

MEETING OF THE PARLIAMENT

Wednesday 8 September 2004

Session 2

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Scottish Parliament

Wednesday 8 September 2004

[THE PRESIDING OFFICER *opened the meeting at 09:31*]

Motions without Notice

The Presiding Officer (Mr George Reid): Good morning. Before we start, I am minded to take two motions without notice in the name of Patricia Ferguson. The first is that the Parliament agrees that rule 5.6.1(c) of standing orders be suspended for the purpose of members' business today. The second is that the Parliament agrees a revision to the programme of business to take us into extra time for two members' business debates tonight.

Motions moved,

That the Parliament agrees that Rule 5.6.1(c) of Standing Orders be suspended for the purpose of Members' Business on Wednesday 8 September 2004.

That the Parliament agrees the following revision to the programme of business for Wednesday 8 September 2004—

after,

5.00 pm Decision Time

insert,

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

followed by Members' Business – Debate on the subject of S2M-1593 Brian Adam: North East of Scotland Sports Facilities.—[*Patricia Ferguson.*]

Motions agreed to.

Scottish Executive's Programme

Resumed debate.

The Presiding Officer (Mr George Reid): The next item of business is continuation of the debate on the First Minister's statement on the Scottish Executive's programme. Members who wish to contribute to the debate should press their request-to-speak buttons now.

Bill Aitken (Glasgow) (Con): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. Some members who wish to contribute to the debate do not yet have a voting card. Will that be borne in mind?

The Presiding Officer: We will try to sort that out as quickly as possible, Mr Aitken.

09:32

The Minister for Justice (Cathy Jamieson): I am delighted to have the opportunity to open this morning's debate in this magnificent debating chamber. As one who spent several years as a student at Glasgow School of Art in the now famous—but when it was built controversial—Mackintosh building, I am sure that the chamber and associated parts of this complex will be as well received in years to come as Glasgow's Mackintosh building, which receives visitors from all over the world, is today.

Yesterday, we heard the First Minister outline our legislative programme. The key values of that programme—fairness, tolerance and respect—are the key values that we need in our justice service as we build the safer, stronger Scotland in which we all want to live. We are undertaking the most ambitious and sustained reform of our justice services for a generation. Our goal is a criminal justice service that puts public safety at its heart by ensuring that justice is delivered—and seen to be delivered—for victims and witnesses, without ever losing sight of the need to be fair to the accused. We need justice services that challenge prejudice. They need to work with society to remove the twin stains of racism and bigotry from our country. They need to put respect back on the agenda in our communities. In short, we need a criminal justice service that is on the side of the many who abide by the law, not of the lawbreaking few.

Devolution is working for a safer Scotland. We have had a 5 per cent reduction in crime and a 7 per cent reduction in violent crime. Overall, we have the lowest crime rate in nearly 25 years. The Scottish Drug Enforcement Agency has made record seizures of criminals' ill-gotten gains. The police have their highest ever crime clear-up rate. Across the country, there is a huge expansion of youth justice programmes to prevent and divert

young people from offending. The Vulnerable Witnesses (Scotland) Act 2004 will provide children, women in rape cases and other sensitive victims and witnesses with extra protection and support in court.

People want to feel safer in their homes or in the streets, but if their daily experience is of graffiti, vandalism and disorder in those streets, they will not necessarily see, or believe that there is, the reduction in serious, violent crime that has been reported in the figures. That is why tackling antisocial behaviour was vital in showing troubled communities that the Executive and the Parliament were on their side, but that is just the start.

Mike Rumbles (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (LD): The minister has just said that we have the lowest crime rate in 25 years, but can she explain why the fear of crime is rising?

Cathy Jamieson: Mr Rumbles has highlighted exactly the point that I am making. If people see graffiti, vandalism and disorder in their communities week after week, month after month, their experience will not lead them to believe that the crime rate is falling. That is why the Executive took the whole issue of antisocial behaviour so seriously.

Alex Johnstone (North East Scotland) (Con): Will the minister take an intervention?

Cathy Jamieson: I would like to move on.

Johann Lamont (Glasgow Pollok) (Lab): Will the minister take an intervention?

Cathy Jamieson: I give way to Johann Lamont.

Johann Lamont: It would be a bad start to this debate to suggest that people in communities who are raising such issues are imagining them. There are issues to do with unrecorded crime and people having confidence in the system's ability to deal with such problems, so it is important that there is a drive to make people feel that it is worth their while to report the difficulties that they face; otherwise people will be led to believe that their difficulties are of their own making.

Cathy Jamieson: That is absolutely right, and the Executive took the experiences of people in those communities seriously. That is why we have tackled antisocial behaviour and it is also why we have changed the way in which the police are able to record crimes, so that those experiences are noted and, more important, acted on.

As I said, that is only the start of the programme. Improving public safety means improving the prevention and detection of crime, but it also means having a criminal justice service that is properly resourced and in which every agency and organisation works together towards common

goals. We must have a criminal justice system that understands and responds to public expectations, exactly as Mike Rumbles and Johann Lamont have outlined, and which understands that something must be done about those expectations, rather than criticising them as being unrealistic. We need a system that recognises the need to tackle quality-of-life crime as well as serious and organised crime, and I believe that our legislative programme and our reforms will build on all the work already started.

I have very little time, but I want to say a few words about the justice programme that the First Minister outlined yesterday.

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

Cathy Jamieson: I really need to move on.

Protecting children must be a priority. That is why we shall seek the swift introduction of bills on the protection of children from sexual harm and female genital mutilation. Strengthening the law to protect children from those who would seek to abuse them and making it unlawful for young girls to be sent abroad to be mutilated must surely be a priority for the Parliament.

We have all been shocked to see the latest pictures coming from Beslan in Russia last night. That was a terrible tragedy and one can only imagine what those children and adults must have felt like in that environment, and indeed what the families must now be feeling.

Whenever possible, we must move to prevent sexual harm before it occurs, but also to punish it with serious time for those serious and sickening crimes when they are carried out, sending a loud and clear signal that there is no safe haven in Scotland for those who would seek to harm our children.

There will also be protection in the form of our new risk management authority to oversee the management of very serious violent and sexual offenders, not just for a month or a year, but to the end of their days. That new body is already legislated for and will begin its work in the new year. Today, I have announced an important next step with the appointment of those tasked with leading that new public safety watchdog.

Long-awaited reforms of family law, which again will put the best interests of children first, will happen. Those reforms will emphasise the responsibilities that adults have towards children, not just the rights that they seek to exercise. We know that stable families, in whatever shape or form, are essential to give children the best start in life, and the family law bill will update the law on unmarried fathers, on divorce and on safeguards for cohabitants.

However, changing the law is not always enough. We also need to change attitudes and cultures, which can often be harder to achieve, but we will not shirk from that. I want to ensure that families get support when they need it most, in times of difficulty, and I will ensure that the issues that are raised by step-parents and grandparents who want to offer children love and affection and to play a crucial part in their development are addressed. However, this is not just about legislation or changing the law and I intend to continue to work with those with an interest in those issues to develop solutions that work better for children.

The legislative programme also outlined that we will bring Scotland's licensing laws into the 21st century to tackle the scourge of binge drinking and the problems of under-age drinking. There is a clear set of principles for the new system: preventing crime and disorder; promoting public safety; preventing public nuisance; promoting health; and, crucially, protecting children. The new system will give communities more of a say while supporting the responsible businesses that contribute to a healthy economy.

Since devolution five years ago, the Executive has invested heavily in giving the courts and the prosecution service the extra resources that they need and investment has been matched with reform. Today, I can announce that we are building on the strong achievements of devolution by supporting a request from the Lord President for an additional two full-time judges. Additional resources for the bench will be provided where and when they are needed most.

However, we know that there is still much more to do in reforming summary justice into sharp, modern courts that serve local communities and deliver smart sentences that are geared to offenders putting something back into the very communities against which they have offended.

Our biggest challenge is to reduce reoffending and to break the cycle that sees too many offenders return time and again to our courts and prisons, and time and again sees them recycled back on to our streets and into our communities.

Mr Swinney: I did not notice any commitment in the legislative programme to introduce legislation to enact the recommendations of the Justice 1 Committee in the previous session of Parliament on the regulation of solicitors.

Cathy Jamieson: That matter was on the agenda when I met the Law Society of Scotland earlier this week. Mr Swinney is probably aware from correspondence that I sent to him previously that we are continuing to take the matter forward. I will be happy to correspond with him further on the matter.

I want public safety to be put at the heart of our reforms. That means that we have to be prepared to take on challenges. No Government before has seriously tried to address reoffending, but no Government in Scotland today can afford to ignore it. If we do not try to address the matter, we will let our communities down and I am not prepared to let that happen.

I will bring forward detailed proposals in the autumn to consider how we can make more effective transitions from custody to the community, which balance rehabilitation with punishment. The proposals will focus on the things that we know help an offender to stop a life of crime in its tracks, such as providing access to jobs, treatment for addictions, housing and family support, and making them face up to their responsibilities.

Those will be modern laws for a modern Scotland. We have a challenging agenda for justice, but it is a challenge that we are up for and up to. We must now step up and join up the opportunities that devolution brings us. The legislation that we deliver from this building must make a real change to ordinary lives in everyday communities. A fast, firm and fair public justice service that is worthy of the public's trust is what we aim for and what we intend to take forward.

09:43

Michael Matheson (Central Scotland) (SNP): Our justice system exists to serve the interests of the people of Scotland and reforms that ensure that it is more responsive to the needs and views of the people of Scotland will be supported by Scottish National Party members.

The Executive's two new proposals—the proposal to introduce a bill at an early date to protect children from internet grooming by those who would seek to abuse and exploit children and the proposal to increase the penalties for those who would send a young girl out of Scotland to undergo female genital mutilation—are worthy and will be supported by the SNP. I hope that they will attract cross-party support within Parliament.

The SNP has long supported the need to review family law in Scotland to ensure that we have a legal framework that reflects the diverse and changing society in which we live today. Equally, on the proposal for licensing law, the existing laws neither reflect contemporary attitudes towards alcohol nor tackle effectively irresponsible or criminal behaviour that is linked to alcohol misuse. Therefore, the Scottish National Party believes that there is a need to introduce new legislation in both those areas and it looks forward to the publication of the bills.

However, in listening to the minister's speech this morning and in reflecting on the First Minister's statement to the chamber yesterday, one might be left with the impression that the Executive's stewardship of our justice system had been a good one. The reality would tell us another story. Let me remind members of the Labour-Lib Dem Executive's record in some areas of our justice system. The Executive stated that it was committed to tackling the problem of overcrowded prisons and that it would seek to reduce the prison population. Instead, five years on, we have record numbers of prisoners within our prison system.

Cathy Jamieson: On that point, Mr Matheson.

Michael Matheson: Let me continue.

The Executive's commitment to deal with the number of female prisoners in Scotland was made back in 1999 by Henry McLeish—remember him?—who stated that a key priority for a new Labour Government would be to reduce the female prison population in Scotland. Five years on, we have record numbers of females in Scottish prisons.

Cathy Jamieson: Does Mr Matheson recognise, and indeed welcome, the fact that we are currently spending more than £1 million a week in equivalent sums to upgrade our prison estate? Does he recognise that, although the buildings must of course be modernised, it is as important that the programmes that we carry out in our prisons to ensure that people do not end up in that revolving door—through the custody process, back into the community and then back into the custody process—are also addressed? Will he give his support for the measures that we are outlining to try to tackle reoffending?

Michael Matheson: Rather than make another speech, the minister should recognise that she had the chance to deal with the issue the first time round.

I wish to point out that the Labour-Lib Dem Executive has been responsible for the Scottish justice system for some five years, and her colleague two seats away—Mr Jim Wallace—was responsible for it for four years. The Executive has failed to deal with overcrowded prisons and Scotland's prisons continue to be overcrowded.

Earlier this year, we witnessed the Executive's continuing obsession with privatising public services when we had the fiasco over the Reliance contract—a contract that, at one point, appeared to be more like a prisoner early-release programme than a prison escort service. One of the most recent examples of the contract fiasco was when young offenders went from Polmont young offenders institution in Falkirk, in Reliance vans, to Barlinnie prison in Glasgow. They were then transferred into a Reliance van and taken

back to Falkirk sheriff court to have their trial, and then taken back to Barlinnie in a Scottish Prison Service van. They were then transferred into a Reliance van and taken back to Polmont young offenders institution. That is an example of the sheer shambles of the contract and it provides further proof that privatising public services for private profit is a recipe for disaster.

Finally, there is the proposal that ministers do not appear to like to mention by name: the single correctional agency—an issue yet again dodged by the First Minister in his statement yesterday. It is a proposal that, notionally, is meant to be about reducing reoffending—I say “notionally” because there is no clear authoritative evidence to suggest that such a major structural reform would effectively reduce reoffending. It is the responsibility of any reasonable Government to demonstrate that its policy proposals can deliver on its objectives. When it comes to the single correctional agency, the Executive has failed to deliver and it is because of that failure that, if the Executive continues to press ahead with the proposal for a single correctional agency, it will be opposed by the SNP.

The Executive could have and should have done more for our justice system. To help the Executive on its way, let me give it three policy areas that I believe it should pursue over the coming term. First, there is a need in the justice system to have a system of family courts, combining civil and criminal matters, allowing issues to be dealt with in a more coherent and holistic fashion. Such a system has proven to be very successful in many other jurisdictions. Secondly, the Executive could introduce a system of unit fines, to provide greater recognition of an individual's ability to pay a fine in the first place, ensuring greater equity in the system and addressing the issue of fine defaulters.

Thirdly, the Executive should consider rolling out a programme of periodic detention systems in Scotland. Such systems, which have been successful in other European countries, allow offenders to serve their sentence but maintain employment and family contact, which are two key issues that must be addressed if we are to prevent reoffending. I hope that the Executive will take on board my three proposals with the good intention with which they are made.

As many members have said, the new Parliament building gives us a chance to make a fresh start and to meet head on the challenges that face Scotland. The First Minister told MSPs that it is time for us to raise our game, but it is a pity that he does not recognise that it is also time that the Executive raised its game.

09:50

Miss Annabel Goldie (West of Scotland)

(Con): I have listened to the minister and I recognise that, as has been mentioned, the Executive has been presiding over law and order in Scotland for five years, but I must commence on a discordant note. In that time, we have seen a 40 per cent increase in rape and attempted rape, a 26 per cent increase in fire-raising and vandalism and a 27 per cent increase in drug-related crimes. Of course, those figures cover only reported crimes. I am not alone among members in having heard first-hand accounts from individuals in our communities who are so fed up with the lack of police and delays in the system that they do not report crimes. Johann Lamont was right to refer to unreported crime, which is now the lurking ogre in every community in Scotland. It is small wonder that 22 per cent of Scots do not feel safe in their neighbourhoods, which is the point to which I think Mr Rumbles alluded. Sadly, throughout Scotland there are only 140 police officers on our streets at any one time. There is no disconnection between what is happening and why people feel apprehensive. Unlike the Executive, people in Scotland still think that lawlessness, disorder and criminal activity are rampant; they know, because they live with it.

I listened to the First Minister's statement yesterday and to the Minister for Justice today and I by no means discount some of the proposed measures. On a positive note, I am pleased that the Executive will introduce legislation to offer children greater protection from grooming for sexual offences. However, I point out that the issue was championed in the Parliament by my colleague Margaret Mitchell. I am glad that the Executive has finally accepted that children in Scotland should receive the same protection as those south of the border receive.

Labour and the Liberal Democrats have been talking about reforming family law since the advent of the Scottish Parliament. We are now informed that, after yet another consultation, legislation will be forthcoming. I want to champion a forgotten cause and, in so doing, utter a word that has apparently been dropped from the Executive's vocabulary: marriage. I urge the Executive to remember that everything that we do must be with the best interests of children at the fore. To the minister's credit, she acknowledged that, but the Executive must recognise the evidence that a child who is born to a married couple will do better at school and is less likely to suffer from emotional problems. It is wrong to imagine that, because we applaud and recognise the virtue of marriage, we stigmatise other relationships. That is not the consequence. We must ensure that marriage is not undermined by changes in the law or trivialised by being turned into a conditional contract that is

terminable at short notice. Why is the Executive so cowardly in applauding the institution of marriage?

Cathy Jamieson: I hope that Miss Goldie accepts that, in the consultation paper produced on the issue, the Executive recognised that marriage has a special place for many Scots, but also that the reality is that many people do not live in married relationships. The important thing is to ensure that the best interests of children are served when relationships go wrong. Those interests are best served not by couples warring over the children, but by resolving problems. Does Miss Goldie accept that the Executive takes the issues of marriage and, more important, stable family relationships seriously?

Miss Goldie: In nothing I have said have I impugned the Executive's genuine attempts to deal with other relationships, but I am deeply concerned that the Executive is not lauding and trumpeting the one relationship that works to the betterment of society. The Executive is not giving political leadership.

Somewhere up the ministerial sleeve, the Executive has proposals on a single correctional agency and the proposals set out by Sheriff Principal McInnes. We await firm proposals, but I have grave reservations about a single correctional agency—another bureaucracy is the last thing that we need. I point out that justices of the peace have provided a valuable contribution to the Scottish legal system over the years and a decision to abolish them should not be taken lightly.

As I have indicated, the programme offered by the Executive is far from radical. I suggest that, sadly, that is predictable. There are no plans for extra police on our streets, but extra police are a necessity, particularly if we are to address antisocial behaviour and enforce recent legislation.

Further, while the Executive talks about clamping down on smoking tobacco, which is a legal drug, we hear nothing about clamping down on illegal drugs. We are in a position in which the Scottish public, while being told not to smoke, are being told how to take drugs safely.

There is an alternative. The Scottish Conservatives are prepared to offer radical policies.

Stewart Stevenson (Banff and Buchan) (SNP): Is there a safe way to smoke?

Miss Goldie: I do not smoke, and in my opinion there is probably not a safe way to smoke. However, the fact is that tobacco is a legal substance and while we are being told not to take that legal substance, the Executive is displaying ambivalence in relation to illegal substances,

which it is apparently suggesting are acceptable. I am deeply concerned about that.

The Deputy Minister for Justice (Hugh Henry): Will the member give way?

Miss Goldie: I am running out of time and want to draw my remarks to a close.

On policing, one of the most obvious frustrations that I hear mentioned by constituents relates to their feeling of total impotence and their inability to have any say in what sort of policing is provided. Of course, their desires are diametrically opposed to those of our chief constables. As I have previously said, the Scottish Conservatives consider that the only way in which to address this problem is to have directly elected police board conveners. All the other parties in the chamber have scorned that suggestion and have rejected it as a way forward but at least my party is proposing an alternative to the people of Scotland—a workable proposal that offers some way out of the present void. If one combines that proposal with a replication of the situation in New York, where police boards are required to compute what is happening in their areas, publish crime statistics and let the public know what is happening, we would get back on the road towards reinstating order in our communities.

