorry, but I am nearly finished.

We would fund schools directly from the Scottish Executive so that the money would follow the pupils to the school of their parents' choice, which would enable councils to use the element of their education spending that comes from council tax to reduce taxes for all.

Rhona Brankin (Midlothian) (Lab): Will the member take an intervention?

David McLetchie: No, I am in my final minute.

That is in marked contrast to the policies of the other parties in the Parliament. Under Labour, council tax has risen by 50 per cent since 1997 and, instead of doing something about that, it wants to juggle with bands and ratios. The SNP and the Liberal Democrats want a local income tax that would mean the average working couple paying an extra £1,500 per year.

Cuts in council tax and business rates are long overdue. They are at the centre of the Conservative alternative for the Parliament, which is a real alternative, not a useless change of passport that Scots do not want. It is a fundamental change of policy and approach for which only we stand. It is time for change. Unfortunately, the Executive's programme will certainly not deliver it.

11:46

Mr John Home Robertson (East Lothian) (Lab): I suppose that it was always too much to hope that David McLetchie would change. After everything that he has said about the Holyrood project during the past few years, I suppose that we should be grateful to him for coming here at all. One message that I draw from his speech today is that his failure to say anything about this magnificent new chamber in which we are debating demonstrates that it can be uncomfortable for a professional prophet of doom to cope with the experience of a real triumph, which is what we have here.

It is difficult to express the relief that I feel to be able to come to this chamber to take part in a parliamentary debate at last. As convener of the Holyrood progress group, I have spent many hours and some pretty traumatic times at Holyrood as a building site during the past four years. Frankly, I think that it has been almost the toughest task that I have had in 25 years in Parliament. There were some difficult times and some infuriating problems, but when I see the place today and, above all, when I see the expressions on the faces of people experiencing Holyrood for the first time, I know that we were right to persevere. We will have to leave it to Lord Fraser to reach his own conclusions on the problems that we encountered in getting the building constructed.

David McLetchie: Will the member reflect on the fact that when the Holyrood progress group—a name that is a contradiction in terms—was set up and when he led it, the budget for the Parliament was £195 million but the cost has finished up being £431 million? Does that constitute a triumph?

Mr Home Robertson: We will leave it to the people to judge whether they have a good Parliament. I think that they will.

Whatever anyone says about costs and delays, there is no doubt in my mind that we were right to keep our nerve and to see this magnificent concept through to completion. It was Donald Dewar who was determined to set Scotland's new constitutional settlement in stone both figuratively and literally. It was Enric Miralles who won the competition with his amazing design. However, it was the poor old Holyrood progress group and the Parliament's Holyrood project team that were landed with the task of making it all happen under a construction management contract. That was a tall order.

To make matters even more interesting, we had to do that job in an environment of unremitting malevolence from much of the Scottish media. To take the most recent example, less than a month ago, we read reports about disastrous flooding on the site. Members might have expected to come here in welly boots. That turned out to be yet another Holyrood myth, which was based on a bucketful of water from a faulty drain that had already been fixed.

This is not a fiasco; it is the finest building to be constructed in Scotland for 100 years. It is the forum for the future of the people of Scotland. It is the permanent home for a Parliament that can and will achieve great things for the nation. Amazingly, we have been able to make the investment at a time when the Executive has also been increasing spending on Scotland's public services.

I think that I can speak for Linda Fabiani, Jamie Stone and all members of the Holyrood progress group in expressing great relief that our task is virtually complete, but let me also express some pride in the part that we have taken in achieving this permanent home for Scotland's new democracy. Great credit is due to the designers, the contractors, the tradesmen, the Holyrood project team and everybody else, but credit is also due to the members of the Scottish Parliament who had the courage to vote for Holyrood. That was the right thing to do.

That is enough about the building for the time being, given that I am supposed to be talking about the legislative programme. As a consensual politician, I will resist any temptation to raise questions about the relevance of Westminster-led nationalism in post-devolution Scotland. Nor will I be uncharitable about unreconstructed Tories or anybody else in the Parliament—not even Liberals. The First Minister's speech presented an excellent legislative programme. I liked what he had to say about child protection, charities and the national concessionary fares scheme, but I want to dwell on four points.

First, the First Minister was right to set enterprise as a priority. The Executive needs to plan for the future of Scotland's electricity generation industry, which is an extremely important industry in my constituency of East Lothian. I am delighted that the Deputy Minister for Enterprise and Lifelong Learning, Lewis Macdonald, was able to launch a new wind farm at Crystal rig in my constituency a couple of weeks ago. Eventually, such wind turbines may help to produce up to 40 per cent of our electricity—when the wind is blowing—but 40 per cent power will not activate a television set, let alone cook the dinner. We must also plan for the 60 per cent base-load requirement. If we are serious about cutting carbon dioxide emissions, we must plan to replace older power stations with new nuclear generators. When that opportunity arises in the UK—as it certainly will—we must secure the future of Scotland's share of the British electricity industry.

Bruce Crawford (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP): It is good to hear the member witter on about energy matters. Like everyone else, I had assumed that energy is an issue that is reserved to Westminster. Reduction of emissions, which he mentioned, is certainly reserved. Does he argue that the Scottish Parliament should decide Scotland's energy policy? If he does, I will agree with him.

Mr Home Robertson: Mr Crawford might have noticed that the Executive has taken a lead on renewable energy. He will be aware that the Parliament has responsibility for planning issues, which will be crucial to the decisions on the

location of new generating plant in this part of the United Kingdom. That is an important point, on which I hope all members will dwell.

Shiona Baird (North East Scotland) (Green): Will the member give way?

Mr Home Robertson: Sorry. I must move on.

Secondly, I want to touch on housing. The Minister for Communities is well aware that areas such as East Lothian have a critical shortage of affordable rented housing, which the First Minister mentioned in his speech. I am not yet sure to which committee I will be allocated after the wind-up of the Holyrood progress group, but if it turns out to be the Communities Committee—as I am advised that it might—I give notice that I am determined to do everything that I can to help councils such as East Lothian Council to tackle our local housing crisis. If that means raising difficult questions about the right to buy, we should not shirk that responsibility. I was delighted to hear the First Minister say that attention needs to be given to meeting the housing crisis in such areas.

Thirdly, let me mention crime and antisocial behaviour. The Executive was certainly right to put crime, disorder and drugs at the heart of its legislative programme last year, as those are some of the most pressing issues in our constituencies all over Scotland. We have rightly concentrated on that serious problem. We have raised expectations that things will get better, so it is extremely important for the Executive to keep working with the police and other agencies to make that strategy work—indeed, that is imperative.

Finally, on cigarettes—I am glad to see that Murray Tosh is in the chair rather than the Presiding Officer, with whom I might run into difficulties—I join other members in urging the First Minister to be bold about measures to discourage smoking and to protect our citizens from passive smoking. There is a piece of legislation on the United Kingdom statute book called the Protection of Children (Tobacco) Act 1986, which I took through the House of Commons as a private member's bill. It was supposed to introduce a more effective ban on the sale of cigarettes and all tobacco products to children. It is a matter of record, and a matter of some shame to the then Government, that it never made any attempt to enforce that act in respect of sales of cigarettes to children.

Cigarette smoking is causing terrible diseases, terrible suffering and an intolerable number of deaths. I understand that more than 30,000 hospital admissions a year and 13,000 deaths a year in Scotland are related to smoking. It is time to stop pussyfooting around on the issue; it is far too important. I realise that people in the licensed

trade and others are uneasy, but a ban on smoking in public places would set the trend and would save lives. I urge the Executive to have the courage to give the Parliament an opportunity to legislate on the issue. Let us have a Scottish solution to that very Scottish problem and let us do it soon.

Presiding Officer, I am grateful for this early opportunity to contribute to a debate in the chamber that I have spent the past four years trying to get completed and I am grateful to members for listening to me.

11:56

Robin Harper (Lothians) (Green): I associate myself with John Home Robertson's feelings about this magnificent building and I congratulate him on all the work that he and the team did.

Does the legislative programme match up to our surroundings in terms of imagination and inspiration? Some of it does but, sadly, some of it does not. There are contradictions and confusions, but above all the programme fails to take the opportunity that we would have liked the Executive to take: to take on the real idea of a smart, successful, sustainable Scotland. The First Minister did not answer my question earlier this morning on climate change. Asking him to commit on climate change, I got an observation that it should be possible to control our emissions and expand our economy. That falls short of what I was looking for, which was an absolute commitment.

I have a warm welcome for the proposals to protect children, for the commitment to the children's hearings system and for the commitment to reducing child poverty, but what about reducing the poverty of the surroundings that many children in this country are brought up in? What about the Executive's commitment to environmental justice? There are other welcome moves, of course, and I do not doubt that ministers are keen occasionally to appear green. We welcome the announcement on strategic environmental assessment and the talk of transforming the planning system, but there are contradictions.

Let us take climate change and transport as an example. The programme gives no clear signal that more action is required or that the Executive is determined to take on its international responsibilities to reduce global warming. Indeed, the Executive actively promotes more climate change pollution, through its road-building programme and through its programme to expand air travel. Where is the commitment to reducing traffic growth before the next election? Where is the commitment to a target for reducing energy

use and climate pollution overall? I remind the Executive that Scotland is 50 per cent behind the UK average in reducing global warming gases. It is time that the Executive woke up to its responsibilities. When signing the £1 billion-plus cheque for the M74 and the Aberdeen bypass, the Executive would do well to reflect on how far that money would have gone on buses, ferries, trains and cycle lanes.

The First Minister talked of encouraging economic growth, and Jim Wallace also mentioned that. I warn the Executive against making too close a connection between economic growth and solving the problems of poverty. More than a century and a half ago, J S Mill observed that in a steady-state economy the primary task of Government—and not an impossible one—would be to pass laws and make regulations that increased the sum of human happiness. Many of the regulations proposed in the Executive's legislative programme do not require economic growth. Protecting our children does not require economic growth.

Why invest three times less in wave energy than the Portuguese when 7,000 jobs may be at stake? Where is the urgent revision of planning to ensure that wind farms are developed sensibly in the right locations with full community involvement in decision making? What about ensuring healthy, safe food for Scotland's people and creating a thriving rural economy through such a policy? There we have another contradiction. New initiatives on organic food are undermined by the Executive's refusal to say no to GM. Last year the Executive took the side of the biotechnology companies and the plans for holding them responsible for any GM contamination of Scotland's food chain and countryside this year look as thin as ever. The Executive says that it is committed to reforming the planning system—that is not before time.

New initiatives on recycling waste will fail to meet European Union objectives unless the Executive addresses the fact that the speed with which the volume of waste that we create is expanding is likely to outrun the speed at which we introduce effective recycling schemes. Waste minimisation is very important.

We welcome the Executive's commitment to ban smoking in public places; however I do not think that we have the kind of joined-up health policy that one finds in countries such as Finland. I am talking about developing a health policy rather than what we currently have, which is a sickness policy.

We as a nation cannot afford to carry on trashing our corner of the planet. Growth for its own sake is no longer an option; economic expansion must be in sustainable industry and

sustainable development. I maintain that the Executive programme is not sufficiently integrated or focused to achieve that aim.

The commitment to strategic environmental assessment is most welcome, but it does not yet seem to be a sign of the greening of the Executive. The legislation had to be brought forward to meet a European directive that was passed three—yes, three—years ago. We are late. The bill should have been discussed and introduced by July this year; it is a dereliction of duty.

The Minister for Environment and Rural Development (Ross Finnie): Is the member aware—he should be—that there is a statutory instrument that will implement the European directive precisely within the timescale that is required and that the bill goes way beyond the requirement of the European directive? The member should get his facts correct before he makes that kind of statement.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Murray Tosh): You are now over time, Mr Harper. Do be quick.

Robin Harper: I will be.

I hope that Mr Finnie's statement is correct. I also hope that the Executive proposes to set up an independent body similar to Audit Scotland to carry out the strategic environmental assessments and that it will be independently monitored, because without such independent monitoring the legislation could be weak and ineffective. I would welcome that commitment from the Executive sometime later today.

12:03

Tommy Sheridan (Glasgow) (SSP): Last week the First Minister appeared on "Newsnight Scotland" on the BBC. He said that the delivery of the new Parliament posed a challenge to all MSPs and all parties to "raise our game", "raise our vision" and be "more daring". After this morning's lengthy presentation, it is clear that the First Minister's motto is, "Do as I say, not as I do."

The First Minister failed to raise our vision or be more daring. He confirmed his new Labour credentials by signalling a continuation of the free-market, profit-driven madness and the employment insecurity that haunts communities throughout Scotland. The new Labour-Liberal prescription for the low-pay, job-insecurity and pensioner-poverty sickness that afflicts so much of our small nation is as simple as it is callous: more of the same—more privatisation of public services; more private finance initiative profiteering at the expense of health and school budgets; more of the unfair council tax and water charges that hammer the poorest but pamper the well-off; even more

shortages of quality homes to rent; more hypocrisy and empty rhetoric in relation to our drug abuse problem and the connected crime; and more acceptance of the middle-to-lower-management role of a group of politicians who are willing to administer our country as a region of Britain rather than govern our country as a proud, independent nation.

That is the nub of the problem: the First Minister can hardly raise his game, raise his vision, or be more daring while willingly submitting to the British straitjacket of free-market profit worship. He talked about productivity, improving economic performance and creating the type of wealth that we need to raise our nation. The problem that he did not address is that while this nation is up to its neck in wealth, that wealth is owned by a tiny clique of multimillionaires who are incapable of sharing it and unwilling to use it in a socially productive fashion. Throughout Scotland, 300,000 children are raised in poverty and a disgraceful 44 per cent of pensioners try to live on less than £10,000 per annum. What a sad indictment of a country with so much wealth and potential.

Why did the First Minister not outline a visionary and daring plan to harness Scotland's vast national resources for the good of all our citizens: the land, the water, the gas, the electricity, the rail infrastructure, the roads network, the telecommunications technology, the pharmaceutical research and potential, what is left of our manufacturing base and, of course, our vast oil reserves? We cannot harness the resources and wealth for the good of all our people, because they are owned and controlled by a tiny clique for the benefit of private profit.

Last year I had the pleasure of visiting the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, and of meeting President Hugo Chávez and Vice-President José Vicente Rangel.

Stewart Stevenson: This is just a rant.

Tommy Sheridan: Presiding Officer, I thought that this was a new Parliament and that the child Stewart Stevenson would have learned to behave appropriately for an adult Parliament, but he has still got his short troosers on.

We discussed how the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela intends to harness its vast oil reserves to raise living standards and improve the quality of life of all its citizens. Why is it that this Parliament in this grand building is happy to remain a mere spectator in relation to economic and social development? Instead of the £10 billion of revenue that was raised from oil reserves last year going into the pockets of private multinationals, it should be deployed to improve the living standards and quality of life of all our citizens. If that can work for countries such as Venezuela and Norway, it can work for countries such as Scotland.

Stewart Stevenson *rose*—

Tommy Sheridan: In Scotland and in this Parliament we have people like Stewart Stevenson who are obsessed with the Barnett formula but not with the type of revolution that we require to harness the wealth and resources of our country. Leave the Barnett formula to the anoraks such as Stewart and the other faint hearts. We need to raise our vision in this Parliament.

This Parliament is far too grand to retain the powers of a mere parish council. Yes, let us use the limited powers that we have. Let us abolish council tax and water rates and replace them with a progressive income-based alternative. Let us introduce free school meals for every child and raise dietary and nutritional standards for our children. Let us abolish the pill tax that is a tax on the ill in this country. Let us ensure that all public contracts in this Parliament go to companies with recognised trade unions, to improve employment standards and conditions.

But let us not forget that if we really want to raise our vision, if we really want to be more daring and if we really want to raise our game, we will have to win and secure the confidence of the Scottish people in a genuinely independent nation and a democratic republic that owns and controls the natural wealth and resources of our country. Only then can we harness them to eradicate poverty, promote peace and tolerance throughout our world and expel barbaric nuclear weapons from our shores. That is our vision, and it is the daring task that we pose to the rest of Scotland. We hope that the rest of Scotland will join us.

12:09

Cathie Craigie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (Lab): As a result of the parliamentary recess, Mr Sheridan's throat problem has improved. Unfortunately, we now have MSPs in here with earache. We will have to see the sound system people about that.

It is a pleasure to have the opportunity to speak on this historic day. Many people have mentioned the building, but it does not take much to realise that it is not a building that makes a Parliament, however spectacular this building is. What makes a Parliament is the legislation that we produce and how it affects the people whom we represent.

The Parliament has been dogged by bad publicity for the past five years—most of it was about this building. Let us hope that when the people whom we represent have the opportunity to see the building for themselves, they will see that the skills of many Scottish workers have produced a building that is an asset to the people of Scotland and in which we can all take pride.

The Parliament was established to bring power closer to the people. We are on the right track.

People are engaging in the Scottish Executive's consultation process and in the parliamentary committee process. My criticism is that, in the Parliament's early stages, we seemed to communicate more with the establishment, to listen too much to professionals and to take account of what the media said, rather than listen to the ordinary people. I am glad that that is changing. I know that many members share that view and are making efforts to go beyond the usual suspects by going out and hearing from people who live and work in our communities.

I want the Parliament to make a difference for each and every one of us: to bring opportunities for our young people; to provide a safe environment in which we can bring up our children; to provide people with skills; to offer job opportunities for everyone; to care for people when they need it; and to provide dignity and security for our older citizens. The legislative programme that the First Minister announced today will do that.