I look forward to finding out what proposals are contained in the police bill. However, I think that the people of Scotland want not more police powers but more police. That is an important distinction to draw.

My party feels that a host of remedies could be available to the Executive but that the Executive does not have the political will to address the issues. Honesty in sentencing has disappeared, we have an ineffective way of collecting unpaid fines, which the Executive does not appear to want to address, and other elements of our criminal justice system, particularly children's hearings, have inadequate powers that are unsuitable for dealing with the challenges of today.

There are elements of the Executive's programme for justice in its legislative schedule that will meet with Conservative support. However, the main concern of my party is that the fundamental flaws in our justice system that cause difficulties with the maintenance of law and order have not been addressed in the past five years by the Executive and there is nothing in the programme to suggest that they will be addressed.

09:58

Margaret Smith (Edinburgh West) (LD): We have all waited a long time—and spent a great deal of money—for Enric Miralles's dream to become reality. Standing here today, I think that

only the churlish would deny that this is a magnificent and unique building that is a fitting home for our Parliament. It remains to be seen whether the debates that we take part in, the speeches that we make and the legislation that we pass will do justice to our surroundings and, more important, to the people of Scotland.

While I want to concentrate on justice issues, I take the opportunity, as the former convener of the Health and Community Care Committee, to urge the Executive to move to ban smoking in public places. Responsible for more than 13,000 deaths every year, smoking is the biggest killer in Scotland and the biggest drain on the health service's resources. Every year, millions of pounds are poured into cancer research, yet we already have a cure for most cancers. The cure is to stop smoking or, better still, not start at all. I know that I have digressed slightly from the area of justice but the issue that I have raised is fundamental to the effort to improve Scotland's health.

Another fundamental issue that we face is the need to build a modern criminal justice system that is fit for our people and the 21st century. We have delivered some good things in relation to the justice agenda. We have delivered reform of the High Court and record investment in our police forces—I particularly welcome the extra resources that are coming to Lothian and Borders police. However, there is still a long way to go, particularly in relation to reoffending and public confidence in the system, which colleagues have mentioned.

I am delighted that a great deal of the justice programme will be about improving the quality of life for people and—this is important—for children and young people, following the Parliament's good work last year on the Vulnerable Witnesses (Scotland) Act 2004. The Executive will introduce legislation to tackle one of the greatest fears that parents have: the growing evil of children being groomed by paedophiles in chat rooms. That legislation, coupled with proposals to improve the protection of children, represents a welcome move. Parents generally will also welcome plans to crack down on binge drinking and to give local communities a greater say on licensing decisions.

We will also support the proposed bill on the prevention of female genital mutilation and legislation to reform charity law, bearing in mind the important place of the voluntary sector in national life. We will also welcome legislation to tackle some of the issues to do with the police force.

The proposed family law bill will be one of the most important pieces of legislation to come before the Parliament. The bill will represent a genuine attempt to reflect the diversity of modern families, to acknowledge and extend the rights and—crucially—the responsibilities of unmarried

fathers, to introduce more humane time limits in relation to separation prior to divorce and to offer greater legal protection to cohabiting couples and—most important—to their children. There will be keen debates during the next few months about the needs, rights and responsibilities of grandparents and step-parents, but it will be crucial that we keep the best interests of children at the heart of our debates. I am sure that we will do so and improve the lives of Scotland's families.

The children's hearings system is rightly respected by MSPs of all parties for the work that it does, in relation to not only young people's offending but the care and protection of young people. In a recent debate we all made it clear that the system should be properly resourced and strengthened as a result of the Executive's review and that it should not in any way be undermined. That means that we must invest in the provision of social workers and take forward the excellent fast-track scheme that the Executive has put in place. It is crucial that we also encourage experienced social workers to stay in the profession.

I welcome a lot of the good work that the Executive has already done on youth justice. Much of the focus has been on the Antisocial Behaviour etc (Scotland) Act 2004, which will assist some of my constituents, who struggle as a result of persistent harassment. We have also been investing in multi-agency youth justice teams. Mike Pringle and I visited a new team in Edinburgh recently and were impressed by the enthusiasm of criminal justice social workers, police officers, voluntary sector workers and housing officers who were all working together to tackle a difficult problem, for the benefit not only of young offenders, but of the offenders' victims and the communities in which they live. That model of multi-agency working is the key to improvements throughout the justice system. At the link centre at Edinburgh prison I have seen for myself what can be achieved when the social work service, the Scottish Prison Service, the voluntary sector and key partners such as local housing providers and Jobcentre Plus work together. This year, 48 prisoners have left prison and moved into work or training as a result of the new programmes at Edinburgh prison. Thanks to improved throughcare funding from the Executive, those people have the chance to turn around their lives and end the cycle of reoffending.

I welcome the Minister for Justice's comments on reducing reoffending, and the commitment that the First Minister gave yesterday to rise to that challenge. I hope that they will match their words with action to expand and resource alternatives to custody and offender programmes in and out of prison, and to reduce the number of short-term prisoners in our overcrowded prisons. Let us be radical; let us raise our game in criminal justice

and deliver holistic solutions that focus on the offender as an individual and on the reasons why an individual offends. Currently, 83 per cent of prisoners have no access to programmes that challenge their offending or tackle the reasons behind their offending—the minister mentioned some of those, such as drug addiction. That is just not good enough. The focus on alternatives to custody will offer a better future for all of us. Alternatives to custody are more effective and cheaper than prison and represent a better use of public resources. However, if such programmes are to work it is crucial that they are inspected, evaluated and evidence-based and that they command public and judicial confidence.

The legislative programme can increase public confidence in the law and will bring real benefits to the people of Scotland. I look forward to working towards those aims in this wonderful building.

The Presiding Officer: I call Shiona Baird. Although I understand that her speech is not on justice, it is in order.

10:05

Shiona Baird (North East Scotland) (Green):

This debate is about the full Executive programme and not only about justice, so I want to focus on some of the challenges that were not mentioned in the First Minister's statement—the challenges of climate change, of dwindling oil supplies and of destruction of natural resources. We need a real vision of sustainability in its true sense, not the economic growth at all costs that is generally proposed. We face tremendous challenges of learning to live within our means, and this Executive is simply not taking those challenges seriously enough. It is still looking back to old solutions, such as building its way out of congestion. We need the Executive to look forward and to see the very best in the world and adopt it—to look to Sweden with its high standards of home insulation, to New Zealand with its zero-waste policy, and to Canada with its cold-water cooling systems.

We in Scotland want our name to be known in the world; we want to have a name for vision and inspiration beyond this building. In Scotland, we have innovative companies that see the need for sustainable development and which have imaginative ideas. They are dedicated to their vision, despite not getting the full support and leadership that would really make a difference to them. In renewable energy, we have companies such as Wavegen, which has been supplying the grid for years with a small device off Islay; or Ocean Power Delivery, which has been testing its wave-energy converter in the Orkneys, funded by venture capitalists; or hydrogen fuel cell companies such as SiGen, which just needs

market support. The venture capital energy specialists, 3i, agree with us. Three times more investment is needed in marine energy to capture the 7,000 jobs that we stand to lose to Portugal. That money is available through the renewable obligation certificates, but there is no commitment from this Executive to invest that money in emerging renewables.

We have individuals, such as Moir Lockhead of FirstGroup with his bullet train idea; or Iain Gulland of Alloa Community Enterprises, who is bubbling over with enthusiasm for the job-creating, resource-saving and cash-saving concept of zero waste. If I had to make one wish for a far-reaching policy that I would like this Executive to embrace, zero waste would be it. Zero waste is not just about managing our waste better and recycling more; it is about managing all resources throughout their life cycle and eliminating waste in every area of human activity. That is the kind of big idea that inspires people and gives them hope that we can develop our country sustainably. I would like the Executive to forget that it was a Green who suggested that idea. It is not my idea; I just looked at the concept in action around the world and thought, "Yes. This is what we need for Scotland." However, the Executive's myopic aim for economic growth at any cost has little time for such ideas.

Many more individuals and institutions are out there trying to find sustainable solutions. We have sustainable housing initiatives in Fife; we have the University of Strathclyde and its work in using human sewage as fertiliser; and we have the University of Dundee and the Robert Gordon University and their work on water resources. I have to apologise, because I am sure that many more people whom I have not mentioned are also beavering away. We—but most of all the Executive—must listen to those people, must get excited by their vision and must back them. The people of Scotland are looking for that vision and drive and for the Executive to inspire them and lead them. We all want to feel proud of Scotland. We want that wow factor, so please give it to us.

10:09

Colin Fox (Lothians) (SSP): This debate is about offering a vision of a different Scotland—a more socially just Scotland. I am sure that, as we open this new building, people across the country will be taking stock of the achievements of this Parliament after five years. They will list free personal care for the elderly, the abolition of poindings and warrant sales and long-needed land reform, which made a unique difference to living in Scotland. Surely that was the whole point of devolution in the first place. That approach remains the yardstick by which this Parliament will

be measured. With that in mind, I want to suggest a change that, although not strictly a justice issue, will bring justice to tens of thousands, if not millions, of Scots.

Thomas Carlyle, the Scottish author and historian—who is not often cited by socialists—once tellingly remarked:

"No lie can last forever."

I believe that NHS prescription charges, which were introduced in 1951, represent an injustice at the heart of the national health service. The Beveridge report of 1942 laid down the fundamental aim of the NHS to provide a health service providing full preventive treatment of every kind

"to every citizen without exception, without remuneration limit and without an economic barrier at any point".

To be fair, even the economists and accountants whose idea prescription charges were saw them as a "temporary and necessary evil". Let us not forget that the charges were introduced to pay for Britain's involvement in the Korean war.

Today, all the available evidence suggests that such user charges deter access to health care. The rise in prescription charges between 1979 and 1984 led to a 40 per cent drop in the number of people taking their prescriptions. Gordon Brown himself, in a recent Treasury report, made the point well in ruling out plans for charging patients to see GPs. If it is an injustice to charge people to see their GPs, it is surely an injustice to charge them for the medicines that the GPs prescribe for them.

Yesterday, the First Minister promised that the Executive will improve access for people in Scotland. It is obvious that the NHS is undermined if people cannot access the treatment that they need. The citizens advice bureaux believe that, annually, as many as 70,000 prescriptions are not redeemed in Scotland because patients cannot find the £6.40 that is required for each medicine. Day in, day out, community pharmacists throughout the country face pleas from patients who ask them which of the vital medicines that have been prescribed for them they can leave out. In recent months, I have received hundreds of letters containing stories of chronic pain and agony suffered by patients throughout Scotland who bear their conditions with great dignity yet are worried sick about where they are going to find the money to pay for their medication.

I accept the fact that, in this Parliament, there is a debate raging—it has raged and continues to rage—about the best way to ensure that the Parliament's resources go to the people who are in most need. However, prescription charges exist in some illogical and archaic netherworld. They are neither wholly means tested nor universally

available. The logic behind them is arbitrary and archaic. The minister said in a previous debate in Parliament that 91 per cent of prescriptions are dispensed free. That could easily give the false impression that this is a trivial matter that affects only a minuscule proportion of society. That is not true. Half the population of Scotland must pay the charges—it is an issue with 2.5 million potential beneficiaries.

It is argued that prescription charges bring vital extra income into the NHS. That income currently amounts to £45 million, representing just 4.9 per cent of the total NHS drugs bill of £850 million and less than 0.5 per cent of the NHS budget in Scotland. The legitimate question is: where is the money to come from to pay for the abolition of prescription charges? Fortunately, there is no shortage of answers. The Minister for Health and Community Care recently announced £41 million for front-line services this year. Welcome as that money is, it was apparently not in the budget announced in his statement at the beginning of the year. One health group has suggested that we examine the healthy profits that are made by drug companies in this country and ask them to contribute. Surely, a glass Parliament such as this is not the best place to argue that we cannot find the money, as the cost of this building would have paid for the abolition of prescription charges 10 times over.

Fergus Ewing (Inverness East, Nairn and Lochaber) (SNP): Colin Fox says that the programme should be funded from the profits of the drug companies. However, one of his colleagues previously suggested that the assets of all drug companies should be expropriated. What profits would be available to fund his programme after that expropriation?

Colin Fox: I referred to one of the many suggestions about how to pay for charges. I am sure that everybody in the chamber is well aware that drug companies make enormous profits from supplying the NHS with drugs.

I could put it another way and say that the bill for abolition is just the cost of two Wayne Rooneys. Eliminating the “necessary evil” of charges would signal our determination not to allow the injustice to persist.

In “Yes, Minister”, Sir Humphrey used to ask Jim Hacker nervously, “Minister, you’re not about to make a brave decision, are you?” I am asking the Executive to take a brave decision—real changes never come without such decisions. However, Jack can relax, because the idea has been tested in Wales, and the walls of the Parliament there did not crash down as a result. Wales started with a review in mind—the same as the Executive’s intention—but at the end of the evidence-taking process, the brave decision was

taken to embrace the full abolition of charges. That decision was widely welcomed.

All the polling evidence in Scotland suggests that the people of Scotland are equally behind the idea. I hope that the Executive will live up to the vision of the people of Scotland, abolish prescription charges and end the injustice at the heart of the national health service.

10:16

Pauline McNeill (Glasgow Kelvin) (Lab):

There was a definite sense of occasion yesterday during the first-ever showing of the new debating chamber in action, and not enough can be said about the wonderful work that our staff have done to make that happen. We all appreciate that.

In many ways, we are all overawed to be here. In achieving home rule for Scotland in 1999, I did not dwell on the significance of having a permanent home but, after spending a few days here, I have no doubt that it adds something to Scotland’s legislature. As a nation, we can be proud of what we have built, if we want to be. It is up to all of us to ensure that the public have the access that they want in order that they can make their judgment on the building.

It goes without saying that flitting to this place should make no difference to our overall goal of improving ordinary Scots’ lives, as many members said yesterday. We have been asked to raise our game. Football metaphors are common currency in Scottish politics, but we all know that what is involved is anything but a game. It is about serious hard work, serious debate and seriously hard decisions.

My plea is that we all do our best to live up to that expectation. As politicians, we know that we have a heavy duty to the public to have real debates and argument that are lively, if possible, and even passionate about subjects that matter to us. However, we must respect the opinions of, and listen to, others. Above all, we must see where consensus lies among the parties, because the public will expect that from the Parliament—although not too much, in case the press are too bored by that.

Michael Matheson challenged the Executive well on its record. We would expect him to do nothing less than that in opposition. However, if we are to raise our game, it is also fair to give the Executive credit where it is due. It is the first Government seriously to tackle slopping out. I read that Barlinnie has dramatically reduced slopping out and I note that the Scottish Prison Service took credit for that, but the Executive should have some credit, too.

We are the first Government to offer an alternative to dealing with women's offending by creating the 218 Time Out centre in Glasgow. We are the first Government to acknowledge, by establishing the drugs courts, that we must tackle drug addiction. We are the first Government to reform the High Court radically for the public's benefit and to offer a victim-centred approach to justice. I could go on about what the Executive has done under its justice programme, but I ask only that the Opposition give credit where it is due.

I will make a few comments that go beyond the justice agenda about what is important to me as a Labour member. Our first priority is to grow the Scottish economy—that is what the partnership agreement says and that is right. However, it is crucial that our First Minister clarified in his statement yesterday that the purpose of that priority is to pursue a strategy that can divert resources to those who need them most, to the creation of successful home-grown industries and to the nurturing of skills in the economy for the benefit of all Scots. We must emphasise that that purpose is in mind—it is not growth for growth's sake or for those who already benefit from it; rather it is growth to meet our targets for lifting children out of poverty, for creating a better environment and for sharing business success with a work force that has helped to create it. We must make further progress on low pay; that must be one purpose of our growth agenda in the private sector in particular.

The United Kingdom director general of the Confederation of British Industry said at the organisation's annual Scottish dinner last week that the unions are irrelevant in a global economy. Although Bill Aitken—who is not here but was at the same table as me—enjoyed seeing my blood pressure rise, it needs to be highlighted that that is certainly not the case in Scotland or for the Executive, which has worked well in partnership with the unions on low pay and training. It is important to note that.

The Opposition has claimed that there is no vision. In some respects, that is a wee bit of a cliché: they would say that, wouldn't they? However, not all aspects of nation building are visionary. There is sheer hard work—change is not always fast and we do not always see results immediately. I think that we have done all right with the 60 bills that were passed in the first session of the Parliament, the 12 bills that are forthcoming and the very important initiatives that are being taken. We have the job of modernising civil law, family law and planning law, shortening our waiting lists, bringing health services closer to people and increasing life chances. We have all those things to do.

I will say what I think our priorities should be. Our planning system is in desperate need of modernisation—some local plans are more than 50 years old. It is a bold idea to reform planning law and I know that at some point in the future a planning bill will be introduced. There will be some lively debate on that issue because there is divergence of opinion on it within the parties, which is healthy. In my view, although business rightly wants a less regulated and freer system so that it can achieve what it needs to achieve, there must be fairness for communities. I urge the Executive to consider introducing a form of review or appeal for communities, which I believe can be done speedily and without damaging business interests.

On transport, we have new powers and I am sure that we will use them to our advantage. However, I want ministers to consider a measure that I am considering including in a member's bill in order to bring more effective bus services to our communities. Currently, there is no statutory requirement for operators to consult communities on withdrawal of services, but I think that communities should have a say on that issue. We should do more to deliver better bus services.

I am pleased that affordable housing is such a high priority for the Executive. I know that I am not alone in saying that there is a desperate need in my constituency for socially rented housing. I know that we also have commitments in respect of the private sector.

On justice, there is still much more to be done, as we have discussed this morning. I agree with Michael Matheson that more needs to be done in the matter of women in custody. Shortening that vicious cycle for women must be a high priority.

There has been some light-hearted talk about lap-dancing clubs, but Glasgow recently faced the prospect of becoming the lap-dancing capital of the UK. That is not an image that Glasgow wants to have and I give all credit to the licensing committee that rejected the two applications that were made, so that the city has not become the UK's lap-dancing capital. I know that the Executive is committed to dealing with that issue and I urge it to consider introducing legislation that would give local authorities the powers to regulate this area of the law, if they wish.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Trish Godman): A considerable number of back benchers have indicated that they wish to speak this morning, and I will try very hard to fit them all in. If members limit their speeches to six minutes, I will do so, but if they overrun they will take up other members' time.