The Parliament is an example of partnership working—partnership in the coalition and partnership working with our colleagues in local government, in Westminster and in Europe. In partnership, we are helping to make Scotland a better place in which to live and work.

Since its creation, the Parliament has acknowledged that learning is a lifelong pursuit that need not stop when the school doors close behind someone for the last time. It is unfortunate that many adults experienced school education that, for various reasons, was not all that it should have been, and many still struggle with basic reading, writing and numbers throughout their adult lives. Early intervention by teachers in schools means that fewer Scottish people will have to struggle with such problems, but that does not mean that we are happy to let those whom the system failed struggle on. Scotland has much more polarised literacy levels than other countries do. Many Scots are competent at the highest literacy levels, and of that we should be proud. However, we have more people at the highest and the lowest literacy levels than do England and Wales and we must work to redress that imbalance.

At the beginning of last week, the First Minister said that Donald Dewar's vision for devolution would be realised if we as members of the Parliament

"learn lessons, work hard, stay in touch with the people of Scotland, and ultimately improve the lot of ordinary Scots."

I cannot think of a better way of improving a person's life than by giving them the basic tools that will enable them to participate fully in their community and in society, so that they can help their children with their homework; read their local

newspaper to find out what is happening in their community; ensure that they are not short-changed at the supermarket; fill in the application form for the job that they really want; go to college to obtain the qualifications for that job; or even write to their MSP to make their voice heard.

I know that the Executive takes lifelong learning seriously. As tomorrow is international literacy day, I congratulate the Executive on the work that has been done and urge it to keep that up. Local authorities and Communities Scotland are crucial partners in delivering the resources on the ground that make our commitment to improving literacy a reality for many Scots.

Last week, I had the pleasure of visiting a successful example of partnership working in the shape of North Lanarkshire's community learning and development partnership. While I was there, I heard from an 80-year-old man who had struggled with reading and writing for his whole life. In his late 70s, he plucked up the courage—and it took a great deal of courage—to attend a local literacy class. With understanding and help, he is now able to read his own mail when, in the past, he had relied on his wife to read it for him. He is now able to read the paper, send greetings cards and write to anyone he wants. He is proud of his achievements—and so he should be. He himself said that if his arms had been long enough, he would have patted his own back. There could not have been one person in the room who did not appreciate that man's achievements, and I do not think that his back could have taken all the pats that we wanted to give him.

Lifelong learning should be synonymous with community-based learning. After all, there is no point in providing educational opportunities for all unless they are accessible. For that reason, I want an increase in partnership working that involves schools, colleges, universities, business and communities. I was encouraged by the recent announcement of the merging of the Scottish Further Education Funding Council and the Scottish Higher Education Funding Council, which should ensure a level playing field for all education providers and users.

The North Lanarkshire community learning and development partnership's mission statement says:

"Our vision for North Lanarkshire is of a strong vibrant community where everyone is committed to strive towards improving the quality of life, work and attainment for themselves and others."

Let us as a Parliament adopt that statement for ourselves and make the Parliament and the Scottish Executive work hard to deliver at all levels for the people whom we serve.

12:16

Alex Neil (Central Scotland) (SNP): Like many other speakers in this debate on this historic day, I want to say that the people out there on the streets of Scotland will judge the Parliament on the improvements that we deliver in the standard and quality of life in this country. I see that Peter Peacock is not in the chamber; I hope that when he returns this afternoon he will address some of Cathie Craigie's valid points, because the levels of literacy and numeracy in Scotland are far too low for a society that aims to be one of the highest-growth economies in Europe.

I believe that, as we apply ourselves in the months and years ahead, the key word must be "audacious". Being audacious does not mean being aggressive or arrogant; it means that we are ambitious and that we are prepared to take the bold steps that are necessary to realise and to deliver on our ambitions. As a nationalist, I believe that this Parliament's powers are inadequate. I honestly believe that if we are to achieve the growth rates of which Scotland is capable, we need financial and economic powers to come from London to Edinburgh.

That is not to say that this Parliament can do nothing to boost economic growth and our people's standard of living. I want to highlight eight examples of missed opportunities; the First Minister should have come forward on this historic day not just to give us more of the motherhood and apple pie that is called FEDS—people think that that is a reference to agents who should be in the Central Intelligence Agency. People are looking for practical policies that will make a difference to Scotland.

I will begin with the subject area that John Home Robertson dealt with. One of the problems in Scotland today is that many of our energy industries are suffering as a result of Government policy that is very often made in London. I will give two examples. First, the British electricity trading and transmission arrangements that have just been signed could increase transmission costs for alternative energy suppliers in Scotland by up to 400 per cent. That is bad news for the environment, bad news for the economy, bad news for jobs, bad news for consumers and bad news for Scotland. Why is a Labour Government in London contradicting the growth policy of the Lib-Lab pact in Edinburgh?

Secondly, as far as the oil sector is concerned, the issue is not just revenue—although, as Nicola Sturgeon outlined, that is important. We have one of the lowest-ever levels of oil exploration in the North sea—not because there is nae oil, but because the incentives are not there. The oil industry employs 100,000 people in Scotland, and we will lose many of those jobs if we do not take

action now to boost the exploration rate in the North sea.

Let us look at other sectors. Many of the ambitions that were outlined five years ago were outlined today. Let us look at the past 10 days. Not only have we had the report on the economy to which Mr McLetchie referred, but figures were published yesterday on the numbers of under-21-year-olds who are enrolling in higher education this year. The numbers are not increasing—they are not even staying stable; they have gone down by nearly 3 per cent. Yet, we all agree that boosting that rate and maintaining the level of participation in the university system is essential to our economic ambitions.

Let us look at business start-ups. The First Minister referred to the need to boost the business sector and yet the Committee of Scottish Clearing Bankers has shown this morning that there has been a 7 per cent decline—not a stabilisation, but a genuine decline—in the number of new businesses.

Mr Wallace: Does Mr Neil accept that the 7 per cent decline comes from comparing quarter Q2 with the previous quarter? If one considers the four quarters, year on year, there is in fact a 15 per cent increase in the number of business start-ups in Scotland.

Alex Neil: Yes, but the minister misses the point—it is obvious that he does not know too much about enterprise. If the trend in the previous quarter has declined by 7 per cent, the trend is downwards, not upwards; any mathematician—who is not here—would tell him that.

When we look at Glasgow, we find that it is short of 120 primary schoolteachers. How are we going to deliver quality education when we do not even have the teachers in the classroom?

Let us look at the water industry, which was mentioned by my colleague John Swinney. The Forum of Private Business estimates that development totalling £500 million in Scotland is ready to go, but the problem is that Scottish Water cannot deliver.

Let us look at what else is happening down south that the Executive does nothing about. The whisky industry is being hit by new legislation on whisky stamps. Other measures that have been taken by the chancellor and others are damaging the Scottish economy. I remember the Deputy First Minister telling us four years ago that we had to look to the long term. I agree with that. However, that was a long term ago—it is time that we started to see the long-term results from the so-called long-term policies. What we see is failure in health, education, transport, growth and in many key industrial sectors. I say to the Scottish Executive that we all want to see it raise its game.

We will raise our game, but let us ensure that, for once, the Executive starts to deliver for the people of Scotland.

12:23

David Mundell (South of Scotland) (Con): I was a bit surprised, for once, by what Alex Neil said. For somebody who says that he does not like policy made in London, Alex Neil was one of the most prominent supporters of Mr Salmond. He will have to get used to policy being made in London.

It has been highlighted this morning that it is unfashionable to count, but it took the First Minister 24 and a half minutes of his 30-minute speech to mention the economy, which I presume is still a top priority. However, whether or not it is a top priority, the view of business remains that the Scottish Executive is not making a difference to the economy.

The latest gross domestic product figures from the Executive show that levels of economic growth continue to lag well behind those in the rest of the United Kingdom. Despite a slight improvement in the first quarter of 2004, our manufacturing sector continued to tumble down by another 1.5 per cent in the past year.

Furthermore, as has already been highlighted, the International Institute for Management Development "World Competitiveness Yearbook" places Scotland's macroeconomic policies in a lowly and frankly unacceptable 38th place out of 60 countries, nine places behind the United Kingdom as a whole. The blame for that sorry state of affairs must lie squarely with the Executive, which, during the past five years, has done virtually nothing to encourage economic growth and a great deal to stifle it. As a report from the University of Glasgow says, rather more subtly than some members:

"much remains to be done to achieve the vision of *A Smart, Successful Scotland*."

Most obviously, Scottish businesses are being crippled by business rates that are 7 per cent higher than those in England and Wales. Moreover, who can forget the harmonisation of charges by Scottish Water, which led to outrageous increases of up to 500 per cent for some businesses, when the self-same Scottish Water is the organisation that represents, through its development constraints, the single biggest impediment to business development in rural Scotland?

Businesses would be forgiven for hoping that our move to the new Holyrood building might coincide with a commitment on the part of the Executive to turn its words into action. Alas, the Executive's offering last Thursday—FEDS 2—turned out to be nothing more than the usual wish

list: long on rhetoric but short on substance. It is plainly absurd for the Executive to call for sustained growth through greater competitiveness while doing nothing to reverse its own policies, which have consistently made Scotland such an uncompetitive place to do business, compared with the rest of the United Kingdom. At the end of this debate, which will continue tomorrow, I hope that we will witness a change of heart and that ministers, rather than procrastinate and give us the usual diatribe—

The Minister for Finance and Public Services (Mr Andy Kerr):

I have been trying desperately not to intervene in this funereal march for the Scottish economy, but the member might care to hear a comment that was made by Digby Jones of the Confederation of British Industry—not a reference that I use frequently. He said on Thursday night—the member referred to the publication of FEDS on Thursday—first, that the UK Government is laying down the strong, stable economy that is allowing the UK to develop its economy far in excess of that of many of our competitors, European and worldwide, and secondly, that the Scottish Executive is also delivering policies that are sustaining that economic growth in Scotland.

David Mundell: As Mr Kerr knows, seven years on, the Conservatives' golden economic legacy has allowed the UK Government to enjoy a period of unprecedented economic calm.

Let us start doing something positive to turn round Scotland's economy. Let us take Scottish Water out of the hands of politicians and deliver to real people the water supply that they need for their businesses and homes. Secondly, let us take the action that is needed to cut the red tape and bureaucracy that are strangling productivity in Scotland and throughout the United Kingdom. Thirdly, let us take a decision—

Mike Rumbles (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (LD): I hear about cutting red tape all over the place, but I would very much like to know which particular red tape, laws or regulations the member would like to be cut.

David Mundell: What I want to see—the member's Liberal Democrat colleagues elsewhere support this—is a system that audits regulation for its impact on business and which allows the removal of regulation that is currently in place. If the member can name one regulation that has been removed, I will listen to him.

I have repeatedly asked a question about our transport network that remains unanswered—I hope that it will get an answer by the end of today. What will the Minister for Transport do when the new transport agency has been set up? Any reading of the description of that agency shows

that it is the job description of the Minister for Transport. The minister should be co-ordinating strategic activity and banging heads together when bodies are not co-operating. We should not be setting up another costly quango to do a job for a minister—even if he is being paid less than all the other ministers. We have to understand what the agency is going to do. The promise of devolution was that we would need fewer such agencies and that we would have more direct and public accountability from ministers on important issues affecting Scotland. As ever, today's statement indicates quite the contrary.

12:30

Meeting suspended until 14:30.

14:30

On resuming—

The Presiding Officer (Mr George Reid): Good afternoon. We continue with the debate on the First Minister's statement on the programme of the Scottish Executive.

14:30

The Minister for Education and Young People

(Peter Peacock): It is a great pleasure for me to make my first contribution in this amazing new chamber that we have had built for the purpose of the exchange of ideas and debate.

In the first five years of this Administration, we have concentrated on getting the foundations right for a significantly stronger education system by changing the legislative base for modern education through the Standards in Scotland's Schools etc Act 2000; ensuring comprehensive provision of pre-school education; investing in the teaching profession; getting the learning environment right through the biggest school building programme for more than a century; reducing class sizes; investing in information and communications technology; and developing new sources of information for parents.

However, as the First Minister set out this morning, this autumn the actions to meet our ambitions for Scottish education are going to shift up several gears, building on the strong foundations that we have created. Our schools for ambition programme will require some schools to reach higher and support other schools to achieve new standards of excellence. We need secondary schools to give more focus and purpose to the early years of secondary education, during which too many young people disengage from the learning process.

Brian Adam (Aberdeen North) (SNP): Will the minister give way?

Peter Peacock: I will give way, but I am conscious that I have only six minutes. I ask Brian Adam to try to be brief.

Brian Adam: This is a new idea from the Government. Can the minister spell out a little more about the basis on which the schools will be selected and whether it will be the schools or the pupils who will be selected?

Peter Peacock: I am happy to confirm that it will be Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Education, together with local authorities, that will suggest to us the schools that fit the category of requiring to transform—as the First Minister said this morning—in order to perform.

As I was saying, we need secondary schools to give more focus and purpose to the early years of secondary education. Far too many young people are disengaging from the learning process. Our vision for the secondary schools of the future will involve explicit and higher expectations: the new excellence standard. It will involve schools with a modern learning environment, with more teachers and smaller class sizes and with learning designed for individual pupils' needs; schools with more freedoms, flexibilities and choices; schools that are challenged, stretched and supported by local authorities that are focused on quality improvement; schools with more choice for pupils in what they study, when they study it, what exams they sit and when those exams are sat; and schools with tough accountabilities for those whom we charge with delivering education at every level of the system within the public sector.

The Executive will be there, supporting schools to move up to the next level with investments of capital and in the people needed to build even more success. We will seek private sector involvement to add value to our schools. Members should be clear, however: Scottish education is not for sale, it is open for business. There will be new flexibility in the curriculum; additional choice for head teachers in school spending and management; new professional trust in our teachers; and new course choices and exam freedoms. We will invest to transform school leadership. In return, we will be utterly intolerant of second best.

Scotland is already among the top performing nations of the world in education. I have seen, this summer, inspiring examples of schools delivering for their pupils, raising attainment and seeing the life chances of their children soar. The best of our primary and secondary schools are truly inspiring places and want to do even better. With inspirational leaders, they are innovative and highly sophisticated in their modern approaches to the diverse needs of our young people—schools making a real difference for their kids, improving performance and wanting to go further. Those

schools are part of a rich tapestry of school provision across Scotland, which embraces our existing specialist schools—centres of excellence that already select pupils on the basis of their talents—and the new generation of comprehensive schools that we are seeing, for example, in North Lanarkshire, where schools are supported to develop existing strengths in music and sport, and more widely in future.

It is because we are on the side of pupils and parents that we are signalling a significant gearing up of our expectations of secondary schools. It is because we are on the side of pupils and parents that we will not tolerate second best for any of them. That is why, in this session of Parliament, we will introduce legislation to give ministers new powers. Those powers will require schools and local authorities to raise their performance when our independent inspectorate requires them to do so. However, both the SNP and the Tories oppose those powers. In the week after we saw one of Scotland's communities badly let down by its secondary school, the SNP and the Tories would seek to prevent ministers from having the power to require that school to improve.

In our backing for parents and pupils, we want to engage parents more fully in the learning process. Over the coming parliamentary year, we will consult parents on how we can strengthen still further their place in education. We will also explore what kind of reformed and more flexible statutory framework will meet our future needs and protect parents' rights while offering them more flexible involvement.

Of course, our vision for education fits within our much wider vision for children's services. We want a Scotland in which we support children across all our public actions. This parliamentary year, we will pursue with vigour our continuing child protection reform programme. We will complete our review of the children's hearings system and push ahead with our early years work force reforms. Furthermore, our 21st century social work group will move forward in its vital task of helping to redefine the role of the social worker in light of today's needs.

We will also legislate to secure the status of Gaelic. As members will see when we introduce the revised bill, we have listened to the representations that were made during the consultation. As a result, the bill will be stronger in a number of respects.

Our ambitions for Scotland's children and schools are without limit. This Executive is brimming with ambition for our young people and has a raft of policies with which to see those ambitions delivered. Over the coming weeks, I will spell out the detail of the most comprehensive reform programme for our secondary schools for a

generation. I look forward to returning to the floor of the chamber time and again to debate the issue with the real opposition in Scotland: those who sit on the Tory benches. They pose the real threat to all that we are building.

We will not abandon schools to a world of competition and market forces or let our schools opt out of their responsibilities to each and every child. We will not make kids with special needs nomads with a bounty on their heads. I look forward with relish to the debates to come.

14:37

Brian Adam (Aberdeen North) (SNP): The events of the past few days at Beslan remind us that our children and our democracy are precious and I am glad that the First Minister opened his speech by acknowledging that.

Today's debate is about the Government's programme—and perhaps its lack of ambition and woolliness. However, I want to endorse some more words that the First Minister said this morning. He mentioned

"looking after yourself and those you love, planning a future and realising dreams."

He then said that that

"brings independence, self respect and the pride of a good day's work rewarded fairly." [*Interruption.*]

The Presiding Officer: Order. Clear the gallery, please.

Carry on, Mr Adam.

Brian Adam: Those were fine sentiments from the First Minister. He also used a phrase that was repeated by the Deputy First Minister and is beloved of ministers of both Executive parties. He said:

"but there is more to do".

Who can disagree with aspiring to break the dependency culture and giving individuals the opportunity to do so? After all, providing for oneself is a key factor in building self-esteem. Independence is a fine thing; it makes one feel good. But there is more to do. Just as independence helps individuals to grow, it strengthens families to be independent and to be able to make their own choices with their own resources.

But there is more to do. Businesses that have been born and grown in Scotland and that compete in the world benefit from independence as well as grow our economy and our capacity to provide a socially just Scotland. But there is more to do. Of course, the logic is that, just like individuals, families and businesses, Scotland will grow as a result of independence.

Today, ministers have talked about their plans for legislation and other action, and there has been a fortnight of frenzied activity as they rushed to launch a series of initiatives with the deeply desired photo-opportunities. At the heart of this Government lies an unresolved question and a real dilemma. Does it really believe in decentralising decision making or does it want central direction? Its words say that it would really like us to make our own choices, but its actions show that it prefers to retain control. Some considerable time ago, Enoch Powell said:

"Power devolved is power retained."

That statement is true, and it is the biggest dilemma that both the parties in the Government face. The lack of local accountability in health authorities—the quango state—and the lack of trust in local councils are examples of that.

In education, we have the rhetoric of choice, but it is only rhetoric. For the Tories, the issue is how to let private education flourish by plundering the public purse. They call that letting parents choose, when they really mean buying advantage and privilege for the few while paying lip service to the majority by offering education vouchers and assisted places. Just how will that help the 30 per cent of young Scots who leave education with few or no formal qualifications?

Mr Brian Monteith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): Given that the member has been so generous in his criticism of the Conservatives, can he point me to any policy that would mean that any passport or voucher in education in Scotland that we propose could be used to access independent education, unless the independent school concerned lowered its fees to match the voucher's value?

Brian Adam: The member has answered his question himself. He would give public money to the independent sector—those are words from his own mouth.

New Labour echoes the mantra of choice, but what does that mean? From what has been said today by the First Minister and the Minister for Education and Young People, it is not clear what it means. It is not at all clear what the criteria will be for these "schools for ambition". That is a nice turn of phrase, and I commend the Executive on continuing to turn out such turns of phrase. The problem is that the reality does not reflect the phrase. It is not yet at all clear what the criteria for selecting schools for ambition will be. There is much to be spelled out, and I look forward to engaging in debate with the minister on that over the next few months.

I must accept the assurances that we will not return to selection. However, from what the Minister for Education and Young People said a

few minutes ago, it is clear that selection is on the Executive's agenda. He highlighted the fact that we already have schools that select and continued to suggest that that policy might develop.

I also accept the assurances that philanthropic donations from private benefactors will be targeted—another key piece of new Labour jargon—at deprived and disadvantaged communities. However, it is still not clear what the criteria for the selection of those new schools will be.

As my colleague Nicola Sturgeon said, the Executive's message today is mixed and confused. The First Minister wants big business to finance our schools, but will not say by how much and what for.

George Lyon: Will the member take an intervention?

Brian Adam: No, I am running out of time.

The First Minister wants more diversity in our schools, but rather than saying how he would achieve that, he rules out selection.

Devolution was to bring Scottish solutions to Scottish problems. In education, the big idea is remarkably like that of city technology colleges. Although Scotland has cities, not all of Scotland's children will have access to that kind of diversity, delivered in an urban way. Where is the choice for many of Scotland's small towns and rural areas, where there is only one school? How will the minister deliver diversity in Keith and Kirkcudbright, as well as in Edinburgh and Glasgow?

This morning the First Minister said:

"Schools will not be able to opt out ... or escape our attention."

Big brother Jack is watching you.

14:44

Lord James Douglas-Hamilton (Lothians) (Con): Like Brian Adam, we wish to be associated with the messages of sympathy that were expressed this morning by the First Minister to the families in Beslan who have been bereaved as a result of the outrage committed against schoolchildren.

As this is our first day in this magnificent chamber, it is worth our reflecting that much of politics is about the reconciliation of different interests. Today, we are here to engage with determination and commitment, so as to be of maximum service to constituents. The magnificence of this chamber should enable us to do that with an enthusiasm and vigour worthy of Scotland.

The Executive has proposed an interesting package of measures. We are certainly not opposed to all of them, but we consider that, overall, we have a package of education policies that would benefit young people in Scotland far more.

An example of an Executive initiative that we support is the increased emphasis on further education and vocational courses for 14 to 16-year-olds, which has been Conservative policy for a long time. Employers in industry desperately need well-trained young people with vocational qualifications to fill the skills gap. We would fill that gap by enabling all pupils aged 14 and over who wish to do so to access vocational courses at further education colleges as part of their school education. We would maintain the modern apprenticeship programme and would encourage greater co-operation between enterprise and schools, but there are some areas in which we genuinely differ from the Executive.

Dr Sylvia Jackson (Stirling) (Lab): What would the 14-year-olds who would be given the choice of going to an FE college for part of their curriculum do for the rest of their curriculum? Would they stay in the FE college or would they receive the rest of their curriculum back in their school? What type of curriculum would they get, apart from the vocational aspect?

Lord James Douglas-Hamilton: Basically, when a young person feels that he or she could get the training that would equip them for a job, they should be provided with that opportunity. I would be guided by the educational experts on how best to achieve that. We would like young people to have the opportunity to go to FE colleges to pursue vocational qualifications and, in that regard, we would go further than the Executive.

The first area in which we differ from the Executive is school choice. We have always advocated an extension of choice. We support an education system that will cater for the diverse needs of our young people. The First Minister pledged to establish schools for ambition in an attempt to return to a system of state education that would provide an academic education for the intellectually gifted from all backgrounds. As it happens, Allan Glen's School in Glasgow, which I believe was closed by a Labour council, was a state school that could boast artists, actors and Nobel laureates among its alumni, as well as a number of distinguished politicians, at least one of whom is in the chamber.

We would give parents the right to choose the focus of their children's education, whether academic or technical. We would encourage failing schools to raise standards, allowing funding to follow the pupil, and would enable popular

schools to expand. Our policy can be summed up by saying that our reforms would lead to the parents choosing the school rather than the school choosing the pupils.

Brian Adam: Will the member tell us how much the Conservatives would move from the public sector to the independent sector—as Mr Monteith indicated—to allow the greater choice that his party advocates?

Lord James Douglas-Hamilton: The answer to the question is that that depends entirely on parental choice. As the member knows only too well, the vast majority of schools in Scotland are in the state sector; I think that the figure is 94, 95 or 96 per cent. That position will continue for a considerable period. We want there to be an extension of choice for parents, which would be as popular a policy as the right to buy for council house tenants. In a few years' time, the Labour Party will be converted to our point of view, as has always been the case in the past—perhaps some of its members have already been converted, although they might be afraid to admit it.

Health and sex education is another area in which we differ from the Executive. Its document, "Enhancing Sexual Wellbeing in Scotland: A Sexual Health and Relationships Strategy", is full of good intentions, but it addresses primarily the symptoms of the problem rather than its cause. In our view, wherever possible, schools should be guided by the wishes of parents and should seek to foster an appropriate balance between children's rights and their responsibilities. The national guidelines on the balance of the curriculum state that the aim of health and sex education should be to encourage in the child

"the capacity to take responsibility for their health and safe living."

In our view, there should be even greater emphasis on responsibility and on parents being involved, wherever that is appropriate.

We know that Scotland has an academic tradition stronger than any in Britain. Although Scotland has only 8.6 per cent of the United Kingdom population, we attracted 13 per cent of the research grants in 2001. However, the Executive may not be doing enough to stall a potential brain drain. I refer to the potential exodus of academic talent and research funding, which is likely to be attracted south of the border by top-up fees and higher salaries. We look forward to hearing how the Executive plans to keep Scotland's universities competitive.

I sum up by saying that, in Scotland, education is the passport to fulfilment and jobs. Every child in Scotland must have the appropriate education to attain fulfilment and must be able to reach the appropriate type of employment according to his

or her aptitude, inclination and ability. We will strive to achieve that purpose.

14:50

Mr Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): As a member of the Holyrood progress group, like John Home Robertson, I should perhaps offer an apology to the chamber. We have made the acoustics too good. That was evident during Tommy Sheridan's contribution and I am suffering from tinnitus as a result. It is a great honour to be the first Lib Dem back bencher to stand up in this new chamber, of which I am very proud.

I am pleased to associate myself and my party with the remarks of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister. Let me take some examples. We have heard about smoking. As members will know, John Farquhar Munro and I were the two smokers in the Lib Dems, but I have packed it in for nearly three months. The counter to that is that this is the fifth time that I have packed it in. On a more serious note, my mother and my family will join me in the weeks to come to have a meal here in this new building—of which, as members know, I am extremely proud. The tragedy is that my father will not be with us. My father died of lung cancer some 18 years ago. We can all tell a similar tale; we have all been touched in some way. Smoking is a killer. The more I see of the right-wing press and the apologists for the fag makers, and the more I see of the letters they write and have printed in the newspapers, the more I feel it is disgusting and disgraceful. Yes, of course smoking should be banned, as far as we humanly can ban it. We are talking about life and nothing is more special than that.

Let me say a few words on renewables. The First Minister referred to the fantastic development that will happen off the coast of my constituency. One fifth of Scotland's power could be produced by that company. The development is offshore, it is fantastic and it is there for ever. That is precisely the way we should be going and I am proud of our ministers and the Scottish Executive's involvement in the initiative.

I have spoken before in Parliament about tidal power. The Pentland firth, between my constituency and Jim Wallace's constituency, has been described as the potential Saudi Arabia of renewable energy. Members have heard me talk in the past about the potential of hydrogen. In Unst, we are nearing completion of a development that will deliver hydrogen power in cars. If someone such as Arnold Schwarzenegger can be well on the way to delivering the hydrogen highway in California, we can do something here. My message to the Executive and to everyone in this chamber is that more must be done on that

front and that we must keep moving in that direction. Hydrogen, ultimately, will become the perfect renewable form of energy, avoiding arguments between nuclear and carbon energy. Hydrogen energy is a perfect process, as we know.

We have heard about what we are doing on the economic front, and I think about enterprise in education. Real tranches of money have gone in. We are now on the second tranche and we are beginning to deliver in our schools and to foster an enterprise culture among our young people.

The Deputy First Minister came this summer to visit the United Kingdom Atomic Energy Authority battery factory in Thurso. Those batteries are long-lasting and very powerful; they are also, of course, recyclable. That fits in exactly with what our colleagues in the Green party have been calling for. The batteries can be taken apart and the components can be used again. Jim Wallace recently opened a factory in Golspie in my constituency.

Rob Gibson (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): When the Deputy First Minister was in Caithness, did he mention anything about a national strategy for the development of the very contentious wind farms, which are likely to cause more contention among local communities than almost any other issue in our surgeries? Is the Deputy First Minister pressing the Executive on that strategy, because I do not see it in today's statement?

Mr Stone: I refer Mr Gibson to the renewable energy report by the committee on which I serve, which is chaired by his colleague, Alasdair Morgan, and to the more recent response of the Executive, which I think is interesting and constructive. There will of course be further work to be done, but I recommend that Mr Gibson look at that response.

I will put in one caveat about the job creation in my constituency from the battery factory and from recycling. This is an old hobby-horse, and members will not be surprised to hear me say this: if maternity services in Caithness are downgraded, that will fly in the face of everything that right-thinking people are trying to do to get companies to move to areas such as Caithness. If women have to travel more than 100 miles to Inverness to have a baby, that is simply not going to work. Members know my thoughts on the matter.

I will now do almost the opposite of what John Home Robertson did: in my remaining minute and a half, I will turn to the subject of this building. I absolutely endorse what John Home Robertson said. I have believed from the word go that this is a magnificent building and that Scotland will come to be very proud of it indeed. I subscribe to the theory that, if people work in beautiful, inspiring

surroundings, it makes for a happier, better workplace. I believe that that makes for a better quality of work.

I extend my personal thanks to the Holyrood progress team, to the architects who are with us in the public gallery and to everyone else who has worked so hard. The people in the Holyrood progress team could not fight back in the way that John Home Robertson, Linda Fabiani and others could. They had to go home at night and get slagged off by their family, by their friends in the social club or whatever. They have had a rotten time, and they deserve our personal thanks.

What a tragedy that Donald Dewar and Enric Miralles are not here to share this triumph with us—and it is a triumph. To all those colleagues who have privately supported John Home Robertson and me, I offer my personal thanks. This building will work, and it will work by becoming the property of the people of Scotland. It behoves every one of us to go into overdrive in getting friends, relations, constituents or whoever in here to see it, to admire it and to celebrate it.

14:57

Mr Mark Ruskell (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green): There has been a lot of talk about how we need collectively to raise our game. If we are going to do so, we have to pick subjects that are real issues for people in their everyday lives. Food is a real and crucial issue for people. It affects public policy and is an issue for the economy. We know that the supermarkets are wielding power over the high street, rural producers and farmers. Food poverty is a crucial health issue. We are sitting on a diet time bomb, which has been ticking away for the past 40 years. Food is also a crucial issue for the environment. Two thirds of Scotland's land area is agricultural and is used for producing food. Climate change is being fuelled by food miles—by the ridiculous, unnecessary transport of food across the planet when it could be grown right next to where it is going to be consumed.

I will develop the key issue of health and food. It is clear that we have a national sickness service, not a national health service. Waiting times have gone up since 1999 and the costs of the NHS continue to spiral. The NHS is very good at pulling people out of the river as they float downstream, but it is not very good at examining why they are falling into that river in the first place.

We need a big idea from the Executive about food. In short, we need a food revolution. We need to recreate our food culture in this country. I am not talking about Executive marketing programmes on television, with people talking into bananas and so on; I am talking about best practice in other countries. I am sick to death of

talking about countries such as Finland, which has a fantastic project surrounding fruit that many members will know about. The Finns have got the production of fruit right: they have enabled farmers to convert from dairy production to producing healthy fruit. They have got education right: they are promoting fruit in schools and throughout society, which is creating a demand. As a result, they have got the gain: a drop in heart disease. That is what is happening in Finland.

If Peter Peacock is looking for an idea about how to involve parents in schools, he should consider what is happening in Italy. There, parents are sitting down with their children at lunch time and having a school meal. A lot of the food in those school meals is produced locally, which supports the rural economy, and some of it is organic, which supports the environment.

I acknowledge that the Executive is making gains in this area. I acknowledge "Hungry for Success" and how, it is hoped, it will improve nutritional standards in schools, but consider what we are not doing. Consider the fact that we are not using the common agricultural policy properly to support farmers to enter local marketing schemes. The Executive should consider the fact that it has not yet looked at Unison's food for good charter and how it could incorporate some of the points of the charter into its policy. It should consider the fact that we are not moving forward on commitments to ensure good public procurement of organic produce and it is not widening access to free school meals. It should consider the fact, which I am worried about, that we might be heading towards a Coca-Cola-isation of our schools, with increasing corporate sponsorship of our sports and our school materials.

I will finish by talking a little about choice. There is a real contradiction in Executive policy. On the one hand we have Executive policies that support organic food and farming, but on the other hand there seems to be no coherent policy or strategy to keep genetically modified food out of Scotland. It is clear that if GM is introduced here, it will be the death of consumer choice, but it will also be the death of producer choice—the choice of farmers and food producers to produce the food that people want, which is GM-free produce.

The Canadian farmers who visited the Parliament last year told us how they had been decimated by the introduction of GM in Canada, because they can no longer grow GM-free produce. No doubt, this is the point at which some helpful Liberal Democrat will stand up and say, "We haven't got the power to implement blanket bans in Scotland." Okay, so let us consider bans on individual crops for individual reasons, such as the ban on Chardon LL back in the spring.

Perhaps the second thing that we can do is ensure that, if the biotech companies want to grow

in Scotland, they are held strictly liable for any economic damage that their products cause. I am introducing that measure through a member's bill, and I invite the Scottish Executive to pinch that bill if it wants—or dares. It can add to its green thread a couple of green thorns to protect consumers and producers in Scotland.

I am looking for big ideas from the Executive. I am looking for concerted action that is real to people, rather than contradictory policy.

15:02

Richard Baker (North East Scotland) (Lab): At the core of the legislative programme that the First Minister outlined this morning are the right goals, underpinned by the right principles and big ideas, creating a Scotland of prosperity, social inclusion and ambition—themes that run throughout the programme. We have moved away from the bad old days of sacrificing the welfare of the many for the wealth of the few and we are creating a nation typified by qualities that are embedded even in this new building in which we now sit—enterprise, ambition and innovation. The building might signify a new start for this Parliament, but the Executive has been putting in place for some time the building blocks to rid us of a lack of ambition and self-confidence, which is why I am pleased that the First Minister has set out the stall of Scottish Labour as being Scotland's party of enterprise. The Executive's programme reflects that ambition, not just for our party, but, most important, for our nation.

I have always believed passionately in the empowering force of education. Today we have heard the First Minister and the Minister for Enterprise and Lifelong Learning outline the Executive's plans for creating choice within schools, but not between them, and for raising the standards of Scotland's pupils, ensuring that they can contribute to a prosperous and socially just Scotland.

I was also pleased to hear the First Minister make an announcement about further legislation for our universities and colleges. They are an engine room of our economy and we are right to be proud of them. To allow them to continue to be among the best in the world we have to allow them a level playing field with other institutions in the UK, as Lord James Douglas-Hamilton said. The advent of top-up fee income for universities in England means that we have to think about how we fund our further and higher education in the long term. The First Minister also referred to the forthcoming budget bill and I hope that we will see another good settlement for our universities and colleges to allow them to continue to be world beaters. They are not only working every day in our communities, encouraging social inclusion, but

creating a skilled work force—key aspects of our party's success in reducing unemployment to the lowest levels for a generation. They are addressing skills gaps and giving Scottish workers the skills that they need to work in the industries of the future.