10:23

Fergus Ewing (Inverness East, Nairn and Lochaber) (SNP): Many members have kindly asked after the health of my wife, Margaret. After speaking to her earlier this morning, I am pleased to be able to say that it is hoped that she will be discharged from Dr Gray's hospital in Elgin in the next few days. However, she will need to spend several weeks rebuilding her strength. She has asked me to express her thanks to all members who have kindly asked after her. We cannot thank enough the staff who have looked after her at Dr Gray's hospital.

As you know, Presiding Officer, I have taken more than a passing interest in the Holyrood project as it has unfolded. Now that we are here, let me say this about the building: I like it. I hope that before the main event in this process takes place we can resolve a matter on which I sought guidance some weeks ago: is Holyrood pronounced with a long O or a short O? When I discussed the question with a member of the press who is not very supportive of this institution, he came up with the line, "Some say Holyrood, others say Hollyrood, let's call the whole thing off." We can all agree that none of us—even in the Conservative ranks—would support that for a moment.

I suspect that, as more people in Scotland have the opportunity to see this building for themselves, the majority will like it. This is a subjective matter and it is not an issue on which we should force people in any way to form a view. However, I suspect that people will come to the conclusion that we now have a building that is fit for a Parliament, but a Parliament that has the powers only of an assembly.

I want to address remarks that the Minister for Justice made this morning. We all want to address offending and reoffending so I want, as a result, to highlight an example of a method that is used not to deal with offending after it has happened or to prevent its recurrence, but to prevent offending in the first place and to turn younger people away from offending towards a life without criminality and antisocial behaviour.

Over the summer, some of us might have seen a programme called "Bad Lads Army", which followed the transformation of a group of young men from feckless individuals who practised a life of crime into good citizens. I am not advocating that we go back to the approach that was shown in the programme; however, as the minister knows, a modern version of that, called operation youth advantage, is already operating in Scotland. The scheme has been pioneered by the Army, working with the Northern constabulary and Grampian police, and asks young people who have been identified by the police, the social work department

and schools as having already embarked on small-time crime—such as graffiti, minor theft, vandalism and foul language—or who it is thought are on the cusp of going into big-time crime, whether they would like to participate in a residential course conducted in an army barracks. Most of them say yes, and when the parents are consulted, most of them also say yes. When individuals who had been on the course—which exposes young people to physical exercise, lessons on citizenship, information on addiction and so on—were evaluated after a year, the results showed that almost none of them had reoffended.

Surely that example should be replicated throughout Scotland. I made this same speech—you know that I enjoy doing that, Presiding Officer—15 months ago on 5 June 2003. I made the same points then and felt that the minister listened attentively, which I can see that she is clearly doing now. I pursued the matter thereafter with two parliamentary questions that asked for the scheme to be replicated throughout Scotland. Unfortunately, the minister replied:

"it is for individual police forces to decide on the extent of their involvement. As a result, the Executive has made no representations to the Ministry of Defence about extending the scheme."—[*Official Report, Written Answers*, 5 September 2003; S2W-2071.]

That is an opportunity lost.

In her other response, the minister added:

"it will be for individual forces to decide on the extent of their involvement."—[*Official Report, Written Answers*, 17 June 2003; S2W-679.]

However, I do not believe that that is good enough. The public are not interested in whether a policy is left, right or centre or whether it is politically correct or not; they are interested in what works.

As I and the SNP have argued, an approach that exposes young people who have led feckless, reckless lives that are devoid of discipline, to the sort of techniques that we have seen on the television programme that I mentioned, that the public understand and that work so spectacularly, should be replicated throughout Scotland.

Listening to the First Minister's speech yesterday, I was reminded of Miss Tallulah Bankhead's famous saying:

"There is less in this than meets the eye."

Now that we have new leadership in the SNP and now that its members have so wisely elected Nicola Sturgeon to lead us in this Parliament, we will continue to do as I have done this morning and offer, in the spirit of our new democracy, a positive idea that works and that can really tackle antisocial behaviour before, not after, it occurs.

10:30

Mary Scanlon (Highlands and Islands) (Con):

It is nice to hear Fergus Ewing being so modest about his abilities. I am sure that he will take all our good wishes to his wife, Margaret. We are delighted to hear that she is on the mend.

I will mention a couple of proposed bills before I go on to talk about those in which I have an interest as party spokesman. On the issues that are raised by the proposed bill on smoking, the Parliament has to be careful because there seems to be an assumption that when the proposed bill is passed, people in Scotland will suddenly stop smoking. Yes, there will be more smoke-free premises, but it would be naive for any of us to believe that the legislation will cut down on smoking. I have just come back from Donegal where I spent a few days last weekend and where there is suddenly a plethora of beer gardens and sheltered buildings attached to pubs and other premises, which are catering for smokers as well as non-smokers.

Stewart Stevenson: How would the member reduce smoking?

Mary Scanlon: My point is that we should not assume that the proposed bill on smoking will reduce smoking. That argument comes up elsewhere and I do not want to use the rest of my speech to consider greater access to anti-smoking measures; there are other ways in which it could be done.

My second point is about the proposed Gaelic language bill. Having come back from Rannafast in Donegal, which is at the centre of the Irish Gaeltacht, I hope that members on the committee that will consider the bill will work with our Irish colleagues and consider the whole of Gaelic culture, not just the language. There is much more to Gaelic culture than just the language.

I move on to issues for which I am the spokesman. First, on the charities bill, Conservative members will certainly support all moves to restore confidence in charities and to encourage giving through donations and volunteering. I hope that Parliament will have a balanced debate about private schools and that we will consider the contribution that they make to our society. During the recess, I visited Gordonstoun School and discovered quite a bit about it that I had not been aware of, such as the fact that it was founded by a Jew who was fleeing persecution from Nazi Germany between the two world wars. The school is also based on community principles; pupils are involved in the local fire service, mountain rescue team and coastguard and are called out regularly to help with those services. That is something that could be more widely learned in Scotland.

We also have to ask why the Inland Revenue has 18,000 charities in its database, yet the Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations has 28,000. Ten thousand charities not being registered with the Inland Revenue has to be a matter for concern. We are not looking for more regulation or over-regulation; we want only that those that are bona fide charities abide by the rules. We must also have a balanced debate that defines the characteristic of independence in charities, particularly when we consider the example of Scottish Natural Heritage, a supposedly independent charity that required two ministerial directives to move it to Inverness. It is going to be difficult for charities to be free from external control or third-party direction when they are under ministerial direction. I look forward to a balanced debate on that issue.

On the proposed housing bill, if we are to do things better in Parliament, we have to ensure that we consult properly and adequately so that we include all the issues in the appropriate bill. The national registration scheme for private landlords did not fulfil that criterion. A consultation on that issue was not undertaken prior to legislation. A national registration scheme for private landlords should not have been in the Antisocial Behaviour etc (Scotland) Bill, particularly when we are going to be considering a housing bill in this session.

When Margaret Mitchell's internet grooming amendment to that bill came to the Communities Committee, it was not accepted by members, mainly because no pre-legislative consultation on it had been undertaken. I supported Margaret Mitchell's amendment, but I understood and acknowledged other committee members' point that no consultation had happened. Having rejected proposals on internet grooming as part of the Antisocial Behaviour etc (Scotland) Bill, we should also have rejected the registration scheme for landlords, because the Antisocial Behaviour etc (Scotland) Bill was not the appropriate bill for such a scheme.

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

Mary Scanlon: I am in my final minute.

We are consulting on a housing bill and conducting post-legislative consultation on a national registration scheme for private landlords, which forms part of the Antisocial Behaviour etc (Scotland) Act 2004.

Housing is not the only answer. Where people have a care need that is assessed, the absence of that care leaves many people isolated. For people with mental health and alcohol problems, the isolation of their own home may be the worst, rather than the best, option.

10:36

Scott Barrie (Dunfermline West) (Lab): I welcome the opportunity to contribute to the debate, especially as we have now, at last, moved into what I think will become a building of great architectural merit and a worthy addition to Scotland's built heritage.

Yesterday the First Minister not only outlined the Executive's legislative programme for the coming year, but reflected on what has already been achieved. For example, he mentioned the Tenements (Scotland) Bill, which will put in place the final piece of the programme that later this year will end feudal tenure in Scotland. It is highly unlikely that that achievement, which is long overdue, would have been made without devolution, given that it has taken three major bills to bring it about. People who complain about our Parliament's having insufficient powers should perhaps reflect on that fact and acknowledge what the Parliament can do, rather than spend too much time talking about what it cannot do.

Yesterday's debate on the Executive's programme ended with the Minister for Transport's speech. Like other members, I welcome the forthcoming transport bill which, in introducing a Scotland-wide concessionary travel scheme, will build on what was achieved in the Transport (Scotland) Act 2001. I welcome the continuing shift in budget allocation towards public transport and I am glad that the Executive intends to fulfil the agreement with the United Kingdom Government to improve Scotland's railways by bringing together rail operation and track infrastructure. That is essential not only for the reopening of previously closed railways such as the Kincardine-Alloa-Stirling line, the Larkhall to Milngavie line and the Airdrie to Bathgate line, but it will lead to increased capacity, which is so important for constituencies such as mine in Fife.

There is no doubt that over the past five years there have been improvements in Fife's rail services; capacity has increased and new stations have opened. However, the improvements have not matched the increase in demand. In particular, the huge rise in the number of people commuting from Dunfermline, Rosyth and Inverkeithing means that overcrowding on peak-hour services remains acute and reliability is still a major difficulty. It is clear that more investment is needed in Fife circle and east coast main line services through Fife to ease those problems.

If we are serious about providing realistic alternatives to the people who travel by car over the Forth bridge, convenient, clean and comfortable public transport needs to be provided. Higher bridge tolls and congestion charging alone will not stop motorists. The Ferry Toll park and ride scheme and new bus lanes have improved bus

travel to and from Edinburgh, but that needs to be built on. This week, Fife Council agreed that a new ferry link across the Forth between central Fife and north Edinburgh was a viable option and I hope that other members, especially the Minister for Transport, would welcome such a link as a valuable addition to travel across the Forth estuary.

I was pleased that the First Minister acknowledged yesterday the important contribution that the people who work in our public services make. As a former local government worker, I get a bit tired of the constant carping by some members of the Parliament about the apparent shortcomings of the public sector. It was important that the First Minister acknowledged the innovation, expertise and commitment that exist in much of our public sector's work force: I certainly endorse that.

However, I am not complacent. I acknowledge that in some areas we need to step up our game and make real improvements. That is especially true of our criminal justice services, particularly those that seek to reduce reoffending. As a nation, we imprison far too many people. We need tough action to be taken against people who pose a danger to others, but there is little point in repeatedly handing out short sentences, especially if we are serious that among the key jobs that our prisons should undertake are rehabilitation and cutting down on reoffending rates.

The problem of recidivism also affects people who are given community sentences. It is not only our prison staff who are challenged in their work to address the issue; local authority criminal justice social workers and their voluntary agency partners also have work to do in that respect. In order to reduce reoffending and further drive down crime statistics, our criminal justice system, local authorities, courts and prisons must all work much more closely together. A more joined-up and integrated approach will make a difference to our criminal justice service, just as that approach will see real improvements in our other much-valued public services.

10:40

Mike Pringle (Edinburgh South) (LD): Like others, I want to say how good it is to start the new session in this new, wonderful Parliament building with a debate on the Executive's programme for government for the coming year. The debate gives us the opportunity to reflect on what has been achieved so far and to highlight what we hope to achieve in future. Today, I will focus on justice issues—an area in which I believe we are making a real difference and in which exciting things are happening in the coming year.

In my first year in the Scottish Parliament it was encouraging to see bills coming before the justice committees that would make a real difference to the lives of so many people, not only in my constituency of Edinburgh South, but across Scotland as a whole. The Criminal Procedure (Amendment) (Scotland) Act 2004 will greatly improve the operation of the court system by cutting delays and uncertainties in the High Court; the Vulnerable Witnesses (Scotland) Act 2004 will protect witnesses such as children and vulnerable adults; and the Tenements (Scotland) Bill, which is proceeding to its stage 3 debate, is the third cog in the wheel. It will dramatically improve the management of tenements across Scotland and provide much-needed reform.

The Lib Dems ensured that the antisocial behaviour strategies will examine the facilities and services that are available for under 16s, thereby ensuring real alternatives to antisocial behaviour in areas across Scotland. We are using electronic tagging and drug testing and treatment orders to try and keep the people who commit low-order crime out of prison, as prison is simply a training ground for turning people into reoffenders.

One of the challenges for the coming year is to ensure that prison is used effectively as a punishment for serious crime. Prison should be used as a place in which people can be rehabilitated over a period of time. Locking up people because they have committed minor offences does no one any good. Rigorous community sentences are far more effective at giving victims some sort of justice.

Bill Aitken: It would be useful if the member could define what he considers to be a minor offence and say what action should be taken against someone who commits a large number of minor offences.

Mike Pringle: Far too many people in prison are serving sentences of anything from a week to three months. Many of them committed offences such as motoring offences. We do not need to put people into prison for such an offence. Margaret Smith and I visited a very good new scheme, which is based in Leith. We met a young man of 27 who, although he had never had a licence, started driving at 17. He has been taken out of offending as a result of the scheme and is no longer in prison. We need to address those sorts of issues. Real money needs to be provided to increase the number of secure places that are available for our young people so that those with real problems can be helped and kept out of prison.

The challenges for the year ahead are great. Obviously, we will have to give serious consideration to the McInnes report into the workings of summary justice. Personally, I am

opposed to the removal of the wealth of experience that lay justices bring to the bench. I agree with the dissenting voices to the report that said that they were not convinced as to that plan. I look forward to seeing what the consultation brings out on the matter. If people come out in favour of some element of lay justice, I hope that the Minister for Justice will listen to those voices. Clearly, the use of more sheriffs and stipendiary magistrates will be more expensive.

The other big challenges for the year ahead include the proposals for changing how criminal justice social work is delivered. Many people to whom I have talked about the proposals are not convinced that change is needed. People are saying that it would damage the partnership work that is being done by social work, the prison service, the police and other agencies. My colleague Margaret Smith referred to that in her speech. The consultation shows clearly that very few people responded positively to the proposals.

The front line for justice issues is always the police on the streets. I was pleased to hear recently that an extra £600,000 was made available for extra policing in the capital. Sadly, that is not near the £1 million that the police had asked for, but I know that it has allowed the chief constable of Lothian and Borders police to have more police in the capital and to continue to grow their number in the coming years.

Extra police on the streets have already made a real difference in my constituency where, over the past year, antisocial behaviour has been brought under control through partnership working between those extra police and the youth action team. I have mentioned the youth action team in the chamber before. It is a wonderful innovation, involving local residents and officials from the City of Edinburgh Council. The Deputy Minister for Communities saw it for herself when she visited my constituency on a couple of occasions. I would hope that the model that has been employed in the Inch and in the surrounding area could be used as best practice across Scotland.

I was pleased to hear yesterday that the Executive is going to tackle many other justice issues, including liquor licensing, the protection of children and the barbaric practice of female genital mutilation. Those issues will give members of the justice committees much to debate and scrutinise, and I look forward to the year ahead. The Executive has been criticised because the legislation over the coming period is perhaps light. That might be a good thing. As a relatively new member, I believe that we do not spend enough time looking back at the laws that we have passed and at their results in our communities.

To digress slightly, I think—I would, of course—that there was one glaring omission from the First

Minister's statement yesterday: the lack of action on plastic bags. Although that does not feature in the Executive's plans in the coming year, I can tell the Parliament that my environmental levy bill will be introduced in this session. I hope that, when the First Minister was in Ireland recently, he saw the real benefits that a charge on plastic bags has brought there. There has been a 97 per cent reduction in bag use in Ireland and a change to far more sustainable carriers. Here in Lothian, Ikea has set the trend, and there is more to come. That can only be a good thing, and I hope that the Executive and the Parliament will support my proposal when it is introduced.

10:47

Mr Stewart Maxwell (West of Scotland) (SNP): I cannot let this opportunity pass without welcoming the First Minister's comments yesterday on the need to tackle smoking and his recent road-to-Damascus—or perhaps that should be road-to-Dublin—conversion. As far as the Conservatives are concerned, and referring particularly to Mary Scanlon's comment about the lack of evidence on whether a ban on smoking in enclosed spaces reduces the incidence of smoking, I would say to Mary that she should go and look at the research. Such a measure reduced smoking in New York by 11 per cent, and smoking in Norway was reduced by 3 per cent before the bill there even passed into law. International evidence shows that such bans reduce the rate of smoking by 4 per cent on average.

I welcome the sudden burst of support from around the chamber, especially from those members who remained silent during the campaign for the introduction of a ban on smoking in enclosed spaces, which I have been involved in since I was elected. Even more welcome is the support from members who said previously that they were not supporters of a comprehensive ban. I am glad to see that the dramatic conversion of the Labour First Minister to the smoke-free cause has become contagious among Labour members. I welcome all those members on board the campaign for a cleaner, healthier and safer Scotland.

I turn now to justice. I welcome the Executive's announcement of its plans for the added protection of children. That is critical, and I am glad about the focus of some of the forthcoming bills that were announced yesterday. However, the Executive committed itself to reducing the prison population, and it is clear that it has failed to do so over the past five years. The number of prisoners in Scotland continues to rise year on year. In my role as a member of the Justice 1 Committee, I have visited a number of prisons over the past

year. I am only too aware of the problems of overcrowding in many prisons.

Cathy Jamieson: Will Stewart Maxwell's party put its weight fully behind our proposals to build two new prisons, so that we can continue to tackle not just the problem of overcrowding, but that of slopping out?

Mr Maxwell: Will the minister put her weight behind a proposal that those prisons should not be privatised?

Cathy Jamieson: Well, I would say to Mr Maxwell—

Mr Maxwell: No—the minister has had her intervention.

Overcrowding in our prisons is not just something that affects prisoners; it makes the working lives of prison staff more difficult and, on occasion, more dangerous. Overcrowding also makes it extremely difficult for the Scottish Prison Service to deal with many of the problems that it currently faces. I fear that it will lead to an ever increasing number of human rights cases.

The biggest problem with the failure to reduce the number of prisoners is that it interferes with prison staff carrying out the rehabilitation programmes that are designed to reduce reoffending, or even prevents them from doing so. Given that more than 60 per cent of prisoners reoffend within two years of release, it is now well past the point when action must be taken. Part of the solution to reducing rates of reoffending lies in tackling offending early.

Justices of the peace generously give of their time and they know the area in which they serve. Often, they are aware of the individual circumstances of those who appear before them and the effect that their actions have on that community. Why would we want to get rid of such a resource? However, that is what the Executive has wrongly proposed. If the Executive goes down that road—

Cathy Jamieson: May I offer a point of clarification?

Mr Maxwell: I know that the issue is under review.

Cathy Jamieson: What the member has said is factually inaccurate, and he should correct it.

Mr Maxwell: I have corrected it. However, it would be a mistake for the Executive to go down that road.

In its response to the summary justice review, the District Courts Association said:

"Participation by members of the public is an important element of democracy."

JPs are the perfect example of such participation. I urge the Executive to reconsider the McInnes report's proposal to scrap the lay justice system. Instead, why does it not put in place the resources to improve and to use properly the skills and knowledge that the JP system brings both to local communities and to the legal profession?

The introduction of a UK supreme court is one of the most important proposed changes to our legal system, but the First Minister's statement made no mention of it. Perhaps that was a deliberate omission or perhaps he was too embarrassed to mention it. If that is the case, who can blame him? Surely even the unionists on the Labour and Lib Dem benches understand that Scotland's unique legal system is worth defending.

If Labour and the Lib Dems meekly hand over our legal system to London by yet again invoking the overused and discredited Sewel motion, that will be because they want to force the issue through this Parliament with no scrutiny and little or no debate. This Parliament was established to provide Scottish solutions to Scottish problems by repatriating to Scotland at least some powers over our own affairs. It was not established in order that Labour and Lib Dem members could snuff out one of the few uniquely Scottish institutions that has survived the pressure to conform to English law during almost 300 years of union. I urge all members to defend the Scottish legal system by throwing out any proposals for a UK supreme court when they get the chance.

The Executive often speaks about justice for all. That is a noble aim indeed, but how can the Executive square the circle of justice for all when innocent children are locked up behind barbed wire in Dungavel? How can such treatment of the most vulnerable in our society be reconciled with the Executive's worthy and lofty statements? Frankly, I do not believe that it can. The Executive's shameful position, whereby it has cowered behind the Westminster Government and constantly cried that such powers are reserved, can be aptly summed up by Abraham Lincoln's phrase:

"To sin by silence when they should protest makes cowards of men."

Those poignant words show how far the Executive must go to raise its game. If the Executive is serious about justice for all, let us hear something more than, "It's nothing to do with us," when it is next questioned on the matter. Actions speak louder than words, but words would at least be a start.

Of course, the real reason for the Executive's inaction is the lack of power that the Executive and Scotland have over our own affairs. Devolution is nothing more than a halfway house. All that is

wrong with the Executive was again encapsulated in a single sentence by Abraham Lincoln, which sums up the difficulties that Scotland faces:

"I believe this Government cannot endure permanently, half slave and half free".

10:53

Karen Whitefield (Airdrie and Shotts) (Lab): I welcome the opportunity to take part in this first debate in our new Parliament building. As many of my colleagues have said, the legacy of Donald Dewar and Enric Miralles is a building that is both inspirational and challenging. The building challenges us all to live up to the ambition and confidence that were needed for its creation. I am sure that we will all strive to be equally ambitious and aspirational in our efforts to create a better Scotland.

I am particularly pleased to be able to take part in the justice section of the debate. Over the past five years, we have often debated social justice. We have taken that to mean that there must be a sense of fairness about how our resources are used. In particular, we have taken it to mean that the Parliament must strive to develop opportunities for the poorest people in our communities. That sense of fairness and responsibility must extend to the protection of our communities from those who, day after day, help only to erode and destroy our communities. Often, the poorest in our society are the ones who feel those effects the most. They suffer the daily grind of abuse, violence, threats and destruction that are dished out by a small minority of antisocial and violent people.

I am pleased that the Parliament has already taken strong action to tackle that scourge on our communities. I am equally pleased that the First Minister has indicated that there will be no let up. I welcome his announcement of the introduction of a bill to protect our children from those who would prey on them. I know that the measure will be welcomed by the Moira Anderson Foundation, which is an organisation based in my constituency that provides help and support to families who have suffered the effects of sexual abuse.

In addition, the Parliament still has important items of business to conclude from the previous parliamentary year, not the least of which is the Emergency Workers (Scotland) Bill. The protection of those who work in our emergency services must remain a priority and we must send a clear signal that we will do everything in our power to punish those who seek to impede or harm them.

Today, however, I would like to focus on the proposals for reforming licensing law. I believe that that is a vital piece of legislation and exactly the type of issue that this Parliament should be tackling. It may not have the grandeur of Nicola

Sturgeon's bullet trains—which, incidentally, would bypass most of the communities that we represent, just so that she can get to her work on time—but it would help to improve the lives of those in many communities across Scotland, including communities such as Calderbank in my constituency.

Mr Mark Ruskell (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green): Is it the case that Karen Whitefield does not support a high-speed rail link between Edinburgh and Glasgow?

Karen Whitefield: I support moves to ensure that we have a transport infrastructure that allows all people in Scotland to get about, and the reopening of the Airdrie to Bathgate line will do far more than a bullet train between Glasgow and Edinburgh would.

I recently visited Hugh Lucas, the chairman of the Calderbank heritage group. Hugh showed me some of the devastation caused by people drinking outside. He showed me the nature park that it had taken the group years to develop but which it has taken a group of antisocial drinkers only weeks to destroy. He showed me the broken glass that is strewn across the local football pitch and which makes playing football perilous for children. He showed me the pond in the nature park, which is poisoned with beer cans, broken bottles and plastic bags. He showed me where the park bench was, before a group of drunken youths set it on fire. In his opinion, those are the effects of having too many off-licence premises in the village open for too many hours. Mr Lucas is quite clear that future licensing laws must take into account more effectively the views of local people. He is equally clear that the number of licences granted must be in proportion to the local population.

I certainly share those views. Our licensing laws must help in the battle to break the link between alcohol abuse and crime. They must punish those shopkeepers who knowingly sell alcohol to under-18s, and they must challenge the culture of binge drinking, which often leads to violent behaviour. That is why I welcome the proposals to curb the use of drinks promotions that encourage people to drink quickly. I also back the Nicholson report recommendations on improving how local people can interact with licensing. They are the people who suffer the effects of an overabundance of licensed premises, so it is only right that they should have a say in the licensing process. I look forward to the progress of that bill through the Parliament, as do many of my constituents. I know that this new Parliament will provide an excellent venue for politicians to listen closely to the views of the public during the passage of the bill.

I welcome the vision for Scotland set out by the First Minister yesterday, and I welcome his continued commitment to tackling crime and

antisocial behaviour in our communities. To those who say that the Parliament has lost touch with the people of Scotland, I say that dealing effectively with crime and antisocial behaviour is the most pressing issue brought to constituency MSPs. That is why ensuring that there is justice for all is, and should remain, a central priority for this Parliament.

10:59

Donald Gorrie (Central Scotland) (LD): My two Liberal Democrat colleagues have dealt very well with the legal issues, so I would like to range a bit more widely, if I may. I speak as a great enthusiast for the Parliament as an institution, as a signed-up supporter of the coalition and as a person who is pleased that we are now in a permanent home that has many excellent features. What we have failed to do so far is to excite the Scots. Many people have a vision, but we have not managed to get it over to the Scottish people that we have a vision, and that we can deliver it—that is also important.

For a start we want to run our own affairs better. There are four main legs of government: the Parliament, the Executive, the civil service and local government. Local government officials by and large think that civil servants are theoretical people who have never run anything and civil servants think that local government cannot run anything—or it runs things but it does so very badly. Civil servants, imbued with the Westminster ethos, think that back-bench MSPs are the enemy and should be kept in the dark as much as possible. Government departments have an ethos of not co-operating with each other and likewise in local government.

We have to get our act together to deliver a better result for the Scottish people. There should be committees of some sort that act as fora in which all four sections can meet on equal terms and discuss issues seriously, rather than ask questions across a table, which is useful but limited. We are not allowed by law—mistakenly in my view—to co-opt people on to our committees, but there must be ways of getting us together so that the four parts of government can assist each other. We all have talents, but we are currently not allowed to use them collectively.

My next point is that we are even worse than Westminster in the excessive power of the party machines. Parties determine the agenda, the speakers and have excessively vigorous whipping organisations—those are worse than at Westminster. We must be grown up and people have to be more relaxed about the outcome of unimportant votes and about defending every word in a bill; ministers currently feel that because a civil servant wrote it he or she has to defend it.

Stewart Stevenson: Does Mr Gorrie agree, given that the committees in this Parliament play a substantially greater role—probably four times as great—than at Westminster and with the virtual absence of whipping in committees, that much of the work of this Parliament is based on rational analysis of the issues in front of parliamentarians, unconstrained by external, irrational whipping?

Donald Gorrie: I wish I shared Stewart Stevenson's view. What he says is true to some extent, but he has an over-optimistic view of the position.

We must have arrangements that give Parliament its voice; Parliament as an institution does not have a voice. We need Parliament and back benchers collectively to have arrangements whereby we can co-operate better with like-minded people without being disloyal to our parties—we have to sort out our own affairs.

My suggestion for a vision would be to start at the bottom with communities; if we can create good communities we will get rid of a great many of the problems that we have discussed in the debate. Currently the public sector and the commercial sector are well organised—they have a voice and they are big pillars of the establishment—but the community voluntary sector, community enterprise, co-operatives, small businesses and so on have very little say. They need to be built up and supported so that they can contribute fully to planning and delivering the services that society urgently requires, which they do very well when they are allowed to.

We must fund those activities in a rational way. We currently waste huge amounts of money by funding projects. Then when the project has got going the funding stops—all the good work is undone and the money is wasted. That happens because new equals a good story; if a minister, a councillor, a health board or whoever has a new project, that gets a story. Keeping a good existing project going does not get a story, so it is ignored. We must have a system of continuing core funding for people who are doing good work—whether they are voluntary organisations or other groups. We must continue to fund successful programmes rather than stop them in order to fund something new—that applies to the voluntary sector and to council activities. We need a national system for allocating funds in a rational and fair way.

We must also build up the social economy: the micro-businesses, the co-operatives and the community businesses. There is good work being done, but we need more focus on such activities, because they fall between the enterprise structure and the community structure. Building up communities can be a real way of producing a vision for Scotland.

11:05

Stewart Stevenson (Banff and Buchan) (SNP): I want to speak about two aspects of the Executive's programme: justice, which has been discussed this morning, and health. I look forward perhaps to hearing further detail on health issues this afternoon.

First, on justice, we have been discussing the number of prisoners and having a rather unproductive debate about whether we are reducing the number of prisoners by increasing the number of spaces that we are building for them. There is relatively broad consensus that there is not much point in sending people to prison unless they come out of that experience changed by it. There are three Rs in the justice system. The first of them, which the public thinks about a great deal, is restriction of liberty. That is the punishment part of the system. The very act of a person being locked up, having reduced communication with their friends and family and having little opportunity to participate in the economy—they cannae go tae their job in the morning—is the punishment.

The second R, which has been discussed to some extent—and about which we heard nothing in the Executive's programme—is restitution, or restorative justice. There is a great deal of opportunity for members throughout the Parliament to come forward with ideas on that subject. It is a subject that is not yet much developed, and I would like the Executive—and indeed my SNP colleagues—to continue to develop it.

Cathy Jamieson: I am glad that that point has been raised as restorative justice is one of the issues that, because of the lack of time, I had difficulty developing in my speech. I can give the member the assurance that the Executive is absolutely committed to ensuring that we have sentencing programmes in which offenders have to make some reparation in the communities against which they have offended.

Stewart Stevenson: I thank the minister. I am delighted with that, and I am sure that, as sensible proposals come forward, the minister will have a fair wind for them from the SNP. I am equally sure that we shall make our own proposals.

The most important of the three Rs is rehabilitation. Scotland is spending an increasing amount of money on programmes in the prison service—I very much welcome that. However, I have considerable concerns about what I have seen happening in the private sector in prisons. I am not just referring to what is happening in Scotland. I visited a private prison in Wales and found a lamentable failure to engage in a meaningful way in rehabilitating prisoners and

ensuring that, when they left prison, they were less likely to reoffend. The figure of 60 per cent reoffending has been mentioned.

I take a considerable interest in the programmes and work of Peterhead prison, in my constituency. I very much welcomed the minister's spending a day with us in the north-east, observing the work of the prison. I hope that she was not too alarmed by the number of prisoners who greeted me by my first name; I can assure her that it is simply because I am their constituency MSP and not for any other, more sinister reason. We have not yet found a way of providing adequate support to what is going on at Peterhead. I recognise that the minister is focused on delivering two new prisons in the central belt for other purposes, but I hope that we will get an early indication that we can get the necessary investment to support, sustain and further develop what happens at Peterhead.

The minister will know, from her meeting with Liberal-independent Aberdeenshire Council, at which I joined her, that there is considerable concern about the proposals for a single correctional agency. The SNP initially took a neutral approach to the proposals, but as we have talked to local authorities in Aberdeenshire and elsewhere, it has become increasingly apparent that local authorities feel that they have a valuable contribution to make through the criminal justice social work system, which they provide and administer. We are in real danger of moving in a centralising way that runs against good practice and effective delivery of the rehabilitation efforts that must take place after prisoners are no longer within prison walls. More generally on that front, there are worrying signs within the Executive. Local authorities have been given the power to promote well-being, but we have seen little change in the Executive's relationship with and empowering of councils.

One of the major issues that will occupy us as we engage with the topic of health is the automation of record keeping in the health service. As we introduce changes in the pattern of out-of-hours care and call centres, more and more of patients' preliminary contact with the health service is with people who have no access to their medical records. That will cause health problems as well as introducing significant inefficiency in the system. In England, substantial amounts of money are being spent to do something about that—I look to England from time to time to learn from what happens there. We will return to that issue.

The First Minister said yesterday that he wanted us to be the best small country in the world. I have more modest ambitions: I want us to be equal to other small countries. I have no grand vision that Scotland is uniquely better than everywhere else, but I think that Scotland is as good as everywhere

else. I welcome Mary Scanlon's conversion to the cause of independence—I hope that she moves from advocating independence for charities to advocating independence for Scotland.

11:12

Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab): A Scotland of ambition and enterprise and one that is characterised by fairness, tolerance and respect—those were the values and the vision that the First Minister set out and which should underpin all that we do in the Parliament. Like many other members, I welcome the legislative programme, with its focus on protecting the vulnerable and giving people new rights and the continuing focus on modernising our justice system. However, legislation is only a small part of what we do—our policy priorities and where we spend our money are equally important.

Irrespective of the mechanism, we were all elected with similar aspirations for devolution: the desire to make a difference, to transform the experience of people in our communities and, for Labour members, to close the opportunity gap and deliver social justice. All those ambitions remain today. Although a lot has been made of the fact that we are a small country, we are big on ambition and potential. The fact that we are small can be a positive asset: it is easier to harness delivery mechanisms, we have an opportunity to get things done quicker and it is easier to take risks and test out what works best.

We need to be ambitious about what can be achieved, particularly in the cause of social justice. I have long believed that a strong economy and a strong society are different sides of exactly the same coin. To tackle poverty and implement the progressive values for which Labour members stand, we need to create the conditions for sustained economic growth. A vibrant economy offers us a clear and effective means of achieving social justice, but we need to be more explicit in our aim of targeting communities and vulnerable individuals. I ask the Executive to continue its efforts—in all portfolios, not just communities—and do more to close the opportunity gap. That work should be the hallmark of this Government.

I see that the lights in the chamber have gone off—the lights have often gone off on me—but I intend to carry on in full flow, as long as you can hear me, Presiding Officer. Not seeing me is probably a benefit.

I will mention education and enterprise and reflect the reality of what is going on in my local community. In primary education, attainment levels have risen in West Dunbartonshire and Argyll and Bute, not least due to the Executive's efforts. That situation will be enhanced by the

additional hundreds of millions of pounds that are being directed towards the creation of new schools. However, the picture is not the same in secondary education. Too many of our young people leave school with no qualifications and few skills and, in some cases, unable to read or write. Their ability to make progress is severely hampered and their opportunities are not realised. Our ability to thrive as an economy will hinge on the skills and knowledge of our people—all of our people. Let me echo what Cathie Craigie said yesterday. If the Executive does only one thing and merely tackles only the inherent problem of literacy and numeracy, we can build on that.

We also need to improve economic performance, particularly in disadvantaged areas. In the constituency of Dumbarton, for example, the numbers of unemployed have reduced dramatically—there has been a 60 or 70 per cent reduction in youth unemployment—but the pace of change is slower. It takes more effort and we remain above the Scottish average. The number of business start-ups is another indication of buoyancy in an economy but, in Dumbarton, there are significant falls in the numbers of businesses being created. We rely on too few employers to sustain our local economic base. We need to do more to make communities sustainable in the constituency of Dumbarton. We need to create not only competitive people but competitive places.

I would like the Executive to do two things. It should remove economic barriers that hamper the flow of people and businesses by abolishing tolls on the Erskine bridge. I know that that is supported by at least two of the Presiding Officers and by my colleague Des McNulty. Secondly, I would like the Executive to provide a new focus to the place by considering establishing a lower Clyde initiative that would start at the Erskine bridge and stretch up to the Gare loch. That would allow us to focus on what needs to be done to ensure that that area has a competitive future.

On health, I believe that the minister understands the concerns that have been expressed in this chamber and which will probably be reflected this afternoon. I also believe that the minister will be helpful and will reflect on those concerns. Let me explain to the chamber the scale of nonsense that local people face in my community as a consequence of NHS Argyll and Clyde's proposals for service change. They face the centralisation not only of specialist services but of virtually all services. They face travelling for two-and-a-half hours by public transport to get across the Clyde to Paisley, bypassing five hospitals en route. They will pass the Golden Jubilee hospital, Gartnavel, the Western infirmary, the Royal infirmary and the Southern general hospital to get to the Royal Alexandra hospital. That is a complete nonsense in urban Scotland.

People face a local service that is not patient centred and they face a health board that is accountable neither to them nor to me.

In short, I want Scotland to have one NHS, with people and their needs and interests at the centre. Health boards need to be clear that that is the message that we are sending them.

11:18

Mr Ted Brocklebank (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I want to explore in further detail some of the things that the First Minister said yesterday and, perhaps more important, some of the things that he did not say.

A couple of years ago, Jack McConnell said that his Executive was going to “do less, better.” If that were an alternative to doing a lot of things badly, few could question the logic. However, it turned out that, while the coalition was, indeed, doing fewer things, it was not necessarily doing them better. So, as we discovered in yesterday's statement, it is time to raise the goalposts again. The softly-softly approach has been abandoned, and no fewer than 12 major pieces of legislation will be introduced this year. However, as we say in my part of Fife, it is a poor cadger that shouts “stinking fish.”