As I represent the north-east of Scotland, I am bound to look, as other members have, to the renewable energy industry as an area in which, through engaging and developing industries, we can reap economic rewards. The announcement of £50 million of Government funding for wave energy technology and the Executive's funding for the wave device testing facility in Orkney mean that we are at the forefront of what will be a major industry. It is not right to say that we are not encouraging such industry and innovation.

Shiona Baird: The member congratulates the Executive, but does he agree that what it has done falls far short of the amount that Portugal is putting into its wave energy programme?

Richard Baker: No. The technology at our institutions in Scotland is far beyond that in Portugal. However, I support the recommendation on the matter in the Enterprise and Culture Committee's report on the issue, of which I am sure Shiona Baird is well aware.

The technology institutes, two of which are in the north-east—in Dundee for biotechnology and in Aberdeen for energy—are exciting and bold initiatives that are vital for our region. Although we have just as much oil to take out of the North sea as we have already extracted, Aberdeen should be the energy capital of Europe even beyond that, through being a centre for renewable energy. That is vital, not only for prosperity, but for social inclusion, because it will ensure that we create jobs in every part of Scotland.

A strong transport infrastructure is key to economic growth, which is why I welcome the proposed transport bill in the Executive's programme. The Executive already recognises the importance of transport—investment was at £1 billion by the end of the previous spending review. The new transport bill is welcome because it typifies the Executive's agenda of encouraging prosperity on the one hand, while on the other hand delivering social inclusion. Business will benefit from an improved and better-managed transport system and pensioners will benefit from the nationwide concessionary travel scheme. The people who say that the Parliament has not done anything for older people have not been paying much attention for the past five years—in fact, older people make up one of the groups that has benefited the most.

Prosperity, social inclusion and ambition are at the heart of the Executive's plans and the new

ambition for Scotland. I do not accept the criticism of the fresh talent initiative, as I do not accept some of the lacklustre predictions that are made about it. It is a workable approach to attracting new talent to Scotland and, vitally, it is a change of culture that the First Minister has introduced in government. For decades, the Government in this country has been preparing to manage decline in our population; now we are gearing up for growth.

That is not the only issue on which we are changing cultures. We are encouraging a more enterprising Scotland through our economic development strategy and programmes such as enterprise in schools. We want to encourage people to get into business and to be more confident about their talents, because we want to have a more confident nation. Members who think that we can achieve that confidence only by divorcing ourselves from our closest neighbours are not only wrong, but impoverishing political debate in Scotland.

If we really start to have a new politics in Scotland, we can move away from the political myopia on the constitutional settlement and focus debate clearly on the issues that make a difference to the lives of the people of Scotland: jobs, homes and public services. Those are central themes of the Executive's and Labour's plans for Scotland, as are the goals of prosperity and social inclusion, which are not in opposition, but which complement each other. I commend to the Parliament the new legislative programme and the Executive's ambition for Scotland.

15:08

Mr Adam Ingram (South of Scotland) (SNP): I am happy to acknowledge the Executive's focus on children and the provision of children's services in its legislative programme. In particular, my colleagues and I welcome the proposed new child protection measures. Much work has been undertaken in the past few years to tackle child abuse, but the new bills will take that work into new areas by dealing with developing threats such as internet grooming as well as ancient barbarities such as female genital mutilation. That said, it would be remiss of me not to enter the caveat that there is many a slip between the introduction of well-intentioned legislation and its effective implementation. Those of us who served on the Education Committee when it conducted its child protection inquiry were made aware of just how slow progress has been, for example in implementing the recommendations of the report "It's everyone's job to make sure I'm alright".

One of the key problems has been the difficulty in recruiting and retaining social workers in the children and families field, where high levels of stress and low levels of public esteem have

worked against the creation of a comprehensive child protection system. Delivering in that area remains a key challenge for the Executive in its attempt to combat child abuse, and care must be taken to ensure that the Executive's concentration on criminal justice and young people does not suck away even more social work resources from child protection.

In his speech this morning, the First Minister made some bold claims with regard to the Executive's tackling of child poverty. The evidence, however, suggests that child poverty remains at disturbingly high levels, with around one third of Scotland's children living in low-income households. It appears that the main beneficiaries of UK Government welfare to work policies have been children in households that are just below the poverty threshold. There is now more support for people in employment or moving into work but much less is being done for those not in employment. In fact, it can be argued that inequality is deepening for the non-working poor. The reality is that eradicating poverty requires us to tackle inequality effectively. A redistributive tax and benefits system is a prerequisite for such an effort. Of course, however, this Parliament is denied those powers. When members on the Labour benches tell me that constitutional issues are irrelevant, I like to point out the impact that our having the powers to implement a redistributive tax and benefits system would have on people in Scotland. The issue is far from being an irrelevance.

The Executive has also made much of its investment in early years education and there is no doubt that such investment is important in enhancing the life chances of all our children, regardless of their background. It is a great pity, therefore, that many who work in that sector, such as nursery nurses, have been treated shabbily for a long time in relation to pay and recognition of their invaluable contribution. I sincerely hope that the current review will provide a just settlement to their long-running grievances. We await the detail with interest.

We want justice for nursery nurses but the SNP also believes that much more must be done to develop a national system of supported childcare that is both affordable and accessible, on the Scandinavian model. In this country, childcare costs act as a powerful disincentive to participation in the labour force and to the decision to have large families. The economic benefits of such a policy would far outweigh its costs. Unfortunately, I see no hint of such policy development from this Executive. I fear that the Executive appears to be quite incapable of raising its game to match our magnificent new surroundings, but we can always live in hope.

15:13

Frances Curran (West of Scotland) (SSP): I was unsure about it at first but, after my first week here, I think that this is a wonderful building. I would like to express my appreciation of the work of and pay tribute to not only the designers, who have been mentioned, but the construction workers and engineers who spent years putting this building together—they might have done so breezeblock by breezeblock in some places, but I still think that it is a fantastic building.

The question about this Parliament—the lawmaker, not the building—is whether it can talk to the almost half of the population who never put a cross on a paper to send any of us here and who do not participate in voting, such as young people and the less well-off. At the moment, they obviously do not think that this Parliament has much to offer them. After the First Minister's speech this morning, I can see their point. There is a view, as expressed on today's Lesley Riddoch show and outside the main entrance to the Parliament at lunch time, that this place is occupied by an elite who represent the privileged. The key question for the Parliament is: who is the Parliament going to represent?

Members: The people.

Frances Curran: Which people?

Members: All the people.

Frances Curran: Perhaps some are treated a bit differently. We roll out the red carpet for the Queen or for the Confederation of British Industry. We put on the champagne and we invite them in, but the health campaigners who represent hundreds of thousands—

Rhona Brankin: Is the member aware of the many thousands of schoolchildren who have visited the Parliament? I have shown around at least 1,000 schoolchildren from my constituency since the Parliament was opened. Has she not been doing the same?

Frances Curran: I think it is wonderful that the school students come, but it is unfortunate that parents who are campaigning against school closures and hospital closures, who represent hundreds of thousands of people who have signed petitions, are kept at the tradesmen's entrance—*[Interruption.]* They are kept outside.

Members: Who?

Frances Curran: They will be here tomorrow—the Stobhill campaigners. Members will be able to see for themselves.

Business leaders are invited to dine, yet in the legislative programme that was announced this morning workers are under attack, including firefighters in the Fire (Scotland) Bill and public

sector workers through the continued privatisation of public services. The Labour Party and the Executive think that that is something that we should applaud. This morning, the First Minister said that he believes that investment in our public services is essential and that he wants to move the money that they spend from the back room to the front line. I have to say that I am not exactly sure what that means—it sounds like spin-doctor gobbledegook.

The real thing that is happening in public services—the real on-the-ground process that is taking place—is that we are moving within a decade to the position of having very few public assets in this country. The Executive is presiding over a colossal transfer of public assets, which we own, and is putting them into private hands through public-private partnerships and the private finance initiative: a Scottish bridge owned in America, a Scottish hospital owned in Holland, a Scottish school owned in Spain, Scottish Water owned in—well, it is not yet privatised, but the Executive would if it could, and it is trying to—*[Interruption.]* I am glad that the Tories agree. Their ideas have been taken on by the Executive, which is introducing privatisation by the back door.

We have had hundreds of years of absentee landlords—the Tories might think that that is a good thing, too. Now our public assets are going to become the property of absentee shareholders. The privilege that we get is to pay our taxes to foreign multinational or transnational companies, which make a lot of their profits from driving down the wages of those who work under the private contracts—who, in the hospitals, include the janitors, the domestic staff and the ancillaries. Why do we not just open up the garden lobby and have a fire sale to sell off the hospitals, schools and roads? What is the problem with that? It would be too open—we would be able to see what the Executive was doing with public services. This particular transfer of wealth is done in secret—so much for open government. Trying to see a PFI or PPP contract is more difficult than trying to get a membership list for the masons.

Stewart Stevenson: I welcome the fact that Frances Curran raises that issue. Yesterday, the Executive published the “Scottish Ministers’ Code of Practice on the Discharge of Functions by Public Authorities under the Freedom of Information (Scotland) Act 2002”, which says that

“When entering into a contract ... confidentiality clauses”

should be

“exempt”.

Will the member join me and others on the SNP benches in challenging the Executive to agree that all future PFI contracts should be put, in total, into the public domain, as the guidance suggests?

Frances Curran: Absolutely. We should find out how much money those companies are making out of us.

I appeal to the Executive to be visionary and to take up the SSP policy to cancel every PFI and PPP contract in Scotland and return public services to the ownership of the people. I would like the health campaigners, the school campaigners, the firefighters whose rights have been attacked and the workers whose wages are being cut to find their way into this building to hold the Executive to account. We must represent not the privileged elite but the 75 per cent who earn less than £25,000, and that is without counting the pensioners, 44 per cent of whom live on less than £10,000. We need to bring them into the building. When we can see that their policies on the things that will change their lives have taken centre stage, we will know that the Scottish Parliament has achieved something. I look forward to that legislative programme.

15:20

Susan Deacon (Edinburgh East and Musselburgh) (Lab): One thing is for sure: the move to this spectacular new building—this home that befits the nation’s Parliament—has caused many members to reflect on what worked in the first five years and what did not. Some of those reflections have been made in public and some in private, but the process of reflection can of itself only be a good thing.

I am of the view that tremendous progress was made in the first five years. A new policy narrative for our nation was crafted—one that reflected the very distinctive views and values of the Scottish people. Tremendous progress was also made in putting in place the much-needed and long-overdue investment that our nation needs for its infrastructure and public services. The area that we need to get right is that of taking forward change—the delivery of the policies to ensure that investment delivers results.

All of us in the Parliament—not only those in government, albeit that they have a clear role to play—need to think about how we can embrace and accelerate change in the years to come. I am talking not about any old change—change for change’s sake—or quick fixes and short-term initiatives, but about real, sustainable, long-term change that people can see, feel and touch. I am talking about change in which people take pride that their Parliament has delivered for them.

We live in a fast-moving world. The pace of technological and social change is immense. If Scotland is to flourish in that world—not just economically but socially—we need to move forward further and faster. There are things that

we can do to enable that to happen. Too much of what we are doing at the moment is taking us too long to deliver. Too much bureaucracy and too many obstructions and obstacles are getting in the road of change. There is a danger that Scotland could lag behind not as a result of anyone's deliberate action—or even inaction—but simply because we are not moving forward fast enough.

We need to think about how we could streamline our decision-making processes in order to ensure that we address the challenges of tomorrow and not simply answer the questions of yesterday. We need to ensure that we avoid wheel reinvention: there has to be a limit to how often we analyse the same problem, consult on the same issue or review the same service.

We have to be aware that some of the process that we have become quite good at over the past five years can sometimes get in the way of the very things that we want to happen. Constant change and review can stop things happening: for example, they can stand in the way of addressing the issues of recruitment and retention in our public services or enabling people to get on with delivering improvement. We have to be sensitive to that.

Brian Adam: An interesting alternative programme for government is coming from the Labour back benches. Although I welcome the analysis, what are the specific changes that Susan Deacon wants to be made to delivery? Can she give examples of what she believes we could do better and tell the chamber how we can get there?

Susan Deacon: It is a pity that Brian Adam has not been listening. I said that it is the job of all of us to come up with examples and to take responsibility for driving forward improvement. That said, I will happily rise to the challenge of giving some suggestions.

I have said this before and I make no apologies for saying it again: we need to think about whether enough is being done to create a Government machine in Scotland—a civil service—that is able to roll out the ambitions of the Administration as actively and effectively as many of us would like that to happen.

There is an absolute need for reform of our planning system. I am pleased that that piece of work is on-going. Although I, for one, believe absolutely that communities need to be given a stronger say at the earliest possible stage in the planning system, let us ensure that what we put in place is more effective and efficient than the present system. We cannot afford for any planning decisions to get locked into the kind of processes that many have been locked into until now.

Let us make the connections between our decision-making processes and some of the

complaints that we raise about things that have not been done—for example, in infrastructure. Great things are happening in Edinburgh to try to tackle the transport challenges and problems that the city faces. However, when we unpick how long it will take to carry through the decision-making process on issues such as congestion charging and the development of trams in the city, we have to ask whether we can do it better and faster.

We should also think about what we all do locally to embrace change. There has been a great deal of debate about issues such as wind farms and changes to hospital services. I acknowledge how strongly local people and their elected members feel about such issues. However, we should note that somehow, somewhere, some time, decisions have to be made. There is a limit to how long we can consult and review. We have to remember that avoiding making a decision is never a benign act. Uncertainty breeds inaction and unrest, which, in turn, compound problems. I say again that it is incumbent on all of us not just to not stand in the way of change but to find a way of assisting it.

I end by adding a couple of issues that I could not miss the opportunity to note. I have not been counting paragraphs or pages, but a couple of issues are conspicuous by their absence. Although I welcome the First Minister's comments on smoking, many other public health issues need to be addressed. I am interested to know where we are going on oral health. The consultation document on that was written more than three years ago, and the consultation began two years ago and closed more than one year ago. I would also like to hear a clear commitment from the Executive on its plans for progressing our sexual health strategy.

15:27

Jim Mather (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): Today is an important day with the Parliament opening for business and, I hope, reawakening the aspirations that many have for Scotland and its people. I hope that the reactions of the people of Scotland, of Scots abroad and of the millions of people who feel good will towards our country will, on seeing us here today, be entirely positive and optimistic about our future. I even hope that our competitors will be pleased for us and that they will be happy to see the full re-emergence of a Scottish role model and Scottish voices on the world stage. However, I fear that those same competitors will be more pleased for themselves, for there is little in today's statement that will strike fear into their hearts, because there is very little that will improve Scotland's competitiveness.

The people of Scotland know instinctively that our great country can do very much better. Many

of them agree with us that Scotland must urgently and simultaneously build confidence and create a new era of real and sustained economic resurgence. Today, sadly, we have heard nothing about that; we have heard nothing that would credibly achieve those objectives. That is not a surprise, because those objectives are not fully achievable without independence. Indeed, progress on either objective can be made only with increased autonomy, but the Executive remains broadly opposed to that strategy. That is increasingly a minority view in Scotland, whether we listen to the Joseph Rowntree Reform Trust Ltd or Ernst & Young surveys that show that a majority of people and businesses want more power, or whether we listen to the majority of the voices in this chamber and the many other senior public figures who want that same outcome.

The real test for any programme of government is the impact that it has on our overall competitiveness and its ability to galvanise the nation. On the strength of what we have heard today, the reaction in Scotland will be the same as that in Ireland, Estonia and the Czech Republic—confusion and a sense of lost opportunity. Nothing that we have heard today will close the gap in competitiveness or force those countries to rethink any plans to steal Scottish jobs or eat Scotland's lunch. Quite simply, although the programme for government has many worthy aims and objectives, it is flawed and it cannot claim to address the problems, solutions to which the Executive claims to believe are paramount to Scotland's future success. The key objectives are economic growth and reversal of population decline. What we heard from Peter Peacock today is undermined because without economic success, we will export talent and it will go off and enrich other countries.

That is the bad news, but there is also good news. Clearly, things must get better and the good news is that the game is up for the Executive. Let me explain why. The almost total absence of credible steps to address problems such as the erosion of Scottish competitiveness, our low economic growth and our population decline is compounded by the absence of macro-level targets. The Executive has no targets for growth, for population or for life expectancy. When I first started to ask questions about that, I was told that the Executive does not control the levers that would allow us to have such targets. I was then told that we have the levers but, despite its having joint responsibility with Westminster for Scotland's well-being, the Executive simply chooses not to set such targets. How credible is that? How laudable is that? How likely is that to produce the results that we want and need? How does that compare with the plan that the First Minister outlined this morning for new, tough accountabilities for schools?

We all know that the Scottish Executive has virtually no power to increase its own revenue, but that lack of targets takes the governance of Scotland to a new low. The wilful refusal to set meaningful top-level targets follows the self-imposed decision to govern with a distinct lack of power, but it is a further insult to the intelligence of the people of Scotland. The problem is exacerbated by the resultant and reprehensible lack of accountability. The business guru Peter Drucker once said, "If you can't measure it, you can't manage it." That is undoubtedly true. Nowhere is that more true than here in Scotland where, sadly, our Government is becoming a laughing stock because of its failure to do what is done by every successful person, every successful business and every successful country: to set meaningful and motivating top-level targets.