I had to pinch myself to realise that the litany of supposed achievements and aspirations that the First Minister was talking up yesterday had happened in the same small country that I live in. Like Jack McConnell, I believe that Scotland is one of the best small countries in the world. However, I believe that despite, rather than because of, the efforts of the coalition. The coalition had nothing to do with the creation of our wonderful scenery—although its policies, in particular those on wind farms, might go a long way towards destroying it. The coalition has done nothing to improve the quality of Scottish education, which was once recognised as of international class but which is now too often regarded as second rate. The coalition has turned the thrifty, entrepreneurial country that Scotland once was into a land in which one in every four employees works in a public sector that accounts for an extraordinary 52 per cent of the country's gross domestic product.

However, this week, Jack McConnell seems to have seen the light. His latest big media message is that the balance between the public and private sectors has swung too far in favour of the state and must be redressed, but—wait for it—that will be done not by reducing the public sector in places such as Fife, where council employment has increased by another 5 per cent, or 600 employees, this year, but by increasing the private sector. Apparently, we can do one but we cannot

do the other. Does the First Minister intend to follow Gordon Brown's example and make public service job cuts? If he does not, was his latest soundbite an example of how he intends to raise the game in Parliamentary debates?

Christine May (Central Fife) (Lab): Will the member give way?

Mr Brocklebank: A little later, perhaps.

I am reminded of my days in the Salvation Army and the old hymn:

"Tell me the old, old story, for I forget so soon ...
Tell me the story simply, as to a little child
For I am weak and weary and helpless and defiled."

I expect that that strikes a chord with many Scots as we enter this Executive's sixth year.

Christine May: Mr Brocklebank talked about the increases in public sector employment. Given that most of those employees are teachers, social workers and workers in the health service, will he tell us how many doctors, nurses and social workers the Tories would get rid of?

Mr Brocklebank: In Christine May's part of Fife—the part that we both come from—by far the largest employer is the public sector. Indeed, that is true for the whole of Fife. I will not guess at how many teachers, doctors and others there are, but is Christine May happy with that statistic? I do not believe so.

Jack McConnell told members that his job is not to create jobs, but to create the climate in which enterprise, innovation and risk taking can grow. That sounded great until he sat down after more than an hour without having once mentioned the Scottish industry that led the world in risk taking, innovation and sheer hard work. Of course, I am talking about the Scottish fishing industry.

Jeremy Purvis (Tweeddale, Etrick and Lauderdale) (LD): Will the member give way?

Mr Brocklebank: A little later, perhaps.

Jack McConnell's words about creating a climate of opportunity must stick in the craw of thousands who have been forced to leave the sea, not because there are no fish to catch but because the Executive and the United Kingdom Government prefer Scottish fish to be caught by Spaniards, Danes and the French. For our own hardworking innovators, Jack McConnell did not have a single word of sympathy, far less constructive advice. After the war there were 28,000 full-time fishermen in Scotland. Two decades ago there were still 10,000. Now the figure has dropped to fewer than 4,000 fishermen and nearly 170 Scots boats have been decommissioned during the past two years alone. Given that for every man at sea we can estimate that there are eight workers ashore, in fewer than

20 years we have witnessed the virtual destruction of the most entrepreneurial industry that Scotland ever produced.

Jeremy Purvis: In the debate on housing in north-east Fife that took place before the summer recess, the member talked about people who could not afford property in St Andrews and who had to move away and earn more money before moving back. Is that the climate of opportunity for the Conservatives?

Mr Brocklebank: In the debate to which Jeremy Purvis draws attention, I described what I did. Whether others choose to do the same thing is their business.

Crews from Peterhead and Fraserburgh are being forced to fish off Namibia and West Africa. So much for Jack McConnell's campaign to attract fresh talent to Scotland—he is dispersing some of our finest talent elsewhere. Meanwhile, according to new figures, Scotland now imports as much fish as it catches. In other words, while our fishermen are thrown on the dole or driven thousands of miles away to scratch a living, the fleets of our European competitors lie off our coasts and frozen haddock and cod from China and Russia flood Scottish markets.

In April, the Executive tried to spin some credit out of having won back a paltry two extra days at sea for our fishermen. The truth is that that has yet to be passed by the European Commission and, even if it was achieved next month, it would mean only six extra days for this year. That would not be enough for our fishermen to make a single extra trip.

I do not have to remind members of who bears the responsibility for the sad state of Scottish fishing. This Executive and this UK Government bear that responsibility for their blind support of the wasteful, shambolic and wholly discredited common fisheries policy. In 2007, the European fisheries fund comes into effect. To be eligible for funding, every recipient has to express "support for the CFP". So, if someone is opposed in principle to that wretched and failed policy, they have to lie to gain any funding.

The Minister for Environment and Rural Development (Ross Finnie) rose—

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

Mr Brocklebank: I imagine that more spin and more porkies should be no problem for a UK Government led by a man whom even Labourites dub Tony Bliar; and, judging by yesterday's performance, I think that it would be no problem for a Scottish Executive led by a First Minister whose nose, I swear, went right on growing the longer he spoke yesterday.

11:26

Marilyn Livingstone (Kirkcaldy) (Lab): I am grateful for the opportunity to speak in today's debate on the Executive's forthcoming legislative programme. Before beginning, I thank those who have worked so hard to make our vision for our Parliament a reality. The opening of this Parliament building is the final stage in completing Donald Dewar's vision for a devolved Scotland and I am sure that he would have been very proud yesterday. It is a great privilege to be able to contribute to this debate in this chamber—which, to me, is awe inspiring. However, as the First Minister said yesterday, it is not the building that matters, but what we do in it.

We commenced our first meeting in the new building with a time for reflection. Perhaps it is incumbent on us all to reflect on the journey that we have travelled since that historic sunny day when we walked together up the Royal Mile in 1999 and to think about the ambitious journey that we are about to embark on.

I will concentrate my comments this morning on two areas of great importance to me and to my community—the protection of our children and young people and the protection of our communities. As the convener of the cross-party group on survivors of childhood sexual abuse, I welcome the proposals for a bill on the protection of children and the prevention of sexual offences. Like many colleagues, I believe that the bill will further strengthen the law to ensure that predatory sex offenders who groom children with the intention of sexual assault can be prosecuted.

I am pleased that the bill will give chief constables the power to apply to the sheriff court for a risk of sexual harm order. I congratulate Cathy Jamieson on that; from my experience, I know that it will be important in protecting our children and young adults. I am also pleased about the proposal for early intervention to restrict the movements of convicted offenders. Although I am delighted that the bill will be introduced within a few weeks, I ask the minister for further information on timescales. I extend an invitation to her to attend a future meeting of the cross-party group in order to discuss further the proposals, which I believe are very important.

Our cross-party group has been working towards the development of a national strategy for survivors. Following the group's one-year-on event, Malcolm Chisholm set up a short-life working group to look at services for adult survivors; the minister is currently considering the working group's report. The bill will be an important part of the strategy. It needs to encompass protection, prevention and punishment, as indeed it will. The survivor groups, and survivors represented on my group, want our

children to be protected from predatory activity. We need to work hard to support yesterday's children and to prevent today's children from becoming the adult survivors of tomorrow. I am pleased to say that devolution is allowing us to debate and discuss these serious issues and to deliver solutions.

We are all aware of the challenges that face our communities. This morning, we have heard about antisocial behaviour, disorder and criminal activity. Much of the crime is being perpetrated by reoffenders, so I was pleased to hear about the wide-ranging action that the Executive will take to improve the quality of life of the people in our communities who find themselves the victims of such crime. However, I agree that the job cannot be for Government alone, although Government has a key role. We are most effective when we work together. In my constituency of Kirkcaldy, and throughout Fife, there are many examples of best practice and exemplary multi-agency working, not least the new police contact centre, which has given people the confidence to report crime and has seen a 10 per cent increase in police work; the much-heralded success of Fife's antisocial behaviour orders pilot; and the introduction of the community wardens scheme.

Two particular successes that Hugh Henry visited recently were our summer diversification programme, which was a great success, and our POP awards—I assure members that there was no singing; the awards relate to problem-oriented policing and are about partnership policing in action. Many of my constituents have been suffering as a result of antisocial behaviour and dangerous driving by the much-publicised boy racers and cruisers that we have had on Kirkcaldy promenade. As well as the dangers, residents have had to cope with excessively loud music from cars, the constant sounding of horns and other nuisances. I thank Margaret Curran for the support that she gave to my group by including antisocial behaviour within vehicles in the Antisocial Behaviour etc (Scotland) Act 2004. That is evidence of true partnership working and that work is making a real difference to our community.

However, I want to raise with the Minister for Justice the issue of the funding of Fife constabulary—an issue on which I know that she has received much correspondence. Fife constabulary's current funding arrangement is a problem mostly because of historical funding issues and is based largely on a formula that was introduced in 1996. Even following the review by the Executive in 2002, funding per head of population is still 11 per cent below the Scottish average. I am aware that other factors, such as deprivation and rurality, are crucial in determining allocation, but the minister is aware of the issues that we face in Fife. I hope that we can address

those issues so that my constituency can benefit from the much-needed enhanced patrol levels, the improved partnership working that I have spoken about and improved response times.

To conclude—I know that I am running over time—I agree with many members who have spoken this morning that it is of major importance to our communities that we tackle together the on-going issues of crime and antisocial behaviour. I take this opportunity to congratulate the Executive, especially Margaret Curran and Cathy Jamieson, on its commitment—past and present—to tackling those major problems.

11:32

Chris Ballance (South of Scotland) (Green): It is a great privilege to take part in the first debate in this building. I congratulate all those whose hard labours have made the building possible and who have contributed to the building work.

I will respond to the speech that the Minister for Transport made yesterday. Although he identified the Executive's past failures, I believe that the programme for government over the next year will not deliver the policies that are necessary to address those failures. Over the past day, we have heard how the Executive programme is well meaning at heart. Nonetheless, I believe that it is confused and contradictory in relation to delivery, like the party to which the Minister for Transport belongs—the Lib Dems—which supports congestion charging as a way forward but opposes it when it is suggested for Edinburgh.

In the transport white paper, the Executive states:

"The transport vision of previous governments was too often dominated by the private car."

It informs us that 74 per cent of single pensioners have no access to a car. The paper continues:

"The cost of motoring has steadily declined in real terms over the past 20 years while the cost of rail and bus fares has increased."

It further states that

"a third of drivers say they would like to use their cars less".

So what is the answer? Social justice and social inclusion demand a strategy to reduce road traffic and improve public transport. The Executive even accepts road traffic reduction as a goal, but it refuses to set meaningful targets or to make public a clear strategy. The proposed transport bill—which was outlined yesterday by the First Minister and Nicol Stephen—will be a missed opportunity. It will contain no meaningful targets and no clear strategy for dealing with the real problem of too much road traffic. Will the proposed national agency be tasked to deliver road traffic reduction targets, or will the current levels of road traffic

continue to rise inexorably, as they have done over the past 10 years? Traffic volume has increased by 18 per cent, whereas the number of bus journeys is down by 16 per cent. Where is the strategy to reverse that? Will the agency be more than just someone for the Executive to blame its failure to deliver on?

The bill will establish regional transport partnerships with no reference to the sustainability agenda or the social justice agenda. Why are sustainability and social justice omitted yet again? As for democracy, the new regional partnerships will have only one councillor from each local authority and will have no opposition or minority voice. One third of places will be reserved for chambers of commerce and other business representatives. Where will the social justice voice in regional transport planning be?

What about the one decision that is necessary for strategic development of our bus services in towns—the decision to re-regulate bus services? That is another lost opportunity in the forthcoming bill. Just as there has been a failure even to mention the community right of appeal in planning, so there has been a failure to mention planning to reduce the need for travel. Also absent from the proposals are out-of-town centralised supermarkets and hospitals—which we have just heard about—and other centralised developments, as well as local procurement to regenerate local communities and measures to reduce food miles travelled. Transport policy must address the real need: social inclusion to create better communities and a better environment for Scotland.

Instead, we have an admission that, despite all the fine words, we are—I quote the white paper again—

"also spending more on ... roads",

as in the M74, the M8, the M80, the M77, a second Kincardine bridge and the Aberdeen peripheral route. That is a spaghetti-junction solution throughout Scotland. Those unwieldy ribbons of new roads will produce worse congestion year on year, as have the roads that were built in the past. The failed road-building dream goes on and on and, under the legislative programme, so will our present traffic chaos and Scotland's second-rate public transport system.

Finally, the First Minister yesterday completely failed to mention climate change, which is accepted scientific reality—we have seen some of its results this summer. We must prepare for and take action against climate change and, most important, we must take action to reduce its causes. I heard nothing of that in the First Minister's statement and that is another missed opportunity.

11:38

Kate Maclean (Dundee West) (Lab): I am happy to speak in the debate and to welcome the Executive's continued commitment to tackling crime and antisocial behaviour. I welcome especially the First Minister's personal commitment to decent, law-abiding Scots that we will do everything that we can to ensure that they have the right to live in peace and quiet in their own neighbourhoods, free from the fear of crime and antisocial behaviour, and that they should be able to raise their families in communities that allow young people to grow and thrive and not communities that drag them into drug and alcohol abuse and deprive them of any chances in life.

Antisocial behaviour and crime now make up the largest proportion of problems that I deal with at my surgery, so it is tremendously important to me that the Executive and the First Minister continue to prioritise those issues year after year by introducing legislation that contributes to the fight against crime and antisocial behaviour and by ensuring that the increasing armoury that is available to the police, local authorities and other agencies is properly resourced and effectively used.

Yesterday, Tommy Sheridan accused the First Minister of using empty rhetoric about crime and referred to crime that relates to drug abuse. I have found the Executive's actions on drug-related crime and antisocial behaviour to be neither empty nor rhetorical. It is a bit rich of Mr Sheridan to accuse anyone of employing empty rhetoric.

In my constituency, I can see that the impact of initiatives and legislation from the Scottish Executive is already starting to be felt. During a visit to the Hilltown area of Dundee, the First Minister heard for himself how the £850,000 that the Scottish Executive gave to fund community-based antisocial behaviour initiatives is being spent effectively on community wardens. Although those wardens have been in operation only for a short period, they are already starting to make local residents feel safer, both in their homes and on the streets. That is not empty rhetoric.

The First Minister also used his visit to announce that Dundee would be the location for a pilot of community reparation orders. The announcement was warmly welcomed by many people who for years have been asking for that type of disposal for crimes that are antisocial and anti-community. My constituents feel that it is entirely appropriate that offenders should be made to do work that will enhance communities and start to compensate for the damage, both physical and psychological, that they have caused. That is not empty rhetoric.

Electronic tagging of persistent young offenders under the age of 16 has also been welcomed by

hard-pressed communities in my constituency. It is possible that the measure would apply to only 10 children each year in Dundee, but those children are causing a disproportionate amount of chaos in relation to their small numbers and very tender years. I assure everyone both inside and outside the chamber who did not support the initiative that measures that will contain those children, limit the opportunities for them to get into trouble and give the hard-pressed communities that have had to tolerate them some relief have been warmly welcomed throughout Dundee. I am sure that the measures will also be welcomed throughout the rest of Scotland. I do not believe that the legislation that is in progress or the future legislation that has been announced is empty rhetoric.

I welcome the Tenements (Scotland) Bill, which will complement the additional powers that local authorities already have at their disposal and will help them to force private owners and landlords to face up to their responsibilities to the areas in which their properties are located.

I welcome the proposed licensing bill, which will ensure that the unscrupulous minority who are involved in the sale of alcohol and are more concerned with profit than with people are not allowed to peddle the misery of alcohol abuse and its related problems to individuals and communities. The bill will also ensure that communities have a say and that people who sell alcohol are forced to do so in a responsible way.

The proposals that the First Minister presented yesterday, which have been outlined in more detail by the Minister for Justice, and the Executive's commitment to tackling crime and antisocial behaviour will be warmly welcomed throughout Scotland. People whose lives are literally being ruined by crime and antisocial behaviour come to my surgery all the time. For too long, they have felt that the emphasis has been on helping the criminal and the perpetrator. I agree with them. Not before time, the Executive is starting to prioritise the individuals and communities that have been the victims of crime and antisocial behaviour. Not before time, the Executive is calling time on the unscrupulous profiteers, neds and thugs who are devastating the communities that we represent. That is a message that I am more than happy to take back to the people whom I represent in Dundee; I assure members that they are more than happy to hear it.

11:43

Rosie Kane (Glasgow) (SSP): Today I will address one important strand of justice that is often overlooked: environmental justice.

Before coming into the new Parliament building on Monday morning, a couple of other MSPs and I

visited a protest in Strathbungo on the south side of Glasgow. Locals from the area were forced to take to the streets in an effort to prevent a brutal, violent attack on their community. Unfortunately, that attack could not be prevented by the use of an antisocial behaviour order, because the perpetrator was Network Rail.

A couple of weeks beforehand, residents living near the rail line in the area were sent a note by Network Rail telling them that hundreds of trees would be removed from the side of the track. The community was left with absolutely no way of fighting the measure. It could not get any information. What Network Rail intended to do can be described only loosely as a plan, as the company did not require planning permission in order to rip the trees from the ground—despite the fact that the land in question is at the foot of the residents' gardens—because it owns and controls that land.

To paint a picture of the situation there, I should point out that the trees provide a natural barrier between the community and the railway line, as the MSPs who were present at the protest will recognise. The area, which is a local conservation area, is outstandingly beautiful and offers a home for many species of wildlife. However, none of that was considered and the area is now under attack because of one stroke of the pen. The fact that we in this brave, bold, new Parliament have absolutely no means of intervening to stop the attack on that community seems unbelievable, but sadly it is true.

When the local people asked Network Rail for information on the environmental impact studies, they were told that studies had been undertaken but were not given access to any of that information. Where was the freedom of information in that?

Over the past couple of days, large amounts of trees have been removed. The residents are meeting daily and I congratulate them on their courage and on the way in which they are working together as a community. After all, they are simply doing the very thing that we in Parliament have been asking communities to do. The residents have been trying their hardest to achieve some environmental justice. That phrase has been bandied about the Parliament for years now, but the example that I have given shows that communities are no more empowered now than they were when the First Minister stood in his wellies and hardhat in a landfill site and promised that there would be environmental justice.

It seems that Network Rail is neither a Government body nor a private company, which means that the faceless, unelected individuals at the top can make decisions that have a huge impact on communities and on the wider

environment without prior consultation or discussion. How can we ever hope to deliver environmental justice in such conditions? The Parliament should hang its head in shame over this case.

That said, why should Glasgow—or, for that matter, anywhere else in Scotland—expect environmental justice when the city is constantly under environmental attack? A couple of weeks ago, a study concluded that walking around Glasgow city centre had the same effect on people as smoking about 40 cigarettes a day. While we are all up in arms about the cigarette problem, we should also be up in arms about Glasgow's unacceptable pollution levels. After all, everyone of every age is vulnerable to those fumes.

Too many members cite the construction of the M74 northern extension as a way of dealing with pollution in and around Glasgow. However, that notion is poisonous and inaccurate. In fact, new motorways create more car use and therefore more pollution. That is not my invention; it forms part of the findings of the Standing Advisory Committee on Trunk Road Assessment report. Moreover, new motorways have a negative effect on the local economy. Again, that is not my invention, but a finding of yet another SACTRA report.

We are waiting for a report back on the inquiry into the M74 northern extension and I am worried that thousands of people in and around Glasgow are about to find out what the good people of Strathbungo are now finding out: that they do not count, that their opinion is not valuable and that they do not deserve to be consulted or to have any environmental justice.

I say to everyone in the chamber, in the media and in Scotland at large who over the years has complained about the ever-escalating price of the Scottish Parliament building that, when the M74 northern extension was started, it was supposed to cost £170 million. When the project was made a little bit smaller, the price went up to £250 million. As we await the result of the report that I mentioned, it is now estimated that the M74 northern extension will cost £1 billion.

Phil Gallie (South of Scotland) (Con): Does the member agree that the M77 extension from Malletshead to the Kingston bridge in Glasgow has meant great environmental improvements for those who live in the south-west of the city?

Rosie Kane: I return to the findings of the SACTRA report. New motorways mean new traffic, which means that we need still more new motorways. We just make the problem bigger and better.

Anyone in the chamber who complained about the cost of the M74 northern extension should get

behind me now and join me in condemning the wasteful and short-sighted construction of the motorway before the report reaches the Parliament. After all, we have power over that matter, but have never used it.

If the money is to be invested in transport, it should be invested in clean, green, sustainable transport that will address all the population's needs. As Chris Ballance has pointed out, we are not all car users—indeed, not all of us want to use cars. Please keep Network Rail out of the question because its performance during the past few weeks shows clearly that it cannot be trusted in terms of democracy, openness or justice. My question to the Executive is: can the Parliament be trusted in terms of openness, democracy and environmental justice?

11:50

Johann Lamont (Glasgow Pollok) (Lab): I welcome the opportunity to speak for the first time in this Parliament building and to contribute to our ambition for one Scotland.

By its nature, this debate is diverse, so I will highlight several issues of importance to my constituents—I am not sure that trees will feature. The strength of the economy is a central issue, but it must be harnessed and given purpose by our social goals. There has been debate about the purpose of enterprise. For some, there have been signals that enterprise agencies are in the business of creating wealth but not in the business of social justice—the wealth is created and then we have to hope for the best that benefit will follow. However, history tells us that we cannot leave that to chance.

There is a good example of that in my constituency. There will be massive private sector development, possibly creating 3,000 jobs, partly as a result of the construction of the M77. We have brought together the private sector developer, the unions and all the relevant agencies to consider how such a development, which will have a huge impact on the nature of the area, can be harnessed to create economic opportunities for local people. Reflecting on that, I will highlight some issues in relation to enterprise and enterprise education.

In passing, I should say that it is a novelty to see the private sector investing in public sector education given that, thus far, all the traffic in that area has been in the other direction, with public sector subsidies to private sector education. I am certainly looking forward to scrutinising the proposed charities bill and hearing what justification there can possibly be for the continuation of that charitable subsidy.

On enterprise education, we should not allow the commitment of money to our local schools to

give the power to determine what is going on in the curriculum. We also have to demand that serious consideration be given to co-operative enterprise, given our commitment to a co-operative development agency and our understanding that co-operative approaches can support economic growth and deliver on social goals.

In our discussions on enterprise, we have to be much more challenging about what is deemed to be acceptable and enterprising. For example, we know how dangerous the construction industry is; part of that danger is caused by the way in which the industry is organised and how work is subcontracted down. We must challenge those who define as entrepreneurial risk the consequences that are borne by the people who are working at the bottom in that industry.

I welcome the fact that long-term unemployment in my constituency has fallen sharply, but there is still a problem with wage disparities. In my constituency, wages consistently lag behind the national level. We must ensure that measures are taken so that economic benefit is enjoyed evenly throughout our constituencies and that we find ways of bringing high-quality jobs into constituencies such as mine.

Given that I represent a disadvantaged constituency such as Pollok in a city that has to deal with serious disadvantage, it would be remiss of me not to challenge everyone in the chamber to acknowledge the importance and cost of a real commitment to one Scotland. Our Scotland is fractured by inequality; that is one of the hardest debates into which we must now drill. We share a general aspiration to encourage healthy eating, to challenge our drink culture and to tackle smoking and the use of illegal drugs. Those general aspirations, when matched by money, can have an effect.

However, we also must grasp the stark reality that, even though our young people throughout Scotland experiment with drugs, a disproportionate number of the poor and disadvantaged die. Throughout Scotland there are smokers, but it is the poor and disadvantaged who resist the health messages. While we debate access to local health services, it is the citizens in Glasgow who, despite having close geographical access to sophisticated services, feature most prominently among those who are the least healthy and who die youngest.

At some point, we will have to talk more about health and education in their context and not just about the particulars of those services. We will have to consider unsafe communities, fractured families, poor job opportunities and the structural problems that face a city such as Glasgow. We will have to confront the reality that general spend will

not, of itself, be enough. We will have to look at the balance of how we direct our money and how we get real value for that money.

In taking ownership of the notion of one Scotland, everyone in the Parliament will have to understand that it is inevitable that there will be a discussion about moving from simply making general provision for everyone in the hope that it will trickle down to the poor and disadvantaged towards targeting and focusing on the experiences of the poor and disadvantaged and examining how those can sometimes be reinforced. I welcome the opportunity to continue in the new Parliament building the debate that we started in our old home about how to put social justice at the centre of the Executive's economic programme. I look forward to playing a part in developing that agenda through legislation in the coming days.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Murray Tosh): There will be a brief suspension of this meeting of Parliament until 12 noon.

11:55

Meeting suspended.

On resuming—

First Minister's Question Time

12:00

The Presiding Officer (Mr George Reid): Before we begin First Minister's question time, members will wish to welcome to the gallery the Hon Raymond Keith Hollis, speaker of the Queensland Legislative Assembly. [*Applause.*]

Cabinet (Meetings)

1. Nicola Sturgeon (Glasgow) (SNP): I begin by also welcoming to the public gallery campaigners from Stobhill general hospital and the Glasgow homeopathic hospital.

To ask the First Minister what issues will be discussed at the next meeting of the Scottish Executive's Cabinet. (S2F-997)

The First Minister (Mr Jack McConnell): Obviously, I concur with the welcome that Nicola Sturgeon gave to those in the gallery who have come to lobby the Parliament. The Scottish Parliament is a Parliament of the people and it should be lobbied.

At the next meeting of the Cabinet, we will discuss our progress towards building the better Scotland that we promised in our partnership agreement. As I said yesterday in my statement to the chamber, I hope that, as part of those discussions, we will also encourage further the development of a confident Scotland—one in which we celebrate success.

I do not want to do this every week, Presiding Officer, but the fabulous young Scottish band Franz Ferdinand won a major music prize last night and one of our top-growing companies, Cairn Energy, joined the FTSE 100 today, and I think that we should celebrate both achievements.

Nicola Sturgeon: I echo the First Minister's comments about those wonderful examples of Scottish success.

Last week, the First Minister asked all members of the Scottish Parliament to mark the opening of this fabulous new Parliament building by raising our game. I know that the First Minister will be keen to lead by example, so I ask him how he, personally, has fallen short of the mark up until now and how he intends to raise his game.

The First Minister: My biggest disappointment so far has been my inability to convince Nicola Sturgeon that we have the vision and determination to secure a future for Scotland both within the United Kingdom and in the wider world that is positive for our citizens and which gives

them the ambition and confidence that this country needs to succeed in the very competitive modern world. I look forward to these weekly exchanges. I hope that they will give me the opportunity to convince Ms Sturgeon and her colleagues that we have that ambition for Scotland.

Nicola Sturgeon: The last time that the First Minister waffled that much, he told himself to sit down.

One way in which the First Minister could raise his game would be to offer firm national leadership on issues of national importance. In almost every part of the country right now communities are up in arms because local hospitals are facing downgrading or closure as services become increasingly centralised. Caithness general hospital, Inverclyde royal hospital, the Vale of Leven hospital, St John's hospital, Stobhill, the Victoria infirmary, the Glasgow homeopathic hospital, the Queen Mother's hospital and many others are under threat. The decisions on those hospitals are being taken in a totally piecemeal manner by unelected and unaccountable health boards that are taking the decisions with total disregard for public opinion.

Rather astonishingly, the Minister for Health and Community Care said this weekend that he has "no control" over the situation. Will the First Minister take control? Will he demand a moratorium on those piecemeal hospital closures and put in place a clear national strategy for the future of the health service in Scotland?

The First Minister: I understand absolutely the concerns that exist in many parts of Scotland about the role of local hospitals in the 21st century and the way in which change can impact on local communities. However, the starting point for any debate on the issue is that there must be a degree of consistency. To call in the same sentence for the election of local health boards and national control is, frankly, a contradiction in terms that will be seen in that light by the people whom Ms Sturgeon identified as having concerns at local level. We need to find the right balance between local decision making and a national strategy, and I believe that that is exactly what we are implementing.

The challenges in the health service are to ensure that local people have confidence in their local hospital and that they are able to access care as quickly as they possibly can, in the right circumstances and with the right level of expertise. The challenge is also to change Scotland's health service for the better, to ensure that we are able to use the new techniques, equipment and expertise that are available and to decentralise services, as is happening across Scotland, to local hospitals and clinics, so as to give local communities more and better access to services. Each of those

decisions brings real challenges for health boards, medical staff and ministers, but ministers will make the right decision for local communities and will ensure that their interests are always paramount.

Nicola Sturgeon: What I am calling for is national thinking and a national plan, so that, throughout Scotland, patients do not have to travel ridiculous distances to access what can be, in some cases, life-saving medical treatment. I suggest to the First Minister that understanding local concerns is not enough; responding to them and acting on them is what the people of Scotland expect and demand.

"the health minister should intervene and require health boards to sustain services."

Those are the words of Bristow Muldoon, Labour MSP for Livingston. Moves to take services away from Vale of Leven hospital are "indefensible". That was said by Jackie Baillie, Labour MSP for Dumbarton.

"This is centralisation on a massive scale ... and not in the interests of patients".

That was said by Duncan McNeil, Labour MSP for Inverclyde.

Will the First Minister recognise that those comments reflect the widespread anger and concern that exist right across the country? Will the First Minister recognise what people in Scotland can see with their own eyes and what his own back benchers know to be true: that our hospital services are being decimated without rhyme or reason?

I ask the First Minister again: will he impose some national order on this mess? Will he take control and show leadership or, like his Minister for Health and Community Care, is he saying that he has "no control"? The First Minister should call a moratorium on the piecemeal health closures and put in place a national plan for the future of our health service. In short, will the First Minister raise his game?

The First Minister: For the avoidance of doubt, the Minister for Health and Community Care did not say that he had "no control" over the situation. In fact, this time last year, the Minister for Health and Community Care clearly made a point that I myself have made on a number of occasions: that ministers can say no as well as saying yes to local proposals, following local consultation. The Minister for Health and Community Care did exactly that last year, when he rejected proposals from Argyll and Clyde NHS Board, because he felt that they were not in the interests of local patients.

There has to be consultation and there is consultation in each of the areas that Nicola Sturgeon identified. The proposals that are currently out to consultation are not yet final.

When the proposals from the health board are final, ministers can say no as well as yes. We will make a considered judgment in each case. When we do that, we will bear in mind the genuine concern that local people feel not just about the local hospital but about the quality of the totality of their local health service.

I reiterate my previous point: it is not consistent to call for national control—as Nicola Sturgeon did again in the final part of her last question—and to call for elections to health boards at a local level. That is not a consistent position. We need the right balance between local decision making and a national strategy. That is exactly what we are working towards achieving.

Dr Jean Turner (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (Ind): Does the First Minister agree that patients should not be transferred from a unit unless they will get a better service? We used to have a gynaecology and oncology unit at Stobhill, which has been transferred temporarily to a refurbished old ward in Glasgow royal infirmary, at a cost of £200,000, instead of being moved into a brand-new unit that is advertised to cost about £5.1 million. That means that the unit has transferred into the royal infirmary without extra high-dependency beds. Does the First Minister not think that that is wrong?

The First Minister: As I have said before, I understand the concerns about the hospital reorganisation in greater Glasgow. I also understand that we cannot stand still and that there cannot be no change in the health service. If we are going to have a health service that will deliver for Scotland in the 21st century, we cannot have no change. There has to be change, improvement, modernisation and reform.

We need to ensure that, as we do that, we improve services to patients. Of course I agree with Jean Turner that that objective should be the underlying principle that governs every decision. In some cases, that will mean services moving, but in all cases it should also mean that other services are decentralised, improved and made more accessible for local people. That means that nurses will do things that doctors used to do and that doctors will do things that consultants and surgeons used to do. There will be the opportunity in multipurpose clinics to access all kinds of services at the local level. Those should be the objectives, while we also ensure that the high-quality service that is needed is available in our specialist hospitals.

Prime Minister (Meetings)

2. David McLetchie (Edinburgh Pentlands) (Con): To ask the First Minister when he will next meet the Prime Minister and what issues will be discussed. (S2F-1002)

The First Minister (Mr Jack McConnell): Mr McLetchie may be disappointed, but I have no plans to meet the Prime Minister in the near future.

David McLetchie: I am sure that the Prime Minister is bereft at that news. When the First Minister has a little space in his diary to accommodate the Prime Minister, they might discuss one of the Prime Minister's favourite topics, which is, as we all know, education. The Scottish Executive has said that it plans to allocate additional funding to a handful of Scottish schools to fund leadership programmes for head teachers. However, the latest figures show that the proportion of the schools budget that is actually devolved to schools has fallen since 1999, while schools remain firmly under local authority control. Will the First Minister tell us what the point is of giving head teachers leadership skills if they are not allowed to lead?

The First Minister: As we outlined yesterday, and as we will outline in greater detail in the weeks and months ahead, not only are we giving head teachers greater powers to lead and ensuring that they are equipped with the skills that they need to do so successfully, but we are ensuring that they have around them the quality infrastructure—both physical and staffing—that allows them to succeed in their schools.

There is a fundamental difference between the implication behind what David McLetchie has said—which he spelled out in more detail yesterday—and the policies that we pursue. We are interested not only in having the highest quality individual schools that are well led with the right staff, the right buildings and the right curriculum and assessment, but in having all the specialist services that local authorities provide for the thousands of special educational needs pupils from whom Mr McLetchie said yesterday he would take money in order to cut council tax and save money for those whose children do not need such services.

On this issue, there is a real divide between those of us who are committed to school transport, school meals provision, special educational needs provision and all the other services that are provided at local level by our local authorities, and the Conservative position, which is to take all that money away and to reduce all those services to save money for those who currently pay for them. I believe that that is the wrong policy. I am happy to debate it at any time—here or in any other place.

David McLetchie: I am delighted to debate those policies. It seems that the First Minister wholly misconceives the idea of freedom and independence of management. He talks the talk but he will not walk the walk by actually giving people freedom, responsibility and control. For instance, the First Minister has said that he wants

to increase the number of specialist schools in Scotland. At present, we have seven such schools—that is, seven out of 386 secondary schools in the whole of Scotland. We currently have seven schools that select pupils on the basis of their ability in sport or music. Why is selection acceptable for pupils who have those talents but unacceptable for pupils who have particular aptitudes for mathematics and science?

The First Minister: Here we see the hidden Tory agenda. We say that we want to increase the number of specialist schools that will be centres of excellence precisely because there are currently only seven such centres of excellence. Of course we want to have more than that. Yes, we will encourage such schools and give the head teachers and teachers in them the powers and responsibilities to develop the full talents of the individuals that come before them. However, we will not have academic selection based on the old Tory way. We will not have that here in Scotland. We will not reject the majority of Scottish pupils to a life that is mediocre and inferior. We will raise standards and ensure that we have excellence and ambition for all Scotland's schools, but we will start with those at the bottom and encourage those at the top.

David McLetchie: The First Minister's policy, of course, is the elitist policy, because it allocates places in schools on the basis of people's ability to pay mortgages, not on the basis of children's educational needs. The fact of the matter is that there are 386 secondary schools in Scotland, that his so-called leadership programme applies to 20 and that we have seven so-called specialist schools. That is a tiny drop in the ocean. Given the tiny numbers that we are talking about in relation to this much-hyped policy, is not it the case that the First Minister's plans are, at worst, window dressing and, at best, tinkering around the edges?

The First Minister: Not at all. The scale of our ambitions for Scottish education is indicated by the fact that we do not believe that "very good" is enough and believe that Scottish schools that are—increasingly—reaching the standard of "very good" in school inspections should reach higher and aim further. That is why we are going to have an excellence standard for all Scottish schools to aim towards as part of their now regular inspection programme.

That is also why we are going to say to 20 schools, and to more schools in future, "We want you to be schools of ambition too. We want you to have the freedoms and the resources that allow you to pick yourselves up, give your kids a better chance and use your teaching skills and your other skills to secure the future that they deserve." That is the scale of our ambitions—not old-fashioned selection the Tory way and not the cuts

in special educational needs provision and in other specialist services that Mr McLetchie called for in yesterday's debate.

Let us have a debate, but let us have a debate that puts education, ambition and excellence on one side—our side—and elitism, selection and cutbacks in services on the Tory side.

Secretary of State for Scotland (Meetings)

3. Robin Harper (Lothians) (Green): I begin by giving a Green party welcome to the representatives from the Glasgow homeopathic hospital.

To ask the First Minister when he will next meet the Secretary of State for Scotland and what issues he intends to discuss. (S2F-1019)

The First Minister (Mr Jack McConnell): I have no plans to meet the secretary of state in the near future.

Robin Harper: Choose life, the Executive initiative set up to improve mental health in Scotland, has a target to reduce suicide by 20 per cent by 2013. We have twice the problem facing England and Wales, yet the First Minister's target is half the target set in England and Wales. Can he explain that?