George Lyon: The member claims that our policy lacks credibility and is a laughing stock. Surely the real laughing stock is that, whereas he once again argues for Irish taxation levels, his deputy leader argued earlier for huge amounts of public investment to Scandinavian levels.

Jim Mather: Mr Lyon does not understand the dynamic of the virtuous circle. If we create a competitive environment, we will pay out less in benefits, take in more in taxes and be able to invest more in public infrastructure. We can then invest in people and growth. More important, in that climate, we would be able to root people here, which the Executive is failing to do. There is now plenty of evidence from many international agencies, which are now counting the score and producing the data that prove my point and prove the Executive's mismanagement. As the message gets out, that will motivate the people of Scotland to produce a damning verdict on this rudderless and directionless Executive.

Reawakening Scottish aspirations and ambitions is one thing, but the objective needs to be rooted in reality and credibility. Sadly, that is what the Executive does not have: witness the First Minister's attempt this morning to answer the question about business rates, in which he attempted to shift the blame on to the private sector; witness his false-hope syndrome when he launched FEDS 2.

Quite simply, successive Governments, including the current one, have not created the conditions for growth in Scotland, although that is the Executive's top priority. Recent reports highlight the problem. As the Royal Bank of Scotland told us, no major company has been created in Scotland for 40 years. The report from the Federation of Small Businesses tells us that few medium-sized companies are in the pipeline. The Royal Bank of Scotland report also points out that there is a huge gap between gross domestic

product and the amount and value of money that ends up in Scottish pockets and Scottish coffers. That is not good enough. It is not a good start. The Executive needs to go back and think again.

15:33

Robert Brown (Glasgow) (LD): As we started this autumn term in this splendid new Scottish Parliament building I, like many others, thought back to our arrival on the Mound in those sunny days of May and June 1999. The excitement that was present at that time is present again today, as Jim Mather mentioned. After all the difficulties and challenges, it is clear that Miralles's vision as expressed in this place will, over time, influence even the most cynical whingers among us—I gaze to my right—in respect of the way in which we approach the clash of ideas that is the stuff of democratic politics.

The legislative programme that has been unveiled today is a key part, but not the only part, of the work that is done by Parliament and Executive to build opportunity for all our people, especially the young. Education is central for our young people, for our economy and for playing our full part in the world. Education opens doors. It creates opportunity, builds confidence and enables personal development. Education is key to developing a prosperous, balanced and liberal society—in the First Minister's words

"a Scotland of ambition and enterprise, of fairness, tolerance and respect."

Before I move on to specifics, let me respond to Jim Mather's comments by pausing to comment on the approach of the main opposition party. In her absence from this afternoon's debate, I warmly welcome and congratulate Nicola Sturgeon on her election as SNP deputy leader, but I suggest to her and her colleagues that they continue to suffer from the identity problem that has caused their recent decline. SNP members can continue to whinge and to wax eloquent about independence in every debate. Nobody doubts their commitment to that cause, but unless they start to engage with the policies and programme of the Executive, unless they start promulgating an alternative vision that tells us not how they will arrange the levers of power but what they will do with those levers, how much it will cost and what they will achieve, and unless they genuinely start to hold the Executive to account, Scotland will be ill served by its principal opposition party and the Parliament will not function as well as it should as the champion of the citizen and of the public interest that it should be.

I would like to take a moment to assess where we are in respect of education. The first thing to say is that the Scottish education system is, by and large, performing well. It is not the desert of

failing schools that was portrayed by David McLetchie. Ultimately, that is because teachers, assistants, head teachers and specialist staff are working hard, supporting achievement, providing role models for young people and building on the home background that is provided by parents or, in some cases, making up for problems at home. The measures that have been put in place by the Scottish Executive under the partnership agreement—many of them specific and unique Liberal Democrat commitments, I might say—have made, and are making, a real difference.

We have better schools as our £2 billion programme of schools estate renewal moves forward. There is investment in primary and secondary teachers; there will be many extra teachers by 2006. Class sizes, according to the June 2004 pupil census, are at an all-time low. Bureaucracy has been reduced or reformed with the abolition of the old national tests and there are major reforms in a number of other areas. We are moving on, quite rightly, to talk about how we can make even more progress and achieve the excellence that the Minister for Education and Young People talked about.

However, there has been a lot of talk—most of it spurious and a good bit of it arid—about choice. For Liberal Democrats, the issue is primarily about opportunity and quality, about broadening and deepening the educational experience, about providing quality life-enhancing chances in sport, music, drama and the arts, and about reigniting and reinspiring young people who have dropped out and opted out of the system. Those are the central issues.

Since I became convener of the Education Committee last May, I have had occasion to visit schools, colleges, youth organisations and pre-school groups. I have visited organisations such as Fairbridge, which works with young people at risk, and projects such as the Ruchill Youth Project, which is in a deprived area, and the San Jai Chinese Project, which provides facilities for young Chinese people. They all have common themes; they give youngsters life chances, particularly by developing soft skills, they build their confidence, engage with them one to one and let them take advantage of work opportunities. One aspect that is of particular importance in that regard—as Lord James Douglas-Hamilton and others have said—is the later stage of secondary school and the transition to college and work. I hope that the way in which we develop vocational skills specifically for that age group will feature prominently in the Executive's proposed curriculum review.

I mention in that context my recent visit to Westinghouse Rail Systems Ltd, the railway signalling firm, which recruits a number of railway

engineering apprentices straight from school. They are committed youngsters with high skill levels who are entering a vital career, and their contribution is at least as great as that of many of those who go to university and end up with university careers. There are good careers in many such areas and we need to tell young people about those careers, to let them experience them and to value them on a par with other careers that follow the university or college paths.

I would like to touch on one other issue that relates to young people—the smoking ban that was mentioned earlier by John Home Robertson. Scotland—Glasgow in particular, with its appalling sickness record—needs a smoking ban more than most countries do. I am especially pleased that, in accordance with our long-term support for effective health promotion, the Scottish Liberal Democrats were the first party to call for a legislative ban on smoking in enclosed public places. That is not only because ventilation does not work to reduce significantly the risk to non-smokers and staff. To me, it is vital that a ban should reduce the number of smokers absolutely by removing the social inducement. That would be of particular benefit in places such as student unions and clubs, where many young people first develop their addiction. If, as we are told, a ban would prevent many young people from smoking at all, it would quite literally prevent the life chances of many young people from being blighted—something that the First Minister himself identifies with, as he told us recently.

In conclusion, I commend the legislative programme and the other work of the Scottish Executive to the chamber. I think that it will give considerably increased and enhanced opportunities for excellence and progress to our young people in Scotland—the lifeblood of Scotland as a nation.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Trish Godman): There is a considerable number of back benchers whom I wish to call, so after Bristow Muldoon we will revert to four-minute speeches.

15:40

Bristow Muldoon (Livingston) (Lab): In the course of my speech I could refer to many aspects of the Executive's programme that I think are very positive but, given the shortage of time, I will concentrate on two issues. The first is the effect of the programme on rebuilding Scotland's transport infrastructure and the second is the concern in many areas about decisions that are being taken by health boards in Scotland.

In considering the record of Parliament on transport, I say that it is one of the areas in which

the Scottish Parliament can make a fundamental difference through boosting Scottish competitiveness, ensuring that we create greater social inclusion and ensuring that we develop the country in a way that is more environmentally sustainable. When we consider the record of the Parliament to date, we all need to recognise the challenge that was inherited as a result of decades of underfunding. However, as we move deep into the second session of Parliament, we need to see dramatic progress being made in delivery of many of the programmes that we have committed to over the past four years.

One of the welcome early changes in transport policy was the commitment to increase the share of resources that are invested in public transport, which will reach 70 per cent by 2006. The Transport (Scotland) Act 2001 introduced free concessionary local travel for older people and disabled people. We have started to see increases in bus passenger numbers for the first time in decades, but we must acknowledge that many concerns still exist about the accountability of the bus industry—we may have to return to that issue.

Support has also been shown for walking and cycling in order to promote them as healthier ways to travel, and through the development of safer routes to schools.

We are committed to many major rail projects. Edinburgh crossrail has been delivered and projects are planned for routes to Edinburgh and Glasgow airports, the Bathgate line, the Kincardine to Stirling line and the Larkhall to Milngavie line.

The proposed transport agency will play a vital role in driving those projects to completion. However, I assure David Mundell that—contrary to comments he made in his speech—I will still hold the Minister for Transport to account over that, not the transport agency. I am sure that considerable progress will be made in that regard.

The transport bill will also support better regional planning and delivery of transport in the regions of Scotland and it will allow the Executive to deliver on the promise of a Scotland-wide concessionary fares scheme for the elderly, the disabled and young people.

We have started to improve our links to continental Europe, through ferry services such as the Rosyth to Zeebrugge service and through the route development fund, which has allowed airlines to develop new routes to Europe and to places such as Dubai.

Mark Ballard (Lothians) (Green): One Executive transport innovation that the member has not mentioned is the introduction of the right to introduce congestion charging. As he knows, the public inquiry on congestion charging in Edinburgh

will report soon. Will he support the outcome of that congestion charging inquiry, whether it is positive or negative?

Bristow Muldoon: I have made clear my position on that on a number of occasions. I support the principle of congestion charging, but I believe that the proposals that are currently being made by the City of Edinburgh Council are deeply flawed. That remains my view.

The second issue that I will cover is acute hospital services. My colleague, Susan Deacon, made a thoughtful speech in which she referred to the fact that sometimes hard decisions need to be made on services. I accept that and agree with that point, but it is my firm view that on some occasions—in particular in the case of some of the decisions that have been taken by NHS Lothian—it is not hard decisions that have been taken, but wrong decisions.

It is undoubtedly the case that there have been many progressive changes in our health services. The First Minister referred today to reduced deaths in the three major illnesses, which are coronary heart disease, stroke and cancer. Credit must be given to the Executive and the NHS for those results. I have also seen positive developments in my constituency, such as more treatments being carried out in primary care settings and new refurbished general practices, such as the excellent Strathbrock partnership centre in Broxburn.

It is also encouraging that the Executive is putting more emphasis on encouraging people to have healthier lifestyles. I add my support to members who have today called on the Executive to introduce legislation that would implement a ban on smoking in enclosed public places.

However, I firmly believe that all that good work is being put at risk by the public's lack of confidence in many of the decisions that have been taken with regard to acute services in our hospitals. It is widely recognised that the NHS is in a state of transition and that some change is necessary. New pressures have been brought to bear by factors such as new contracts for consultants and reduced working hours for junior doctors. However, community after community throughout Scotland believe that their views are not being taken fully into account by health boards.

In my area, major emergency services either are under threat or have already been removed. Emergency orthopaedic surgery was removed from St John's hospital last month, and NHS Lothian proposes to remove emergency general surgery at the end of this month, which means that a modern hospital with a renovated accident and emergency department that cost more than £3

million and was completed only this year will have no emergency surgical back-up. It is a modern hospital with an excellent record. It has the third lowest methicillin-resistant staphylococcus aureus infection rate in Scotland. The people of West Lothian have confidence in it. It is situated in the area with the fastest growing population in Scotland and it is located next to a motorway network and Edinburgh airport. I find the situation to be unacceptable, as do the people of West Lothian and a large number of NHS staff.

Everyone accepts that some complex specialties, such as neurosurgery, need to be delivered in a small number of sites and will not be delivered in every hospital, but people do not understand why or accept that surgery on arm breaks and leg breaks or appendix removal cannot be performed in local hospitals when they have been delivered safely in those hospitals for decades. NHS Lothian says that it has no option and that decisions are driven by the postgraduate dean, but I believe that it does have options, which I put to the Minister for Health and Community Care and to NHS Lothian.

The NHS is the most treasured public body in Scotland. Its creation is the greatest achievement in more than 100 years of Labour's history, but I did not support the establishment of this Parliament and the principle of bringing decision making closer to the people of Scotland only to see emergency services being centralised and taken further away from people. I repeat my call to the Minister for Health and Community Care and I urge him to intervene in the process of centralisation.

15:47

Dennis Canavan (Falkirk West) (Ind): Like other members, I hope that our move into this new building will inspire us to greater things. I hope that lessons have been learned from the mistakes of the past. The escalating cost of this building was, and still is, a national scandal and it has done more than anything else to tarnish the reputation of our Parliament. Too many people equate the Parliament with this building, but I hope that in the fullness of time the people of Scotland will judge our Parliament—their Parliament—not on the quality of this building, but on the quality of the decisions that we make, which I hope will lead to an improvement in the quality of the lives of the people whom we represent.

One way of improving people's quality of life is to improve educational opportunities, especially for young people. I was concerned that some of the Executive's recent policy statements—or leaks to the press—might lead to a decrease rather than an increase in educational opportunities. I was pleased and relieved to hear the First Minister

state this morning that there will be no elitist selection of pupils. However, I am concerned that private funding of state schools is still on the agenda.

Some of the right-wing media are urging the Executive to copy the modernisation programme of new Labour south of the border. In some respects, new Labour is just old hat. Modernisation is the name of their game, but if we examine closely some of the policies of the so-called modernisers, we find that often those policies are not modernising, but turning back the clock. There is nothing modern about rich people buying the right to influence or dictate the ethos and curriculum of schools and there is nothing modern about selecting and rejecting children according to their ability. Before the comprehensive revolution of the 1960s, that was the norm in many parts of Scotland and more than half—I repeat; more than half—of the nation's children were written off as failures at the age of 11 or 12. Now, more than half the young people who leave our schools are going on to higher education. We should be proud of that, but we should never be complacent.

There is abundant evidence that there is a need for improvement in Scottish education. Earlier this year, for example, Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Education published a report on education services in the Falkirk area. That report was critical of certain aspects of the service and Falkirk Council is now trying to address those criticisms. However, the Scottish Executive must also play its part in trying to improve standards in our schools. One way to do that is to employ more teachers in order to reduce class sizes. However, statistics that were published by the Executive a few weeks ago show that, last year, there were 818 fewer teachers than there were the previous year.

If the Executive really wants to modernise our education system, it should provide the resources to education authorities to employ more teachers instead of looking around for wealthy private investors who want to undermine equality of opportunity. We should not be turning the clock back; we should be moving forward to build a better Scotland. I am all in favour of modernisation if modernisation is going to deliver real improvements for the people whom we represent.

15:51

Rhona Brankin (Midlothian) (Lab): I add my condolences to the people of Beslan. Our sympathies are with them and their families at this time.

Like other members, I feel immensely privileged to be working in such a wonderful building. I pay tribute to Enric Miralles for his genius and to Donald Dewar for his belief that the people of

Scotland deserve nothing less than a wonderful Parliament and his belief that the Parliament has the capacity to change the lives of the people of Scotland. We all believe that, otherwise we would not be here.

I shall concentrate on the Executive's policies for children and young people. The Scottish education system is already admired and, indeed, imitated in many parts of the world. We have introduced nursery education for all our three and four-year-olds and we have consistently raised attainment levels year on year. There are record numbers of young people going into higher education and we have wonderful new school buildings. However, we must continuously seek improvement. I welcome very much Peter Peacock's announcement of exactly what the programme for government sets out to do, but there is still a lot to do.

I welcome very much the package of reforms that is planned for secondary schools. We all acknowledge that our young people are still not being challenged sufficiently in the first and second years of secondary education. I support the principle of freeing up the curriculum. For too long, we have matched our young people to the needs of the curriculum; we now need to match the curriculum to the needs of our young people. By doing that, we can develop individual talents and release potential. We can engage more young people in the learning process, we can raise standards and—which is important—we can reduce disaffection. We must create the opportunities for success, whether that is through outstanding talent in culture, in sport, in science or in citizenship.

I believe that the new recognition for excellent schools will be hugely important. "Very good" is simply not enough. We already have outstanding schools in Scotland, and we must recognise that excellence, but we need to give other schools the ambition to be excellent.

Let me be clear: changing secondary schools must not be about a return to the vocational divide of the past and the separation that was caused by the discredited 11-plus, to which the Tories seek to return. It is not about a voucher system that undermines local schools, makes planning impossible and potentially discriminates against children who have additional support needs. Labour believes that every community is entitled to an excellent school. Every child—whatever their ability—has the right to attend an excellent school in their community. The Tories have to answer these questions: if they believe in selection, what about the rights of children to attend their local school? What happens when local schools become filled up? They must answer those questions. A free market in education is simply a

free-for-all in which the most vulnerable children will suffer.

I say to Peter Peacock that we have to be vigilant and ensure that creating vocational opportunities does not close down other pathways for our young people. The young people in my constituency of Midlothian and in other former coal-mining constituencies still do not get the opportunities to enter higher education that they deserve. That is simply not good enough. Our economy needs the talents of all our children, no matter whether those talents lie in going to university or in other directions. Given Scotland's demographic trends and population decline, we simply cannot afford to waste the talents of even one young person.

I make no apologies for stating that we must target resources at many of the families that need support. In that light, I urge Peter Peacock to consider rolling out parenting initiatives such as that which is run by the Aberlour Child Care Trust. For example, in my constituency, I have seen the difference that programmes such as surestart are making with young families and I would welcome the further rolling-out of that programme.