The First Minister: I do not think that we should underestimate the importance of the choose life campaign and of the issue of suicide in Scotland. Many of us will have personal experience of the tragedy that can occur in families when suicide takes place; however, the reality in Scotland today is that, for the very first time in more than a generation, we have a reduction in suicides. There could be all kinds of reasons for that, but I hope that among those reasons are the improved use of and support for the voluntary sector organisations that support people when they are in difficulties and feel that they are close to that situation, and the improved health services that now make support available for people who are feeling close to the edge.

However, that reduction is not enough for us. That is precisely why we have set a clear target and are taking steps towards it here in Scotland. Others can answer for their own targets, but our target here in Scotland is a genuine one and is clearly established, and it is one that we are already on the way to managing to achieve.

Robin Harper: Research published nearly four years ago by Professor Stephen Platt of the University of Edinburgh identified the profile of the young man most likely to commit suicide in Scotland. Too many children end up in care. Too many young people leave care without sufficient further support. Too many then end up homeless, in trouble with the police and arrested for minor

misdemeanours, and some are locked up. What has the Executive done over the past four years, and what does it intend to do, to ensure that young men who fit any aspect of or all of that profile get the support and care that they need to keep them from despair?

The First Minister: I share Robin Harper's genuine concern for the individuals who fit each of the descriptions that he gave. However, I hope that he understands and can see that we have taken in recent years and continue to take serious action to deal with individuals who are most at risk and to give them support, not just by improving the educational opportunities, other opportunities and the care and support that people get when they are in care—there have been considerable strides forward in that in recent years—but, much more important, by securing further support for them beyond the age of 16, after they leave care, when they are most vulnerable and most likely to be at risk.

We have also improved significantly the level of service in our prisons, where people in the past have been vulnerable to the risk of suicide and self-harm. One of the improvements that we have seen in the statistics in Scotland is a specific reduction in the number of people who are committing suicide in our prisons. That action goes on in care, in prison and elsewhere, but it is not yet enough. We must go further and I hope that we will have the support of all parties in the Parliament when we do so.

Civil Service (Reform and Modernisation)

4. Susan Deacon (Edinburgh East and Musselburgh) (Lab): To ask the First Minister what steps are being taken to reform and modernise the civil service in Scotland. (S2F-1006)

The First Minister (Mr Jack McConnell): Our programme of reform and modernisation of the civil service in Scotland will help to ensure that it has the skills and expertise to meet the demands of devolution. Changes include having more professional specialist skills, increasing the use of secondments from the public and private sectors, applying new technology effectively and working more closely with external stakeholders.

Susan Deacon: I thank the First Minister for his answer. I am sure that none of us, least of all the First Minister, would wish to prejudge Lord Fraser's report, but I am sure that many of us have made the observation that the Fraser inquiry has provided a valuable insight into the workings of the civil service in Scotland. Has the First Minister shared that observation and does he agree that a successful post-devolution Scotland must have a civil service with the right culture, the right skills and the right people to do the job? Will he give us

an assurance that he will take the actions necessary to ensure that we have that?

The First Minister: I agree with Susan Deacon that we need to have a civil service in Scotland that has the right culture, the right skills and the right people to help us to take Scotland forward and that that civil service should be accountable to the Parliament through Scottish Executive ministers, as it is. I believe that we have made considerable strides during the past five years in developing the civil service, but I believe that we need to go further and I believe that that view is shared by the permanent secretary. I also believe that, in considering the final report of the Fraser inquiry, one of the issues that I am sure we will need to address is how we take forward that agenda. We will announce our intentions on that when we respond to Lord Fraser's report.

Donald Gorrie (Central Scotland) (LD): Would the First Minister consider setting up arrangements to enable MSPs and civil servants to co-operate constructively on issues in a way that does not currently happen because there is at present a more antagonistic relationship? We all have things to contribute and I think that we could work together better than we do.

The First Minister: There have been improvements in that area in the past five years. I recall that when Donald Gorrie first raised those issues five years ago there were initial problems in the Parliament owing to the open and accountable nature of the Parliament and the fact that it was a system of which civil servants in Scotland had little experience.

I think that there have been considerable improvements over that time in the engagement of civil servants with committees and with members on individual issues in other ways, but I am sure that we can go further and develop further those skills and that engagement, although we must always remember that it is ministers who have to be held accountable to the Parliament and that ministers have to answer for civil servants in their departments—ultimately, that is the core of the democratic structure in which we operate.

Ms Wendy Alexander (Paisley North) (Lab): Since the Parliament last met, it has been announced in the UK spending review that all

“Departments have agreed targets for efficiency, of at least 2.5% a year over the 2004 Spending Review”.

Last week, I read in the media that the Executive intends to exceed those targets in Scotland. Will the First Minister confirm the percentage target for savings in Scotland and by how much it exceeds that in the rest of the UK?

The First Minister: In the United Kingdom, the percentage target for cash savings is 1.25 per cent

and in Scotland it will be a minimum of 2 per cent over three years. That shows our determination to secure greater efficiencies in the Scottish budget and to ensure that more resources are taken from the back office and delivered in front-line services. We will lay out our more detailed plans on that when the Scottish budget is outlined at the end of this month.

Fergus Ewing (Inverness East, Nairn and Lochaber) (SNP): Now that we have a Scottish Parliament building fit for a Parliament, should we not have a civil service directly accountable to the Parliament? In short, should there not be a Scottish civil service for the Scottish Parliament?

The First Minister: I want to be clear that the civil service in Scotland is accountable to the Parliament through the accountability of ministers. The priorities, actions and accountability of civil servants in Scotland are determined through Scottish ministers, not through ministers in London, and of course ministers in Scotland are accountable to this Parliament and not to Whitehall or the Parliament in London. That accountability is in place. However—and I hope that this is a constructive point—whatever ideologies members have, I hope that they can take on board how vital it is that our civil service in Scotland does not become divorced from the rest of the United Kingdom or elsewhere and the fact that the interchange in Scotland between the civil service and other parts of the public sector—and, indeed, the private sector—and between the civil service in Scotland and the civil service elsewhere helps to develop ideas, experience and careers and helps to secure the best talent for the civil service in Scotland. That is an important perspective, which we must bring to the debate.

Smoking Ban

5. Mr Stewart Maxwell (West of Scotland) (SNP): To ask the First Minister what the Scottish Executive's plans are in respect of the introduction of a smoking ban in enclosed spaces in Scotland. (S2F-1025)

The First Minister (Mr Jack McConnell): The public consultation on smoking in enclosed public places runs until the end of September 2004. Responses to the consultation will then be considered alongside a number of research studies commissioned by the Executive. A statement on future action will be made before the end of the year.

Mr Maxwell: The First Minister will be aware that a statement may be needed sooner than that, given the fact that my member's bill will come before the Parliament long before the end of the year. I am glad that the First Minister and the Executive accept that passive smoking kills at least 100 Scots a year and damages the health of

many more. Does the First Minister agree that we must therefore follow the Irish and Norwegian examples and introduce a comprehensive smoking ban in enclosed spaces? By backing my bill we would introduce such a ban by the summer of 2005 rather than 2006, as has been widely reported, so that we can save lives and prevent damage to people's health sooner rather than later.

The First Minister: I welcome the support for that position from Mr Maxwell, the new deputy leader of the Scottish National Party and others. It is a constructive contribution to the debate. However, I also believe that we should complete the consultation and that we should listen to what is being said to us. We should then make our decision, justify that decision publicly and implement it quickly. We will do so. There has to be action on smoking in enclosed public spaces in Scotland. The extent of that action will be determined at the end of the consultation, when I believe the lessons in Ireland and elsewhere will have an awful lot to teach us.

Sport

6. Jeremy Purvis (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD): To ask the First Minister how the Scottish Executive is encouraging participation in sport and promoting excellence at the highest, and all, levels throughout Scotland following the Athens Olympic games. (S2F-1024)

The First Minister (Mr Jack McConnell): I would like to take this opportunity to congratulate team GB on its success at the recent Olympic games in Athens. To celebrate the achievements of athletes based in Scotland, I am hosting a celebration for them at Bute House tonight. I am looking forward to it. I want particularly to congratulate Shirley Robertson, Chris Hoy, Katherine Grainger and Campbell Walsh. As medal-winning Scots, they will be great role models for the next generation of young Scots.

We are encouraging participation in sport through the significant investment in active schools, which includes the use of sporting champions in our schools and higher-quality and more regular physical education. We are supporting excellence at a higher level through the funding of talented athletes and our continued investment in the Scottish Institute of Sport.

Jeremy Purvis: I thank the First Minister warmly for that positive reply. I endorse the work for all sports, especially that at grass-roots level. Is the First Minister aware that one sport with growing grass-roots support is rugby sevens? Given the successful addition of that sport to the Commonwealth games, will the First Minister speak with Lord Coe about Olympic recognition of rugby sevens, which it had until the 1928 Olympic

games? In those discussions, will he support Melrose as a potential location for Olympic recognition of the sport?

The First Minister: We have had an interesting trend in the Parliament in recent weeks: we are more and more interested in what is happening in London. I hope that Mr Purvis's interest in London will have benefits for Scotland, rather than take anything away from us.

The London Olympics could be a great boost, not just to sport in London, the youngsters of London and the economy of the south-east; they could boost the economy of the whole of Britain and could certainly encourage participation in sport the length and breadth of the country. I am interested in Mr Purvis's idea, but I suspect that it might be quite a challenge to convince the Olympic authorities that it would be a viable option. However, I am happy to note his idea and his enthusiasm for the native sport of his constituency.

12:31

Meeting suspended until 14:00.

14:00

On resuming—

Question Time

SCOTTISH EXECUTIVE

Enterprise, Lifelong Learning and Transport

Demographic Change

1. Susan Deacon (Edinburgh East and Musselburgh) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive what steps it is taking to work with employers to address demographic shifts. (S2O-3116)

The Deputy First Minister and Minister for Enterprise and Lifelong Learning (Mr Jim Wallace): We have stressed the need to reverse population decline in the refreshed document "The Framework for Economic Development in Scotland", which we published at the beginning of this month. We are taking a range of measures to address demographic trends. The fresh talent programme to encourage managed migration has been widely welcomed by organisations such as the Confederation of British Industry Scotland, the Institute of Directors, the Federation of Small Businesses and others. In addition, we are investing just under £30 million in child care this year, rising to just over £40 million next year. We also recognise the key role that older people can play and welcome the fact that the United Kingdom Government has committed to supplementing the existing code of practice on age diversity through legislating by October 2006 to prohibit age discrimination in employment and vocational training.

Susan Deacon: I thank the minister for his comprehensive answer to my question. I am sure that the minister is familiar with the recent report from the Registrar General's office, which confirms the scale of the demographic change that is taking place in Scotland. Does he agree that it is vital that all ministers, all MSPs and, indeed, all those who take decisions that involve planning for Scotland's future look at those data and ensure that the projections and trends are factored into our planning both now and in the future? Does he further agree that employers have a particularly vital role to play in that regard?

Mr Wallace: I certainly agree that employers have a vital role to play, but as the First Minister indicated in his statement yesterday, whereas people who looked at demographic trends about five or six years ago almost accepted them as inevitable, we now want to try to reverse those

trends, to encourage more people to stay and work in Scotland and to recognise that Scotland is a good place in which to do business and to live. To add to what the First Minister said at First Minister's question time earlier today, we must celebrate yesterday's achievements by Franz Ferdinand and by Snow Patrol and Belle and Sebastian. All those groups met at university and show that Scotland is a great place where talent can be created at university. That is important for Scotland's cultural growth and it also demonstrates that Scotland is a place where people can achieve excellence.

English Language Teaching (Immigrants)

2. Donald Gorrie (Central Scotland) (LD): To ask the Scottish Executive what steps it is taking to provide affordable English language courses for immigrants and to address any shortage of English language teachers for immigrants whose first language is not English. (S2O-3016)

The Deputy First Minister and Minister for Enterprise and Lifelong Learning (Mr Jim Wallace): Since 2001 we have allocated an extra £5.4 million to the further education sector to ensure that colleges can boost such provision, most of which is free to the learner, depending on the circumstances of the learner and the provider. We are not aware of any shortage of relevant teachers but, in partnership with Communities Scotland, we are currently sponsoring a mapping exercise to determine the extent and quality of public provision in Scotland of English for speakers of other languages.

Donald Gorrie: The minister's response is encouraging and shows that the Executive takes the matter seriously. It is important to provide language teaching for those who have skills to offer Scotland, but who do not have the necessary language skills. Will he encourage the system to take account of people who have perhaps been here for a while and fallen through the net, but who would contribute much better if they had better English?

Mr Wallace: That is an important point, because people who are here but who have fallen through the net undoubtedly have an important contribution to make to the social, cultural and economic life of Scotland. As I indicated, in responding to the Scottish refugee integration forum's action plan, we said that we intended to develop a national strategy for speakers of other languages who are in Scotland. A number of streams of work are going on in that area and we hope to be able to have the feedback from that work before too long and to respond to it by developing the national strategy that we promised.

Maureen Macmillan (Highlands and Islands) (Lab): Will the minister consult the Minister for Education and Young People on the matter, given that it involves schools? I perceive that people from the new entrants to the European Union who are working in the Highlands and Islands are considering bringing their families to Scotland. That places a burden on schools, not just in relation to the provision of teachers but in relation to costs. I have been told that each dictionary costs £80, that there is a shortage of translators and that some migrants to Scotland are working as unpaid translators. I feel that that is inappropriate and I wonder whether the minister will think about how he will deal with the situation.

Mr Wallace: I am certainly prepared to draw Maureen Macmillan's comments to the attention of Peter Peacock. We accept that there might be shortages in some parts of the country, although it is difficult to gauge the extent and nature of such shortages at any particular time. Indeed, that is one of the reasons why we commissioned the research that is being undertaken to map the extent and quality of provision of English language courses for speakers of other languages throughout Scotland.

Corporate Social Responsibility

3. Mary Scanlon (Highlands and Islands) (Con): To ask the Scottish Executive what action is being taken to encourage corporate social responsibility in businesses. (S2O-3078)

The Deputy First Minister and Minister for Enterprise and Lifelong Learning (Mr Jim Wallace): Businesses are encouraged to adopt the principles of corporate social responsibility in a wide variety of ways—I include in that the work of Scottish Business in the Community, which is supported by the Scottish Executive. Scottish Enterprise has established its policy in relation to corporate social responsibility and it is working through an action plan for implementation. Highlands and Islands Enterprise is committed to the key principles of CSR in its interaction with businesses, including its promotion of Investors in People, energy efficiency and the reduction of waste.

Mary Scanlon: I hoped that the Minister for Communities would respond to my question as I understand she has responsibility for the matter, but it is nice to see joined-up working. Will the Executive ensure that organisations that pay taxes and rates and contribute to our social fabric are given the recognition that they deserve for their often unsung contribution to our society?

Mr Wallace: Yes—I am certainly prepared to do that. People sometimes suggest that Scotland is not performing as well on corporate social responsibility as other parts of the United

Kingdom, but the answer to that is that we have a large small and medium-sized business sector and many of those companies do the things that Mary Scanlon refers to. They are flowing with the tide in promoting corporate social responsibility but they are not always badged as such, so I am more than happy to acknowledge the work that they do. It is good to know that organisations such as the Federation of Small Businesses in Scotland and Scottish Business in the Community are involved in the issue and are encouraging small businesses to undertake activities that are relevant to CSR. This is an appropriate occasion on which to recognise that.

Dennis Canavan (Falkirk West) (Ind): In view of the proposed closure of the British Alcan aluminium works at Falkirk, which will mean the loss of 85 jobs, will the minister urge the company to face up to its responsibilities by having genuine consultations with the work force and the wider community about all possible future options? There has been an aluminium industry in Falkirk for many decades and the local community has provided a loyal work force during all those years.

Mr Wallace: I very much regret the loss of jobs, not least as it is in a place where the industry has a long tradition. As Dennis Canavan rightly says, for generations many people from the community have contributed their skills to the industry. I hope that the company is engaged in trying to ensure that there are arrangements in place to help those who are about to lose their jobs. I am sure that the local enterprise company, through the partnership action for continuing employment—or PACE—initiative will be engaged in that too.

Rob Gibson (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): What action will the Executive take to change the decision of the supermarket chain Morrisons to levy a 7.5 per cent surcharge on common items in the smaller Safeway stores that it recently bought? What corporate social responsibility is Morrisons displaying to its customers on islands such as the Orkneys and in other small communities, given that those customers have little or no alternative means to purchase their weekly shopping elsewhere?

Mr Wallace: I recognise the point that Rob Gibson makes, but before Government intervenes in detail in any corporate enterprise one has to be very careful indeed. I will, of course, consider the particular point that he raises.

Security

4. Phil Gallie (South of Scotland) (Con): To ask the Scottish Executive what steps it is taking to address any economic changes resulting from the implementation of Her Majesty's Government's proposals in "Delivering Security in a Changing World: Future Capabilities." (S2O-3023)

The Deputy First Minister and Minister for Enterprise and Lifelong Learning (Mr Jim Wallace): As I am sure Mr Gallie and other members well know, defence is a matter reserved to the United Kingdom Parliament. However, the Scottish Executive is working closely with Ministry of Defence ministers and officials and will work with local agencies, including local authorities and local enterprise companies, to mitigate any economic impact on communities that might be affected by the latest armed forces review.

Phil Gallie: I am well aware of that, but I asked about the effect on Scotland's economy. The further downsizing of our overburdened armed forces will have an effect on our manufacturing industry, service industry and high-tech industries in particular, because the armed services provide very good training indeed for our young people—training that is used ultimately by those industries. Will the minister undertake to talk to his Westminster colleagues to see what can be done about covering that gap in training?

Mr Wallace: I acknowledge that Mr Gallie asked the question in the context of economic impact. I assure him that, as and when final decisions are made and it is possible to make some assessment of the economic impact, we stand ready to engage with the community and, ahead of that, to talk to the Ministry of Defence. Indeed, as I have indicated, we work with ministers and officials with regard to the impact on communities. It is worth putting on the record that the estimated value of Ministry of Defence contracts placed with companies in Scotland since 2000 is approximately £2 billion, which I think indicates the importance of the role of the Ministry of Defence in the Scottish economy.

Jeremy Purvis (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD): Given the importance of the Ministry of Defence contracts—the minister will be aware that, as well as generic contracts, technical textiles are an important aspect, with the potential that we have for body armour—will he ensure that Scottish Enterprise and Scottish textiles promote the Scottish textile industry in aggressively pursuing MoD contracts?