The education of our young people is the key to Scottish prosperity. I am privileged to represent the people of Midlothian in this wonderful Parliament. The programme for Scotland is inspiring and I look forward to playing a part in the progress of legislation.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Before I call Jamie McGrigor, I ask members to ensure that they stick to four-minute speeches. If they do, we will get all the back benchers in.

15:56

Mr Jamie McGrigor (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I am surprised that the First Minister did not say more in his statement about the health service, because the main worry of people in the west of Scotland north of the Erskine bridge is that their health service is disintegrating. The downgrading of health services and the possible closures of medical units such as the Jeanie Deans unit in Helensburgh and of famous hospitals such as the Vale of Leven hospital are retrograde steps that will surely lower standards of living. The centralisation of acute and emergency services at the Royal Alexandra hospital in Paisley is not an acceptable option for people in Lomond, Helensburgh, Dunoon and south Argyll, because those places are simply too far away.

The disappearance of out-of-hours general practitioner services in many rural areas is causing great anxiety. For example, in the Eastdale practice in Argyll, which includes the island of Luing—which I visited the other night—one doctor

was available locally out of hours to cover fewer than 1,000 people. Now they, and the whole out-of-hours service for north Argyll, will be covered by one doctor in Oban hospital, which means that there will be one doctor for 20,000 people. We must think about the extra stress that that will put on ambulances and ambulance service staff.

Malcolm Chisholm says that the new GP contract offers doctors a choice. However, it is clear from the contract that that choice is stacked in favour of opting out and against opting in. Such an approach might work in urban areas, but it will be a disaster for rural communities.

I want now to turn to Scotland's biggest industry, tourism, which accounts for 9 per cent of the Scottish work force. Despite the Executive document, "A New Strategy for Scottish Tourism", which was launched in February 2000; despite Lord Watson's tourism framework directive, which was issued in 2002; and despite the ad hoc ministerial tourism group finally reporting in March 2004 with its structure for tourism, the figures for tourism in Scotland are worse than those for the rest of the UK.

For example, between 2001 and 2003, the number of European Union visitors in England rose by 1,806,000, whereas in Scotland the figure fell by 63,000. In 2003-04, that figure had increased by 276,000 in England but had fallen by 14,000 in Scotland. The numbers in London rose, despite the fact that the city would have been the most likely target for a terrorist attack. Under this Executive, tourist numbers in Scotland continue to fall. Scotland needs more direct affordable flights from outside destinations and a better road infrastructure to speed people north of the border. We must improve Scottish train services and ensure that the ferry services to our many islands are fully integrated and user friendly.

The chairman of Oban and Lorn Tourism Association wrote to me recently to say that he believed that the loss of area tourist board membership will cause particular problems for Highland tourism because of the loss of local identity. He emphasised the importance of a major VisitScotland presence, namely an area headquarters to create a strong link between the organisation and the west Highland tourist industry.

George Lyon: Will the member give way?

Mr McGrigor: No, I am sorry, but I cannot. I do not have the time.

The fundamental problem with the Executive's tourism policy is that it believes that it is Government's role to lead the industry. It pursues an interventionist approach and is obsessed with organisational restructuring and strategy launches, rather than allowing the industry to grow by creating a climate in which it can flourish.

The Scottish Conservatives would invest more in Scotland's roads. We would try to bring common sense back into the procedure for keeping roads open after traffic accidents. Recently in the Highlands—especially in Argyll—there has been a spate of road accidents, many of them fatal, which is obviously very sad. However, it seems that often when there is a fatality nowadays major trunk roads are closed for hours and, sometimes, even days. Recently, an unfortunate motorcyclist was killed on the A85, which resulted in the road being closed for 11 hours at the high point of the tourist season. The Government must ensure that common sense is applied to keep things moving and that the blame-and-claim culture is not allowed to bring Scotland to a standstill.

On sport, I am glad that the First Minister will meet the Scottish Olympic medal heroes tonight. I hope that the Executive will respond to their efforts by encouraging more sport in schools.

I am sorry to say that our cultural image is in terrible trouble. It has been strong since the age of enlightenment, but the wrecking of Scottish Opera is quite disgraceful and makes Scotland's other national companies scared for their futures. If artists, musicians, actors and film makers are to flourish in Scotland, there must be more encouragement for the teaching of those subjects in schools.

16:01

Iain Smith (North East Fife) (LD): I welcome the opportunity to contribute to the first debate in this magnificent new chamber. This is a building that rose from the aspirations of its architect, and we as parliamentarians should use it to raise the aspirations of Scotland, its communities and its people. Too many communities in Scotland have been blighted by a lack of aspiration over many years, which has led those communities to enter a cycle of decline. It is our job in the Scottish Parliament and in this building to give such communities the tools that they need to raise their aspirations and to escape the cycle of decline. As my colleague Robert Brown said, the issue is not the false debate about choice that the Conservatives seem determined to have, but quality and opportunity. We should ensure that opportunity is available to everyone in Scotland, not just the few who are able to take advantage of the Conservatives' false choice agenda.

However, I will give the Conservatives some credit. Unlike the main Opposition party, at least they have an idea, even if it is not a very good or very new idea. I listened in vain for an idea in Nicola Sturgeon's speech this morning.

Behind the rhetoric of the Conservatives' policy, there are many dangerous things. We must be

very careful about that. For example, they propose to take education away from local government and to cut council tax by £540 million. However, they do not say where that money would come from. Would they cut the education budget by £540 million, or would they cut some other budgets by that amount? I say to Brian Monteith that the money must come from somewhere—I hope that he will tell us.

Mr Monteith: Clearly, the member had some earwax this morning, or he would have heard David McLetchie explain that, under Gordon Brown's spending review, adequate funding has been made available to transfer the money in question so that council taxes can be cut.

Iain Smith: I see. Let me get this clear: the Conservatives would provide no additional money to cover the £540 million that they would take away from the education service. In anyone's terms, that is a cut in public services in Scotland. On top of that, the Conservatives would have to build a huge new bureaucracy. They would have to build a massive extension to Victoria Quay to house all the bureaucrats who would have to run our local schools. Decisions about local schools would be taken not by local councillors and communities, but by Scottish Executive civil servants in Victoria Quay. To my mind, that is not the way forward for education.

In the short time that I have left, I would like to say a few words about transport. As Robert Brown said, not everything that we do in this Parliament is included in the legislative programme. We are already doing a great deal to promote transport. We are registering progress on projects such as the Stirling-Alloa-Kinross line, the bill for which was passed before the summer recess. There has been progress on the Milngavie to Larkhall line, on the Borders rail link, the private bill for which is before the Parliament, and on the tram lines for Edinburgh. Major progress is being made on public transport.

Progress is being made on initiatives such as the links to Edinburgh and Glasgow airports and the first phase of the Waverley redevelopment. Such improvements to our transport system are essential. In addition, I hope that the reissuing of the ScotRail franchise will allow further improvements in our rail services from October. Those measures are extremely important, as is the proposed transport bill, which is about giving the Executive and its ministers the tools to be able to deliver such important changes to our transport infrastructure. Nicol Stephen has many qualities, but he is not a civil engineer. We need to have the civil engineers in place to ensure that we can deliver the new railways and road networks that we need to provide the transport network that Scotland so desperately requires.

16:05

Mike Watson (Glasgow Cathcart) (Lab): It is a privilege to be here today on such a momentous occasion. The stunning design of the chamber is a testament to the efforts of Enric Miralles, Donald Dewar and others, whose vision it was long before any of us fully understood what it might produce. The building is a powerful statement of Scotland's status post devolution and I have no doubt that, throughout the world, the Parliament's status as a powerful symbol of Scottish democracy will grow very quickly. That is an extremely important aspect of any Parliament; the Parliament building itself is far less important.

Many people have talked about raising the game. Of course that is important and we should all be trying to do that, for whatever reason. I want to pay tribute to some people who have raised their game significantly over the past month to make the building ready for us to move into today—the Parliament staff. The First Minister and Nicola Sturgeon mentioned that. It is not just party leaders, ministers and back benchers who need to raise their game; the media need to raise their game as well. That is not to say, “Don't criticise us,” but it is to say, “Report events as you see them, but see them a bit more widely.” In particular, I suggest that the media should examine what happens in the committees, because they are the nuts and bolts of the Parliament, which have produced some very valuable work over the past five years.

Comments have been made about the standard of debate in the chamber, which has been compared—unfavourably, in many cases—to that in the House of Commons.

Mary Scanlon (Highlands and Islands) (Con): Will the member take an intervention?

Mike Watson: Not just now. I am afraid that I have not got time.

I had the dubious privilege of spending eight years in the House of Commons and I urge anyone who thinks that the standard of debate is higher there than it is here to get satellite or cable television—if they have not already got it—and to tune in to the Parliament channel other than during Prime Minister's question time. I think that they would find that educative. The standard in the House of Commons is certainly no higher than that which we achieve here. I believe that the sense of responsibility that this great chamber confers on all of us will lead us to raise the standard of debate. I am certain that that will follow in the months ahead.

One of the situations that affect the standard of debate has arisen this afternoon. My point is not just a personal one. When one is told that one has six minutes to make a speech and its length is

then cut arbitrarily by a third at just a few minutes' notice, that does not enhance the standard of debate; it cannot. I wanted to take interventions and I apologise for not having been able to take Mary Scanlon's—there is simply not enough time. I have prepared proposals, which I will make to the Procedures Committee, about how we might overcome the problem, because I think that it affects the way in which our debates are perceived.

I have little time left to discuss the legislative programme, which I was rather dismayed, although not surprised, to hear Brian Adam characterise as unambitious. The programme did not include the ambition of divorcing Scotland from the rest of the UK, so it was always going to fall short as far as Mr Adam was concerned, but is it really unambitious? Is it unambitious to use the resources that are to be announced in the budget in a few weeks' time to invest further in our public services or to say that that investment is to be complemented by efficiency savings? I do not think so. Are new laws to provide children with greater protection from sexual predators unambitious? Is it unambitious to introduce a bill that will modernise the buying and selling of houses, raise standards in Scotland's public housing stock and strengthen the rights of private sector tenants? There is a raft of measures that are aimed at pursuing the Executive's major policy of growing Scotland's economy. We will have a chance to debate all that next week, so I will not discuss it. The Executive's programme is certainly not unambitious; it is the opposite.

I want to finish on an aspect of the programme that the First Minister outlined that is one of the core issues of the Labour Party. It concerns only about 60,000 people in Scotland and fits each of the party's four core beliefs of respect, tolerance, solidarity and equality. I am referring to the Gaelic language bill, which will complement the excellent work that has been done by Bòrd na Gàidhlig since its establishment in January of last year and will enable more people to learn in the medium that is central to Scotland's cultural heritage. Like so much of the legislative programme that we have been hearing about and which we will discuss today and tomorrow, the bill would never have been possible if it had had to come from Westminster. I suggest that anyone who still questions the benefits of devolution should ponder that point.

16:09

Mr Bruce McFee (West of Scotland) (SNP): In his statement this morning, the Prime Minister—I am sorry, the First Minister, who has been elevated already—said:

“We are making the biggest investment to modernise our school buildings in more than a century”.

However, by its insistence over many years that PPP/PFI is, in effect, the only game in town, this Labour-Liberal Executive stands guilty of wasting public money, of diminishing local facilities and of tying the hands of local authorities by removing their ability to respond properly to changing circumstances for up to 30 years. We are constantly being told that schools should be at the heart of communities but, in many instances, the reality of the Executive's privatisation policies is to remove schools from communities. We see inflated prices being charged to community groups that want to access school facilities out of hours; high penalty costs for councillors who want to promote community use; and the giving to private consortia of the whip hand when it comes to negotiating for additional provision.

The Executive constantly tells us that our young people need to take more exercise—that is true for some of us in here as well. However, this Executive's policies continuously put school playing fields and open spaces in jeopardy. They are assets to be bartered away to squeeze a little more mileage from the PPP negotiations with the preferred bidder. As usual, the public have little or no say in the decisions, because the councils that want to trade the land are the same councils that are the planning authorities that decide whether a developer gets planning permission to build new houses. PPP does not empower communities; it robs them of any influence.

One of the much trumpeted attributes of PPP was that it was supposed to provide healthy competition. Let us leave aside for a moment the fact that the higher rates of interest that the private consortia are required to pay to finance the projects are passed on directly to the taxpayer and the council tax payer and concentrate on the competition element. The sheer scale of PPP projects, and the way in which they are configured, means that the number of companies or private consortia that are able to carry out the works is extremely limited. That has resulted in normal council tendering procedures being thrown out of the window. No longer have four or five competitive bids been required; sometimes the number required has been reduced to only two. Indeed, only last week in Renfrewshire Council, a decision was taken not to re-tender a PPP project after the collapse of the previous proposals, but to enter into negotiations with a single bidder instead—a decision of dubious legality and obvious risk. What occasioned that collapse was the refusal of the preferred bidder to involve itself in any refurbishment works.

We are told that PPP involves the transfer of risk from the public sector to the private sector—that'll be right. With the local authorities locked into negotiations with their preferred bidders, and in a situation in which those preferred bidders now

have councils over a barrel, the private consortia are now busily transferring the elements of risk back on to the local authority and the council tax payers. What the private companies want are the nice, clean, profitable new builds—that is where the future profit lies. However, PPP, with its subsidies to the private sector, is a very expensive method of delivering new schools.

In Renfrewshire alone, as a direct result of the lack of competition and of the transfer of powers—which have been handed over to the private consortia because of the inadequacies of PPP—12 schools that were to have been refurbished are no longer in the programme. That number includes seven major secondary schools.

I will need to cut my speech a bit short because of the time. The fact is that we are now creating a two-tier schools estate. More properties, many of which are badly in need of repair—those outside PPPs—are now competing for a dwindling share of capital and revenue budgets. By pursuing the PPP option, the Executive is behaving not like a responsible custodian of the public purse, but more like a leaky old bucket. This Executive lacks vision and lacks cohesion. Its policies and objectives are contradictory. Scotland deserves better but, unfortunately, this Executive is not up to the job.

16:14

Mr Kenneth Macintosh (Eastwood) (Lab): Like many other members, I start by saying how privileged and pleased I am to be speaking in this most magnificent of buildings. I do not want either to justify or to vindicate the mistakes that were made in getting here, but this is a truly inspiring, uplifting piece of architecture. I hope that, in time, all of us in Scotland will be immensely proud of it. Five years have passed since the first Scottish Parliament elections, and political expectations and fortunes have waxed and waned in that time, but, to my mind, this building still captures the spirit of 1999. This is a confident, optimistic, forward-looking Parliament. I hope that, as MSPs and as a country, we feel reinvigorated by our new environment. I hope that we can approach the decisions that lie ahead of us with some of that optimism and anticipation.

I welcome the tone that was set by the First Minister this morning. He said that he was looking to share and discuss his vision and our ideas for the new Scotland. I was showing some visitors around the Parliament last night and, as was echoed in the comments that my colleague, Mike Watson, has just made, I said that I did not feel that proceedings in the chamber had been an accurate reflection of behaviour in the Parliament more generally. We often come into the chamber with our speeches written and our minds made

up—I am speaking personally—and more ready to exchange insults than arguments. This morning, we have already heard what sounded suspiciously like carping, but we have also heard members from all sides talking about vision, about big ideas, about being daring and about being audacious. I am encouraged by that language and by what it says about what lies ahead of us.

I wish to talk about a couple of the issues that await us in the parliamentary year ahead.

Mary Scanlon: On this first day in the new Parliament building, I acknowledge the loss of Rab McNeil from our press gallery. Although that will be a loss, I welcome his replacement.

Mr Macintosh: I am not sure how many of our colleagues will join Mary Scanlon in that, but I take that in the spirit in which it was intended.

I will talk about a couple of issues that were raised this morning, in particular what the First Minister said about modernising our schools. It is worth acknowledging what we have achieved to date. I believe that our schools are already livelier, more invigorating, healthier and happier institutions than they were just a decade ago. Everywhere I look in my constituency, school buildings are going up or are being revamped. Class sizes are falling, and the increase in the number of classroom assistants is having a terrific impact in primary schools. Virtually all our pupils have access to computers. The new pre-school landscape is unrecognisable. Fresh fruit and water and healthier eating options are improving our nation's diet, and the recent announcement about physical education teachers will make a big difference. Our schools are healthier and happier places and, I believe, they are better learning institutions.

I was very encouraged to hear the First Minister speak about his further ambitions for our schools: higher achievement, better discipline and attendance records, and a new inspection standard. Perhaps most encouraging, he talked about greater freedom and choice. The words freedom and choice are often abused, as they have been this afternoon in the context of public services. For the Tories, those words mean a freedom to choose for the few at the expense of the many—a supposed freedom to support privilege and to opt out. That is the two-Scotlands argument, which allows some to prosper while others lag behind.

A fair choice needs to be based on our equality, not on the inequality of our wealth. A fair choice is one that liberates pupils within schools, not one that creates unfair distortions between schools. Choice is not a goal in itself, but a means to improve our schools, to re-engage our young people and to help raise achievement. My

colleague, Rhona Brankin, put that argument very well. As a member of the Education Committee, I look forward to taking part in the debate on that subject.

I will touch briefly on two further issues that I hope will come before the Education Committee. The first is the forthcoming Gaelic bill. As many colleagues will know, that is very important to me personally, and I warmly welcome it. We still have to have the debate on how far the proposed bill goes, but I was pleased to hear from the Minister for Education and Young People about how it is being strengthened. I would like to echo constructively the comments from SNP members about the need for Gaelic-medium teachers, but it would be churlish to suggest that the bill will be anything other than a key step forward in protecting and rejuvenating what could be a dying language.

Secondly, I look forward to scrutinising the code of practice that the Executive will introduce to accompany the Education (Additional Support for Learning) (Scotland) Act 2004. That measure and the resources that go with it will be essential.

We have a new building in which to deliberate and a new vision of what can be achieved, which we will debate. I commend the programme for government and I look forward to the coming year.

16:19

Ms Rosemary Byrne (South of Scotland) (SSP): I take this opportunity to say that I, too, am delighted to be in this beautiful new building. I hope that we can move forward and raise everything to the standard that this beautiful chamber has set us.

I have chosen to focus on education and young people, because they are Scotland's future. The child protection reform programme is to be welcomed, but I remind the Executive that drug treatment services must improve so that children living in homes where there is drug abuse have parents who can function and look after them. In the minister's closing speech, can we please have an indication of when the Executive's drugs review, which should have come out in April, will appear out of the ether and come before the Parliament so that we can move forward with it?

The minister plans to unveil what he calls the most comprehensive modernisation programme for our secondary schools, so I will take this opportunity to outline what is required to make a real difference in our schools. First, we need improved resourcing and support, which must go as far as decreasing class sizes to a maximum of 20 for non-practical classes and fewer for practical classes. That is necessary as a mandatory standard, because although average class sizes

are falling, some children are disadvantaged in that they are still sitting in classes of 30 or 33. If we want equality across the board, we must have a standard that is in line with Educational Institute of Scotland policy.

We also need to increase the number of appropriately trained specialist learning support teachers. I will outline some of the things that we are failing to do in additional support needs and that I fear the new Education (Additional Support for Learning) (Scotland) Act 2004 will not help us to improve. I cite dyslexia as an example, but there are many others. A recent study by the British Dyslexia Association identified a link between dyslexia and offending. Dyslexia rates of between 30 and 50 per cent have been found among offenders, compared with an incidence of only 10 per cent in the general population. There is evidence of a route to offending among certain young people that starts with difficulties in the classroom and moves through low self-esteem, poor behaviour and school exclusion to end in offending. Children and young people with dyslexia are more likely to fall into taking that route because of the difficulties with learning that they face. That corroborates Scottish Prison Service figures that show that one third of young offenders lack functional literacy and one fifth lack functional numeracy, the main reason for which is a lack of sustained initial schooling.

Early intervention is the key. It is time to review support at the early stages of education. We must examine good practice and involve all agencies in working with families and children at a formative age. Young people today face many pressures and have little opportunity to engage with adults. Many are living in homes where there is either drug or alcohol abuse and many suffer from poverty and deprivation. The Westminster Education and Skills Committee's report of September 2003 recognised that the home circumstances of all children are not necessarily conducive to education and stated:

"It is unarguable from the evidence presented to us that poverty is the biggest single indicator of low educational achievement."

The programme to eradicate childhood poverty is far too slow; we need to push it much faster. Although young people with specific difficulties are clearly being let down, there are other groups for which gaps in provision exist. Pupils with social, emotional and behavioural difficulties are often unable to access adequate support. That has an impact not only on their education, but on the education of others.

Funding for social inclusion has increased over recent years, but its initiative-led, ring-fenced nature militates against long-term planning. Core funding needs to be increased to allow local

authorities and schools to employ more teachers. If we are to include all our young people, services to support them must be staffed and resourced adequately. Over the past five years, many specialist units in schools with expertise to support young people with the most severe behavioural difficulties have closed. Those young people have been left in mainstream schools with inadequate support for them and their families. Many of those young people are disruptive and prevent others from learning. If we are to prevent that group from becoming future young offenders, specialist placements must be maintained to provide appropriate support for those young people and their families.

Another group of young people for whom provision is sadly lacking are those with mental health problems. At present, gaining access to child and adolescent mental health services can mean waiting for months. An answer to a recent question on the number of clinical psychologists who are employed in child and adolescent mental health services revealed shocking figures: of the 15 health boards, three had no such psychologists and 10 had five or fewer. Those figures, alongside the fact that only 44 child and adolescent psychiatric health beds are available in Scotland, are a stunning indictment of the value that we place on Scotland's future.

The minister's pronouncements on secondary education came as no surprise to those of us who have been following new Labour's big-business agenda. Every child is special and is entitled to equality and fairness in education. Selection in any guise is a retrograde step that will bring privilege and division into our education system.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Murray Tosh): I must hurry you.

Ms Byrne: Not everyone will get into the school of their choice or receive the type of education that they require. The idea that the future of Scottish education lies in relying on the private sector for funding is abhorrent. Even more abhorrent is the idea that schools will be able to pick their pupils.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You really must hurry.

Ms Byrne: Scottish schools are under the control of democratically elected councils. Once business interests are involved—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I am afraid that there is a difference between a conclusion and a continuation of the speech. We are now short of time. I call Patrick Harvie.

16:26

Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green): Members from all parties have talked of their feelings when

speaking for the first time in this beautiful chamber. It is beautiful and I like it a lot, but I feel a sense of responsibility. This room will ring with the voice of Scottish government for many generations to come; generations of Scottish politicians yet unborn will be here. The chamber should be a reminder to us all to hand on a better Scotland to them.

The Executive's programme has many elements to commend, some of which I will mention. The justice and communities portfolios look pretty busy. Members of the Parliament's smaller parties sometimes have to double up on portfolios—I am pleased that the Executive will be keeping me busy in the next year. Robin Harper's opening speech for the Greens had a strong emphasis on climate change and the Executive's failure to take on its responsibilities to provide a safer tomorrow for Scots and all the world's people. Despite the low aspirations at UK level on that issue, the Scottish Executive has fallen even shorter. However, I have always made the case that Green politics is about more than environmentalism and I will close for my party by setting out a response to the Executive's programme on other aspects of the quality of life in Scotland.

It is already becoming difficult to discuss charity reform without getting into debates over private education. It is clear that that issue will need to be addressed. The private, as opposed to public, benefit that is gained by exclusive fee-paying schools must be recognised and dealt with, but we must also take care not to endanger smaller, less wealthy schools, such as Steiner schools, which struggle to survive in order to provide a genuinely alternative approach to education. Such schools currently benefit from charitable status.

There is a great deal to commend the proposals on housing that we have heard today, such as the improvement of the private rented stock and the recognition of the huge shortfall in affordable housing. However, I point out a contradiction between two members who, I am afraid, have both left the chamber. John Home Robertson described—accurately, I believe—a housing crisis, whereas the First Minister, Jack McConnell, spoke of a housing renaissance as a result of the Executive's work since 1999. I wonder whether the Executive has the commitment to reverse the policies that have resulted, in Glasgow, for example, in a renaissance for luxury housing and huge developments with no affordable element. Prime sites are taken up with £250,000 or £300,000 houses and the less prime sites are left for affordable housing, if we get round to building it.

There is little in the Executive's programme to support activities that turn residential areas into communities. We need not only housing, but local

activities in all sectors of the economy. A town without a vibrant local high street is no town; it is Tesco town. A town with only the same big brand-name shops on its high street survives only at the whim of multinationals, whose decision to ship out and relocate will come as soon as there is a sniff of bigger profits elsewhere. Locally owned business, however, will stay and fight to make a go of it. The issue is even more important in some areas of our biggest cities, from which regeneration money can simply leak away if there is no truly local economy to soak it up and get it recirculating.

On justice, we have heard about many issues that we can welcome. We must all welcome what was said about the use of the internet for grooming children for abuse and I am sure that we will all welcome the opportunity to pass the bill. The same applies to what was said about female genital mutilation overseas. Many people have been waiting a long time for action to be taken in relation to family law and it is great to see the inclusion of a family law bill in the Executive's programme. I also welcome the restatement of the commitment to the children's hearings system and to the reduction of reoffending. I will enthusiastically endorse those elements if it looks as though they are heading in the right direction.

Jack McConnell mentioned reforming prisons, but he gave very little detail. Does reforming prisons mean that we will have more private prisons or does it mean that we will cut overcrowding in prisons? Does it mean ending short-term sentences? Does it mean ending slopping out? Does it mean recognising that prisoners are human beings with human rights?

Speaking of human rights, I should add that there was no word in the statement on the Executive's programme of the establishment of a Scottish commission on human rights. Getting that done and out of the way before Westminster creates the commission for equality and human rights would have real advantages and I ask the Executive to respond on that point in particular.

We have before us the programme that I expected. It contains generous scatterings of supportable measures and plenty of upbeat soundbites such as "supporting excellence", "championing achievement" and "improving opportunities". However, the underlying contradictions remain. The Executive wants sustainable integrated transport, but it has built capacity for ever more traffic. It wants environmental justice, but it has planned for ever more waste dumps and incinerators. It wants affordable housing, but that is just not being built. It wants safer communities, but we hear no word about the youth work revival that many people want, believing that it could be one of the greatest

preventers of the chaos that we work hard to combat in communities.

The final contradiction—the deeper one—is the one that Jim Wallace tried to deny. Greens are all too often accused of being anti-growth. However, what we want is a sophisticated understanding that not all growth is good. If we assume that all growth is good, we risk undermining our health, our environment, our social fabric, our freedom and our dignity. Only by accepting that quality-of-life measures are crucial to our assessment can we be sure of growing the right things and only an Executive guided by that wisdom will pass on a sustainable Scotland to the generations of unborn politicians who will speak in this chamber after us.

16:33

Des McNulty (Clydebank and Milngavie) (Lab): The First Minister has repeatedly made it clear that growing the economy is the Executive's top priority. Jim Mather might scoff, but the refreshed FEDS document sets out the context for decisions on transport, housing and business support. Those decisions are crucial if we are to increase Scotland's growth rate and create opportunities for more of our people to enjoy the benefits of higher growth.

Whether we are prepared to be both realistic and bold in translating talk into action will dictate success or failure. This morning, it was notable that Nicola Sturgeon seemed unwilling to consider making any difficult choices. She wants national strategies, but only ones in which every demand is met and every local interest is assuaged. Of course, it is true that generalised policies are unlikely to be effective—one size does not fit all. The needs of Elgin are not the same as those of Edinburgh or of my constituency, Clydebank and Milngavie. However, Government intervention in the economy to secure its sustainable development must be opportunity led.

In some parts of Scotland, the market is already delivering positive economic outcomes for workers and businesses, but in other parts it cannot and, left to itself, it will not. Our attention and interventions must therefore be concentrated on those areas of Scotland in which the market has so far failed. We have difficult decisions to make about what to do and what not to do. To grow the economy, we have to identify and pursue opportunities that the private sector alone cannot or will not address. The task for the Executive is to direct resources towards meeting its combined objectives of delivering economic growth and social regeneration.

Our top priority must be to energise the potential of the west of Scotland, where half the population of Scotland is concentrated. Cities are the key

drivers of economic growth, not just here in Scotland, but across the world. Growth in Glasgow is crucial to bringing benefits not just to its citizens, but to the wider conurbation. For Glasgow to succeed, its links and connections with nearby towns, and even with its suburbs, need to be overhauled and the blockages that currently blight it need to be removed. When resources were allocated following the cities review, an opportunity was missed to plan and invest with a city region perspective. I hope that that error will not be repeated.

The spatial analysis provided in the national planning framework identifies two major opportunities—the Clyde waterfront and the Clyde gateway—as the key projects in the next 15 years, not just for Clydeside, but for Scotland. The participating councils and Scottish Enterprise should be congratulated on their co-operation on those projects to date, the gateway still being at the planning stage, but the projects raise big issues and choices for the Parliament and the Executive. How far are we prepared to act on the basis that the economy really is the top priority? Will we target our investment on infrastructure and will we invest in the right infrastructure?

Let us consider for a moment our water and sewerage infrastructure. I have no problem with Ross Finnie's proposal that developers should pay for water connections—that puts us on a par with England—but that is not the key issue. The biggest barrier to development is that the existing infrastructure cannot support more users. That is a crucial issue for the Clyde gateway, but it is also an issue for parts of the Clyde waterfront.

The Conservatives left us a legacy of dereliction—schools and hospitals were starved of investment for 20 years. This morning, David McLetchie invited us to judge the Conservatives on their past record and we will continue to hold them to account on that basis. The Tory legacy beneath the ground has had serious consequences in restricting growth in Scotland. It is understandably difficult to persuade constituents who are faced with increasing water charges of the need to invest in infrastructure that is hidden, but the consequence of failing to deal with past underinvestment will be that we fail Scotland.

The Finance Committee has forcefully expressed its concern about the persistent slippage in Scottish Water's capital investment programme. Steps must be taken urgently to ensure that Scottish Water meets its required capital investment targets and new targets in the quality and standards 3 programme should incorporate the necessary investment that is required to make the waterfront and gateway projects a reality.

Logically, our transport policy should flow from our refreshed economic framework; our transport strategy should fully take into account how we can best exploit economic opportunities. In the past, that was not so. Political rather than economic considerations predominated, providing something for those who shouted loudest rather than the systematic implementation of a strategic vision. The huge amounts that we are projecting to go into transport projects must serve the key priority of the Executive—they must facilitate regeneration in areas such as Clydebank and the east end of Glasgow, which will, in turn, help us to deal with poverty where it is most prevalent.

Putting growth as our priority does not mean blindly following the market. It means shaping the market so that it unleashes the potential of all our people. The choice to be made is not between growth and social inclusion. We must seek to close the gap as the economy grows, but we must be prepared to make the right choices so that public investment has the biggest impact. That is the challenge for the Executive, as well as for members in scrutinising the programmes and budgets that will soon be set out.

For far too long, people in the constituency that I represent were overlooked and decisions were made by remote and often anonymous individuals 50 miles or 450 miles away. The promise of this Parliament was that all that would change. It is up to the Executive to make the hard choices that are required to turn its plans and promises into real changes for my constituents and those of other members. Today, we are not just welcoming a great building; this is a great day for democracy in Scotland. The First Minister has set out an exciting legislative programme that addresses the needs of the people, but it will be judged by what we deliver. We must deliver for Scotland not just a political renaissance, but an economic renaissance. How we spend our money and how we manage it efficiently are crucial to the Parliament.

16:39

Mr Brian Monteith (Mid Scotland and Fife)
(Con): I, too, feel deeply privileged to speak today. I am privileged to put the opposing view about the Parliament and about the Executive's policies, which were announced earlier. Many aspects of this building are beautiful, but there are also some that are, frankly, ugly. There are many improvements to our working conditions and to the facilities in the Parliament that are desirable, but there are some that are, frankly, not practical.

I believe that what sticks in the craw of the Scottish public is not so much the price but the fact that people were told that they would have a Parliament for some £40 million. I have absolutely

no doubt that, had the public been told at the outset that they would have the Parliament building that we see today for £431 million, it is likely that they would still have voted for devolution. I also believe that the public would have felt all the better for having got the building delivered at the price that they were told it was going to cost—it is the deception that people feel most upset and disappointed about.

Much has been said about how the new building—and the new debating chamber in particular—should inspire MSPs to raise their game and to deliver big ideas and better debates. I will reserve my judgment on the chamber, in particular, for a month or two until I have seen it at work on a regular basis, but my first impression is that the debates and ideas will be no better than those that we had up the road. Even the trademarks of this tired and uninspiring Executive—its bluster, hype and flannel—have made the short journey from the Lawnmarket to the Canongate.

I will illustrate that remark by talking first about education. The First Minister talked about “year on year” improvements in attainment and about ensuring that there would be “no ... selection” in Scottish schools. Although I would not go so far as to accuse the First Minister of lying—I leave that sort of thing to Tommy Sheridan—it is clear that the First Minister is unaware of his own official statistics.

Last year, the percentage of higher passes fell. That means that improvements in attainment were not just halted, they were reversed. The figures also tell us that there was an increase in the number of pupils who left school last year with no standard grades—after 11 years of school study they left school with nothing. Last year was not the first time that such a damning outcome happened under Jack McConnell's watch; it also happened in 2001 and 2003. Sadly, the number of pupils leaving school with nothing is no better than it was five years ago—so much for improving attainment.

The First Minister said that there will be no selection under his watch, but is there not selection at the seven schools of excellence—the specialist schools—so that the best musicians and sportsmen and women come through their front doors? Surely the new schools that might be introduced will want to have some selection, even if it is selection to help the most disadvantaged in our society.

The truth is that we have selection, not only at those schools, but for the wealthy who can either buy their children's education or buy a house in the catchment area of what they believe to be a well-performing state school. Jack McConnell wants to make the system even more exclusive. According to his statement today, he will ask Her

Majesty's Inspectorate of Education to introduce a new branding called "excellent schools". The result will simply be a rise in house prices in the catchment areas of those excellent schools—members can envisage how such schools will appear in the estate agents' and solicitors' particulars. Children in poorer areas will find it even harder to attend those schools and the gulf between the best-performing and the worst-performing schools will widen, not close. Labour does not help the poor; it helps the privileged.

The Conservatives offer choice for all parents. I agree that that means selection, but it is selection by parents from a wider range of schools—a choice that, in rural and urban areas, would drive standards up through competition. Those decisions would not be made in town halls or in Victoria Quay; they would be made by parents.

The First Minister also commented on our economy, although he did so rather briefly and at the end of his statement—it is clear that the economy is no longer the priority that it was at one time. The Executive's statistics on world competitiveness show that Scotland has slipped to 36th place. We are some 14 points behind the United Kingdom, which itself has slipped from 11th to 22nd place. The UK has slipped and Scotland is now 36th. We should tell that to our businesses. That is why this morning's statistics show that there are fewer business start-ups.

We need a complete revolution in our culture and approach. We need to cut our business and individual taxes. We have to cut regulations and we have to ensure that public services are determined by people making choices so that they get the benefits, not by making services more exclusive and privileged.

16:45

Mr Kenny MacAskill (Lothians) (SNP): As others have said, it is a pleasure to participate in this historic debate. The chamber is a magnificent auditorium and it is certainly incumbent on us all to fulfil its potential and, perhaps more importantly, the hopes and expectations of our nation and people.

I participated in the closing debate on the Stirling-Alloa-Kincardine Railway and Linked Improvements Bill, as did the minister who will be summing up for the Executive. I said then, say now, and echo Nicola Sturgeon who said earlier that we will support the Executive where it seeks to deliver and we will seek to assist it; however, the debate in the chamber must move on from what was done in the building of Holyrood to what is done in the Holyrood building. The First Minister is right to call for us to raise our game—that applies to each and every one of us: to the

Administration and to the Opposition, as well as to ministers and back benchers. As others have said, the people of Scotland tried us and found us wanting in the old chamber, and we must go forward and improve.

Things have to be better, but we cannot legislate for a culture change, nor can we impose respect rather than earn it. That means that the chamber has to deliver: members must raise their game, but the Executive needs to have vision and ambition. After all, this is our national Parliament, not our regional assembly, and the Executive must act and be treated accordingly. We need to have specific actions and substance, not superficial proposals and spin. We need action on the economy and in our society, and we need to take action at home and abroad.

It was right and proper that we should express our condolences to the people of Beslan and of Russia. However, on international matters, we need to be able to do more than just send sympathy. It is not enough to send condolences; we must be proactive, which we were not in that chamber up the road when we allowed matters to roll out that had significant consequences for huge areas of the gulf and for our own people, many of whom died. We have to take political, fiscal and social responsibility.

The economy and community matters are important. As Nicola Sturgeon said earlier, much is worthy—we cannot dispute that. The points made about a Gaelic language bill were made with great sympathy and sentiment, but we have a situation in which we are proposing a Gaelic language bill, yet the Parliament—never mind the Minister for Tourism, Culture and Sport—has no powers over broadcasting. If we want to preserve a language in an anglophone culture, we require powers over broadcasting. That issue must be addressed.

Mr Brown was critical and said that the SNP campaigns only for independence, but it does not. We believe that the matter can be dealt with by a referendum and that the people of Scotland should be given the opportunity to decide whether they want to be an independent nation, but if we are to deliver, to improve and to raise our game, we have to expand and enhance the powers of the Parliament, and I will give the chamber many opportunities to discuss that.

In the Liberal Democrat ranks, a great deal is being said about what is happening in our communities. Comment has been made by others, including my colleague Nicola Sturgeon, about what is happening in health and about communities being damaged by hospitals being closed or people being moved around the country willy-nilly and over great distances, whether from Edinburgh to West Lothian and back, as

mentioned by Bristow Muldoon, or as has happened across the Clyde.

It is not just in the area of health that our communities are being attacked. The Liberal Democrats are going strong on what is happening to our sub-post offices and to the Post Office as an institution. This Parliament has no powers or influence on that whatever. Whether it be in a rural or an urban area—as many Edinburgh MSPs from other political parties have pointed out—the closure of a post office is of huge significance and can damage the local economy. We need to expand the powers of this Parliament.

Robert Brown: Does Mr MacAskill accept that the key issue is what the policy is rather than who implements it? We can have disagreements about post office policy—as we do—but the issue is not who should do something about it but ensuring that something is done.

Mr MacAskill: Of course the issue is about policy, but the problems in our post offices have been driven by the Westminster Government. It has undermined our post offices by shifting benefits payments and by forcing closures because of the privatisation agenda of the henchmen whom it put in to undermine that wonderful institution. We should preserve, support and enhance the Post Office rather than simply wring our hands and lament it.

On the economy, little was said. Tourism is a major industry, but not one comment was made on tourism until Jamie McGrigor mentioned it. The most important thing that we could do for the Highlands and Islands is something of which we would be capable without any additional powers: Inverness airport is wholly owned by the First Minister, but he offered no proposals to allow the PFI to be bought out, to allow low-cost carriers to fly in or to allow the Highlands and Islands of Scotland to compete on a level playing field with its competitors elsewhere.

Tourism is affected not only by accessibility but by affordability. We have high levels of value-added tax, a high pound and high fuel costs, yet not one of those issues is being addressed. Unless the Executive seeks to up its game as a Government, our tourism industry will continue to be hamstrung and face difficulties and it will not progress as it should given the wonderful product that we have. Scotland has not only a magnificent Parliament to visit but magnificent scenery and other architectural matters elsewhere.

Doubtless, transport will be mentioned in the minister's speech that will follow mine. Reference has already been made to transport, but not to the important issue that transcends all other transport matters at present, which is fuel. Fuel underpins the whole of our economy, but no one from the

Executive has mentioned how the crisis in fuel will be addressed. Fuel prices are approaching the level at which we saw significant discontent arise several years back, yet nothing is being done about them.

The situation is that we live on an island that is oil rich. I cannot remember which Labour member mentioned the possibility—I think that it was Richard Baker—but Aberdeen should progress to become Europe's energy capital. Given the value of North sea oil and the fact that we are oil rich with Scotland's oil—which has been going for a generation and will run for a generation or two more—and that we have never seen the Exchequer fuller, is it not ridiculous that the price of petrol has never been higher and the extent of fuel poverty never deeper? Until such time as we can address the problems brought about by high fuel prices, we will not address the various aspects of poverty and we will undermine our economy. For a small nation located on Europe's periphery to have the most expensive fuel prices in the developed world is barking mad.

We wish the Executive well and we will support it in its endeavours to deliver, but we need to move forward—not necessarily to independence just yet, as that will be dealt with in a referendum—to a situation in which the Parliament's powers are enhanced. We need those powers if we are to address matters that range from the Post Office to the price of petrol, so that we are able to deliver what our people want.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Before I call Nicol Stephen, I advise members that the photographic session that was advertised has had to be rescheduled for another date. Further information will be given about that.

16:54

The Minister for Transport (Nicol Stephen): We have said these words often before, but today has been an historic day. Following on from the campaign for a Scottish Parliament, the Scottish Constitutional Convention, the referendum, the first election, our swearing in, Donald Dewar's speech and the words of Robert Burns, this—our first day in the new chamber of the new Parliament—has been another historic day.

From today, I hope that we no longer talk about this as being the right place or the wrong place, but about it being our place and our chamber—a chamber and a Parliament for all of Scotland. It is worth remarking that an important part of today has been seeing so many people walking quietly and respectfully—bar one brief interruption—in and out of the public gallery. Many of those people are deeply involved with this Parliament and with this building, and others simply wanted to see, to

sense and to be part of today's first session. This must be a Parliament for the people of Scotland—all the people from every part of Scotland and of every age.

In response to David McLetchie, the First Minister spoke about the need to earn the respect of the people. Politics will always be controversial—no Parliament in the world avoids controversy and we in Scotland have already had our fair share. However, many of today's measures are strongly supported by members in most parts—and in many cases all parts—of this great new chamber. Transport is a good example. There is strong support for investing more to improve Scotland's transport. There is also broad support for focusing more on public transport—on buses, trains, trams and lifeline air and ferry services. There is overwhelming support for our major public transport infrastructure projects and for new rail lines such as the Larkhall to Milngavie line, the Stirling-Alloa-Kincardine line, the Airdrie to Bathgate line, the Borders railway and new airport rail links to Glasgow and Edinburgh airports, as well as for new trams for our nation's capital.

We are now committed to a transport budget of £1 billion a year, with 70 per cent being spent on public transport. We are also spending more on our roads, with important projects such as the Aberdeen western peripheral route, the M74 extension and the A8000 upgrading, all of which are important priorities for Scotland. However, as Susan Deacon rightly mentioned earlier this afternoon, the key now is to deliver. They are major proposals and there is to be £3 billion of investment in major capital projects over 10 years. Where better than here to emphasise the importance of delivering those new projects on time and on budget over the coming decade?

To achieve that in transport, we need to strengthen our ability to deliver. We need new skills, new people and a new priority for transport in Scotland. That is why we will create a Scottish transport agency and new regional transport partnerships to develop—and, for the first time, deliver—national as well as regional transport strategies. The new regional partnerships will build on the success of the existing organisations—the Highlands and Islands strategic transport partnership, the west of Scotland transport partnership and Strathclyde Passenger Transport, the south-east Scotland transport partnership and the north-east Scotland transport partnership—and the new transport agency will be given powers to co-ordinate and deliver our new concessionary fares schemes. There will be a new Scotland-wide scheme of free concessionary bus travel for older people and disabled people and a new scheme of concessionary travel for young people on our ferries, buses and trains.

There will also be new proposals in the bill to tackle poor-quality roadworks and to introduce tough penalties for poor performance. They are all important measures that can make Scotland a better place—and I thought that Mike Watson spoke eloquently in response to Brian Adam about how important and ambitious the proposals are for Scotland.

When one has stopped frozen in front of a television screen on a Friday morning to witness the horrendous, hellish scenes that we saw from Beslan, and when one has young children of a similar age who go to a similar school of a similar construction here in Scotland, one is forced to reconsider one's priorities—not only in politics but in life—and one's reasons for being in this Parliament. Roadworks no longer seem remotely important, but in another sense, of course, they are. All of this is important—the legislative programme, the chamber and the Parliament that we represent—because through debate, disagreement and democracy, and through our determination to make all of this a success, we may not ever quite achieve heaven on earth, but together we can do our bit to prevent hell on earth, to make Scotland a better place and to earn respect for this Parliament, not just today but every day in this fine Parliament's future.

Parliamentary Bureau Motions

17:00

The Presiding Officer (Mr George Reid): The next item of business is consideration of four Parliamentary Bureau motions. I ask Patricia Ferguson to move motions S2M-1631 and S2M-1632, on the designation of lead committees.

Motions moved,

That the Parliament agrees that the Justice 2 Committee be designated as lead committee in consideration of the European Communities (Lawyer's Practice) (Scotland) Amendment Regulations 2004 (SSI 2004/302).

That the Parliament agrees that the Justice 1 Committee be designated as lead committee in consideration of the Register of Sasines (Application Procedure) Rules 2004 (SSI 2004/318).—[*Patricia Ferguson.*]

The Presiding Officer: I also ask Patricia Ferguson to move motions S2M-1642 and S2M-1644, on the membership of committees.

Motions moved,

That the Parliament agrees that Mr John Home Robertson be appointed to replace Elaine Smith on the Communities Committee.

That the Parliament agrees that Rosie Kane be appointed to replace Carolyn Leckie on the Public Petitions Committee.—[*Patricia Ferguson.*]

The Presiding Officer: The questions on the motions will be put at decision time.

Decision Time

17:00

The Presiding Officer (Mr George Reid): There are four questions to be put as a result of today's business. The first question is, that motion S2M-1631, in the name of Patricia Ferguson, on the designation of a lead committee, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to.

That the Parliament agrees that the Justice 2 Committee be designated as lead committee in consideration of the European Communities (Lawyer's Practice) (Scotland) Amendment Regulations 2004 (SSI 2004/302).

The Presiding Officer: The second question is, that motion S2M-1632, in the name of Patricia Ferguson, on the designation of a lead committee, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to.

That the Parliament agrees that the Justice 1 Committee be designated as lead committee in consideration of the Register of Sasines (Application Procedure) Rules 2004 (SSI 2004/318).

The Presiding Officer: The third question is, that motion S2M-1642, in the name of Patricia Ferguson, on committee membership, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to.

That the Parliament agrees that Mr John Home Robertson be appointed to replace Elaine Smith on the Communities Committee.

The Presiding Officer: The fourth and final question is, that motion S2M-1644, in the name of Patricia Ferguson, on committee membership, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to.

That the Parliament agrees that Rosie Kane be appointed to replace Carolyn Leckie on the Public Petitions Committee.

International Suicide Prevention Week

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Trish Godman): The final item of business today is a members' business debate on motion S2M-1578, in the name of Duncan McNeil, on international suicide prevention week. The debate will be concluded without any question being put.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament acknowledges the importance of International Suicide Prevention Week from 5 to 11 September 2004 for raising awareness of this cause of death; recognises that more people die as a result of suicide than from traffic accidents; commends the work being done by *Choose life*, Scotland's strategy aimed at reducing suicides by 20% over the next 10 years; welcomes the introduction to Scotland of Applied Suicide Intervention Skills Training, helping develop more effective approaches to both identifying and assisting those most at risk of suicide, and looks forward to this suicide-reduction work continuing at a national and local level.

17:02

Mr Duncan McNeil (Greenock and Inverclyde) (Lab): My microphone does not appear to have come on.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Speak and I think that it will happen.

Mr McNeil: Are you suggesting that I do not need the microphone?

I thank the members who have signed the motion and those who have made time to attend the first ever members' business debate in the new chamber. Before anyone else suggests it, I say that there is no connection between the subject matter of the debate and the entirely unrelated fact that it is my birthday.

When we look seriously at the issue of suicide, our own worries suddenly seem much less important. When I spoke in the last members' business debate before we handed our temporary lodgings back to our theological landlords, I reflected that it was appropriate to ask, "Why are we here?" Today, in the first members' business debate in our new building, members might well ask the same question. I will tell the Parliament why we are here—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I am very sorry to have to do this to you, Mr McNeil, but I have to interrupt you as the system seems to have failed. I have to suspend the meeting for a few minutes to see whether we can fix it—I am sure that it has nothing to do with your debate.

17:04

Meeting suspended.

17:13

On resuming—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I ask members to reinsert their cards and we will start again. You have seven minutes, Mr McNeil.

Mr McNeil: Are we up and running? I will take it from the top. The only regret is that—this will be confirmed or not tomorrow morning—the story tomorrow will not be about the number of suicides in Scotland but will be about the fact that the microphones broke down.

To those who continually tell us to raise the game, perhaps we can send the message that the real debate tonight is about international suicide prevention week. I thank all those members who have signed the motion and who have made time to attend the first ever members' business debate in the new chamber.

When one looks seriously at the issue of suicide, one's own worries suddenly seem a lot less important. When I spoke in the last members' business debate before we handed our temporary lodgings back to our theological landlords, I reflected that it was appropriate to ask, "Why are we here?" Today, in the first members' business debate in our new building, members might well ask the same question.

Well, I will tell members why we are here. We are here because the biggest killer of young men in Scotland is neither a blade nor a car but their own hand. According to the Samaritans, although suicide rates in England and Wales fell over the 10 years up to 2002, they rose in Scotland. The latest figures show that people in Scotland are twice as likely to kill themselves as people in the rest of the UK are. Although I welcome the fact that the numbers are now falling, suicide is still the main cause of death for men aged 15 to 44. Indeed, according to the Registrar General for Scotland, almost three quarters of those who committed suicide last year were male.

The reasons are many and varied; they are medical, cultural and social. They include mental health problems that are brought about or are made worse by drug abuse; the lack of a role for men in our society and the tendency to blame young working-class men for just about everything; unemployment or financial worries; a stressful living environment; the inability to come to terms with homosexuality or the fear of doing so; and a reluctance to seek help from a health service that is neither designed to meet, nor particularly sympathetic to, men's needs.

So what do we do about the situation? We cannot eliminate stress, money worries or setbacks from modern life. No matter how tough we are, the war on drugs will not be won overnight. Moreover, although we must carry on working to tackle stigma over mental health and to end prejudice about homosexuality, we cannot continue with the waste of young lives until that work is done.

If we are going to end Scotland's suicide shame and take long-term action to address the root causes that can be addressed, we also need to better equip young men to deal with the difficulties that they will face. Given our reluctance to seek help, we need more people in our communities who are trained to spot the early signs and to step in to prevent suicide.

That is why I believe that the Executive is to be commended for initiatives such as the choose life strategy, which is aimed at reducing suicides by 20 per cent over the next 10 years, and the introduction of applied suicide intervention skills training. I also welcome the fact that, through the choose life initiative, every local authority will by the end of the year have trained staff accredited with such intervention skills. I do not intend to detain members at length with the details of those schemes, because I am sure that the minister will ably highlight the Executive's work in his response.

However, I would like to urge the Executive to push on with its efforts to meet and exceed its targets. In particular, as far as the Health Department is concerned, we should examine how we can change the NHS to ensure that it is more responsive to men's needs. Does the way in which we treat depression need to be revisited? Do we provide adequate health education in this area? We will need to answer those questions and others if we are to end the scandal of young men feeling that they have so little to live for and so little hope that their only way out is to take their own lives.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: As a considerable number of back benchers wish to speak in the debate, I will be strict about the four-minute limit.

17:21

Stewart Stevenson (Banff and Buchan) (SNP)
rose—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I am afraid that I must interrupt you, as the sound system has failed.

17:22

Meeting suspended.

17:26

On resuming—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I regret that I have to close this meeting of the Parliament. The Presiding Officers and the business managers will meet tomorrow and I hope that we will be able to continue with the debate tomorrow at lunch time. Members will obviously be informed of our decision. I regret what has happened, but we are all experiencing teething troubles. I thank members very much for their attention.

Meeting closed at 17:26.

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