Mr Wallace: Given the engagement that I have had with the Scottish textile industry, including at the national textiles conference earlier this year, I think it is an industry that, having had considerable setbacks, is now very much geared up to identifying opportunities for investment and markets. I will certainly ensure that Mr Purvis's comments that here is an opportunity with regard to making provision for the MoD are relayed to Scottish Enterprise's textiles division.

A9

5. Mr John Swinney (North Tayside) (SNP):

To ask the Scottish Executive what plans it has to upgrade the A9 between Perth and Inverness. (S2O-3056)

The Minister for Transport (Nicol Stephen):

We are developing proposals to extend the dual carriageway at Crubenmore by around 2km at a cost of £5.6 million and to provide 4km of additional overtaking opportunities between Kincaig and Dalraddy at a cost of £6.7 million. I expect to publish draft orders for those two schemes early next year. A number of other improvements are planned and a route improvement study has been commissioned that will report in autumn 2005.

Mr Swinney: I thank the minister for his answer and for the interest that he took in the A9 over the summer, because of the severe weather. As part of the process of upgrading the A9, the former transport minister announced the upgrade of the killer junction at Ballinluig and said that work would be undertaken during the financial years 2003-04 and 2004-05. Earlier this summer it became clear that that work is much more likely to take place in the financial year 2005-06. Will the minister explain why that slippage has taken place? Does he understand the anger and frustration at the delay and will he give me a reassurance that there will be no further slippage in the timescale involved?

Nicol Stephen: I agree that the upgrading of the junction at Ballinluig is a high priority. It is a scheme that the Executive is determined to proceed with. As John Swinney pointed out, over the summer I visited the A9 to look at not only the landslip but the Ballinluig junction—I stopped there specifically. I will do everything in my power to ensure that the project now proceeds as speedily as possible.

John Farquhar Munro (Ross, Skye and Inverness West) (LD): I am sure that motorists will be grateful that the recent improvements that the minister mentioned have been carried out on the A9 between Perth and Inverness, but could I remind the minister that the A9 extends beyond Inverness? In fact, it extends to the far north of Scotland, and I am sure that the people in that area would welcome any commitment that the minister can give to improve that section of the A9.

Nicol Stephen: A range of improvement works is taking place on the A9 to the north of Inverness, some of which I visited over the summer months. Significant improvements are under way right along the length of the A9, although I realise that there is always demand for more sooner. Overtaking opportunities are important, given the platooning or gathering together of cars and, in

particular, lorries that occurs, which leads to frustration and dangerous and unsafe overtaking manoeuvres. All that work is important and, as I pointed out, more is planned in the coming months and years. We are talking about investing tens of millions of pounds in the A9. I know that a number of members have campaigned over the long term for a full dualling of the road, but the improvements will make a significant difference. In safety terms, the A9 already compares well with other trunk roads in Scotland.

Fergus Ewing (Inverness East, Nairn and Lochaber) (SNP): I am one of those who has campaigned and will continue to campaign for the full dualling of the A9 to Inverness. Does the minister accept the case in principle? If so, when will it be delivered? Can he specify the year, decade, century or millennium?

Nicol Stephen: No, I cannot, because as I said in the answer to the previous question, the proposal to dual the A9 has not been approved by the Executive. Our priority is investment in public transport projects. At the same time, we are extending investment in roads projects and we are growing the transport budget to £1 billion per year. However, we are determined to increase the amount of investment in public transport projects, which is why we are investing in new rail and tram schemes.

I know that the campaigns to dual the A9, the A96 and other roads will continue. We are doing a lot in terms of the M74 and the M77—the Glasgow southern orbital—so it is not a question of the Executive in any way turning against the dualling of new roads. We want the road network in Scotland to improve and we want transport connections to improve, but I am not in a position today to give Fergus Ewing his start date.

Lord James Douglas-Hamilton (Lothians) (Con): Does the minister accept that moving from dual carriageway to single carriageway at frequent intervals on the A9 is one of the contributory factors to the relatively high accident rate? Will he keep safety considerations as a top priority in taking forward his plans?

Nicol Stephen: I do not agree. If evidence of the kind to which Lord James referred was drawn to my attention I would ensure that action was taken. If there were identifiable blackspots and particular problem areas I would ensure that schemes were brought forward to address them. Wherever there are serious accidents, deaths and serious injuries on the road network, we prioritise those areas and take steps to ensure that incidents do not happen again. A good example of that is to the north of Inverness on the A9, at North Kessock. Although everyone wants to see the long-term solution of a grade-separated junction, we improved the junction by reducing the speed

limit and introducing other safety measures to improve the safety of the road and warn drivers of the dangers of the road at that point.

Road Safety (Sheltered Housing)

6. Brian Adam (Aberdeen North) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Executive what guidance it issues to local authorities on road safety near sheltered housing complexes. (S2O-3066)

The Minister for Transport (Nicol Stephen): No guidance has been issued specifically on road safety near sheltered housing. However, existing guidance includes advice on the needs of elderly and disabled road users.

Brian Adam: I am aware—as the minister will be, given that he is a member for Aberdeen—that there are many sheltered housing complexes in the city and that the residents want safe road crossings. However, Aberdeen City Council appears to hide behind the current regulations on road crossings. Will the minister assure me that he will issue appropriate guidance that will allow the installation of crossings near sheltered housing where there is sufficient demand, not just a certain amount of road usage?

Nicol Stephen: If a local road is involved, those matters are for the local council. Given that local councils have significant discretion in this area, it would be unfair of them to pass responsibility to the Scottish Executive. However, I am willing to consider the issue and to find out the extent of the concerns throughout Scotland. If there is a particular issue in Aberdeen and if Brian Adam writes to me to draw the matter to my attention, I will follow it up to see what can be done.

Separate responsibilities for trunk roads rest with the Executive. There is a range of regulations, which I will not read out now, but if there were the need for a crossing near a sheltered housing complex, I would look on that matter sympathetically, if at all possible.

Justice and Law Officers

Aggressive Driving

1. Richard Baker (North East Scotland) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive what action it is taking to prevent crimes that are associated with aggressive driving. (S2O-3033)

The Minister for Justice (Cathy Jamieson): The Executive is determined to improve safety in our communities. We have introduced legislation to give the police powers to stop and seize vehicles that are being used in a manner causing alarm, distress or annoyance to members of the public. We have also put in place a range of measures to combat dangerous and inconsiderate

driving, including giving the police national targets to reduce road accidents, supporting safety camera partnerships and introducing a national driver-improvement scheme.

Richard Baker: The minister will be aware of the problems in Aberdeen that are caused by cars being raced in some of the city's streets, particularly by young men in vehicles that are altered for the purpose of racing them. In the past, the police have had difficulty securing convictions for such offences. Will she assure me that the Executive is considering further measures to deter that reckless type of car crime, which endangers lives?

Cathy Jamieson: I absolutely condemn anyone who knowingly drives recklessly or dangerously. Of course, young people can enjoy driving and can use their driving licence to get out and about or to access a range of employment and training initiatives. However, they must be able to drive responsibly. As I outlined, we legislated on the matter in the Antisocial Behaviour etc (Scotland) Act 2004 and further measures will come into force later this year. Regulations are to be laid after consultation with the appropriate stakeholders. I assure members that the Executive takes the matter seriously and will continue to keep it under review.

Christine Grahame (South of Scotland) (SNP): There are many problems in the Scottish Borders, and Scotland-wide, with boy and girl racers. I hear what the minister says about antisocial behaviour orders and road traffic legislation, but a vehicle cannot be seized unless there is a breach of that legislation and such people are not in breach of any road traffic regulations. The police tell me that a huge problem is the exhausts that those young men and women put on their cars to soup them up and make them noisy. The police say that a simple measure would be to regulate the souping up of exhausts. Will the minister be in communication with the Minister for Transport, who says that he talks about the issue all the time, to ensure that the situation is changed? That simple action would prevent nuisance in many of our villages and towns.

Cathy Jamieson: I am sure that the Minister for Transport in the Scottish Executive wishes to discuss with me a range of issues about ensuring that our roads are safer. I remind members that the Home Secretary announced a general review of a number of pieces of road traffic law. There is a working group at UK level that includes transport and justice officials from the Scottish Executive and which will consider a range of issues, including careless and dangerous driving. We look forward to the consultation that has been promised when the group publishes its report.

Prison Governors Association

2. Mr Stewart Maxwell (West of Scotland) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Executive what action it will take to ensure that the Scottish Prison Service recognises the Prison Governors Association. (S2O-3007)

The Minister for Justice (Cathy Jamieson): The Executive is committed to working in partnership with trade unions not only in the justice services but across all that it does. The interests of prison governors are already represented by one of the recognised trade unions for the purposes of collective bargaining.

Mr Maxwell: I thank the minister for her answer. However, prison governors play an important and central role in the Scottish Prison Service and the decision by the SPS leaves the prison governors without representation and excludes them from participating fully in the prison service when the SPS, the Prison Officers Association Scotland and the Public and Commercial Services Union are all fully involved. Given that prison governors have decided to switch to the new organisation, will she urge the SPS management to enter into talks with the PGA to try to achieve a speedy and satisfactory outcome for all concerned?

Cathy Jamieson: I very much value the contribution that is made by prison governors and prison staff throughout Scotland; I had the opportunity to meet many of them during visits that I made during the summer recess. The important point to remember is that, like other staff, prison governors have the opportunity to join a trade union of their choice, but the SPS has an agreement with a number of trade unions—four, in fact—around a single table in terms of collective bargaining. That does not stop individual prison governors joining the PGA and it does not stop the PGA having recognition for individual complaints and grievances, but it is important to recognise that the partnership approach that the SPS and the trade union side have taken has brought benefits into the system and has given us the opportunity to have some stability in industrial relations—I would not want to lose that.

Mclnnes Review

3. Mike Pringle (Edinburgh South) (LD): To ask the Scottish Executive how many responses it has received to the consultation on the recommendations of the Mclnnes review. (S2O-3012)

The Minister for Justice (Cathy Jamieson): The consultation on the review of summary justice ran from 16 March to 16 July, during which time 239 responses were received. One hundred and fourteen responses from individuals and 125 responses from organisations were submitted.

Mike Pringle: Can the minister tell me whether a majority of the responses are in favour of retaining an element of lay justice in the new system? Can she give me an assurance that if the majority of responses come out in favour of the dissenting voice on the Mclnnes report she will listen to that?

Cathy Jamieson: I always take very seriously any consultation that the Executive undertakes. One of the fundamental principles of the Parliament is that we consult and, despite the fact that we are sometimes criticised for the amount of consultation that we do, I make no apologies for that.

We will, of course, give due weight to the comments that have been made during the consultation, but it is important to recognise that it is not simply a numerical exercise in terms of the number of responses that are submitted to the consultation. I have received an analysis of the responses, which have been put together, and I am considering that very carefully. I can say that a number of issues have been raised about lay justice, unification of the court system and a whole range of other issues that were included in the Mclnnes review. I want to consider the responses carefully and I will come back to Parliament to respond in due course.

Mr John Home Robertson (East Lothian) (Lab): I hope that the minister will conclude that there is an overwhelming case for retaining lay justices as a feature of the justice system in Scotland. However, does she share my concerns about establishment control over the selection and appointment of justices of the peace in Scotland? Does she agree that lords lieutenant are not necessarily the most appropriate people to have the lead role in the selection and appointment of JPs?

Cathy Jamieson: It is important to recognise that the reason why we consulted on the issue in the first place is that we want to consider speeding up the process of summary justice and making it connect better with our local communities. As we heard in the debate this morning, many people are concerned to ensure that that feature of the system continues. Many members who spoke in the debate this morning outlined the valuable work that JPs have done in the past, but it is also fair to say that concerns have been expressed to me that the system is not always as representative of local communities as it might be. However we take the matter forward, my priority will be to have an effective system that speeds up the process and connects with local communities.

Michael Matheson (Central Scotland) (SNP): In the light of the Criminal Procedure (Amendment) (Scotland) Act 2004, which will see some 20 per cent of High Court work moved down

to the sheriff court system, and given that McInnes has recommended that district court work should be moved up to the summary sheriff courts, there is a danger that our summary sheriff courts may not be able to cope with the demands that are being placed upon them. Can the minister therefore give an assurance that before any of the proposed changes in McInnes are made there will be a detailed assessment of their impact on the summary sheriff court system in Scotland?

Cathy Jamieson: I am sure that the member is aware that the McInnes report proposes a unified court system and a new system of summary sheriff courts. It is not fair to say that it will simply be a case of moving cases up in the existing system. Of course I will carefully consider all the contributions that have been made. I reiterate that the review is about speeding up the system and giving communities a better opportunity to be connected to their local courts system, so that what happens in relation to the justice system is visible and communities can be confident that when people are detected, put through the prosecution system into the courts and sentenced, there will be something to prevent them from reoffending. The courts system has a great contribution to make to that.

Peterhead Prison

4. Nora Radcliffe (Gordon) (LD): To ask the Scottish Executive what recent discussions it has had with the Scottish Prison Service regarding HM Prison Peterhead. (S2O-3030)

The Minister for Justice (Cathy Jamieson): I visited Peterhead prison on 24 August. I met staff, prisoners and representatives from the unions and the local authority.

Nora Radcliffe: I thank the minister for that and for making the time to call at Craiginches prison in the by-going, which was much appreciated. Does she agree that there are some very positive factors at Peterhead, such as the local acceptance of the prison, effective programmes for a specialised category of prisoner and cross-agency work to improve preparation for release? In the light of those positive factors, is serious consideration being given to a new-build replacement prison in Peterhead?

Cathy Jamieson: During my visit I was impressed by the expertise and commitment shown by all the staff whom I met in Peterhead. It would be obvious to any observer that the staff are dedicated and focused on their work and that their work enjoys tremendous support from the local community. I recognise that work with sex offenders is by its very nature a difficult task and it was encouraging to see that the staff have a genuine enthusiasm for their work and a clear understanding of their role in the rehabilitation

process. I am also aware of the enthusiasm that Aberdeenshire Council has shown and the council's willingness to try to work with and support the prison. The member will be aware that I have asked the Scottish Prison Service to update the prison estates review and of course, as I said when I visited Peterhead prison, I will take account of the representations that were made to me during my visit when I consider the Scottish Prison Service's response.

Stewart Stevenson (Banff and Buchan) (SNP): I welcome the continuing cross-party agreement that the work of Peterhead prison is important for public safety throughout Scotland and makes a valuable economic contribution to the local community. The minister referred to community support. Is she aware of any other community in Scotland that has bid to take over the responsibilities that Peterhead prison currently discharges through the Scottish criminal justice system?

Cathy Jamieson: I thank Stewart Stevenson for his hospitality during my visit to Peterhead. Members might remember that he made a spending commitment before the summer recess, when he said that he would take me to lunch at the vegetarian restaurant of the year. I am pleased to say that the Scottish National Party delivered at least on that one promise.

I can answer Mr Stevenson's question fairly straightforwardly: no, people have not been beating a path to my door to offer to take over those services.

Pollution Cases

5. Eleanor Scott (Highlands and Islands) (Green): To ask the Scottish Executive on how many occasions in 2003-04 procurators fiscal recommended no action on pollution cases forwarded to them by the Scottish Environment Protection Agency and what proportion of cases that represented. (S2O-3131)

The Lord Advocate (Colin Boyd): A total of 53 cases were reported to the procurator fiscal by SEPA in 2003-04. According to information on cases in respect of which a decision has been made, the procurator fiscal took no proceedings in seven of those cases.

Eleanor Scott: Is there any evidence to suggest that current trends and practices have changed since the appointment of specially trained prosecutors in February 2004? Have policy changes resulted in a higher average level of fine for breaches of environmental legislation? If so, what is the amount of the increase?

The Lord Advocate: We have established a network of specialist prosecutors within the Crown Office and Procurator Fiscal Service; there are

now a total of 17 throughout the country. They undertake joint training with people in SEPA twice a year and are available as an area resource. It is too early to give the kind of information that Eleanor Scott has been asking for—on whether there have been improvements in the service as a result. All I can say is that there is a much-improved working relationship with SEPA, which I very much welcome. I think that that relationship will deepen and that we will be in a position to put before courts in Scotland cases that are much better presented.

Dr Sylvia Jackson (Stirling) (Lab): Following the issues that have been raised by the spreading of blood and guts on land at Argaty near Doune in my constituency, will the Lord Advocate describe the progress made—by regulation and other means—to ensure that such things do not happen again, anywhere in Scotland?

The Lord Advocate: I understand that the particular circumstances that gave rise to the problem in Sylvia Jackson's constituency have now been amended by regulation—which means, as I understand it, that those particular circumstances could not happen again, at least not legally. If she cares to write to me with the full details of the particular case she mentions, either I or the minister responsible for the regulations will answer her.

Offences Aggravated by Religious Hatred

6. Donald Gorrie (Central Scotland) (LD): To ask the Scottish Executive what the latest available figures are for the number of cases of offences aggravated by religious hatred coming before the courts and how many convictions there have been for such offences. (S2O-3017)

The Lord Advocate (Colin Boyd): Religious hatred in whatever manifestation has no place in a modern Scotland. As at 3 September 2004, there have been 172 charges of offences aggravated by religious hatred heard before the courts that have proceeded to conclusion. Of those, 140 have resulted in convictions. At present, I cannot confirm that each of those convictions included religious aggravation, but I will forward that information as soon as it comes to hand.

Donald Gorrie: That is very encouraging. Does the Lord Advocate agree that it is important that we keep up a steady flow of information on this subject so that everyone involved can see whether the system is working and whether any changes need to be made? In particular, does he welcome the decision of the police officer in charge of the most recent Rangers v Celtic football match, who published the figures for the number of arrests and the number of people charged with religious hatred in that context? That sort of information is very valuable.

The Lord Advocate: I certainly accept the need for information and I can tell Donald Gorrie that the Crown Office will be publishing a report on the first six months of the working of this offence. So far as the information given by the police officer in relation to the Rangers v Celtic match is concerned, the important thing is that we continue our vigilance in respect of these matters. Everybody should work together to ensure that such cases are brought before court when there is sufficient evidence.

Royal Family (Protection)

7. Mr David Davidson (North East Scotland) (Con): To ask the Scottish Executive what specific resources it will give to police forces to provide protection for the royal family. (S2O-3001)

The Minister for Justice (Cathy Jamieson): I am sure that the member will agree that we should be cautious about disclosing specific details about the protection measures that are in place for royalty and other public figures, in case that affects their security. For that reason, it is the Executive's policy not to comment on such issues.

Mr Davidson: I thank the minister for her partial answer. Perhaps she will tell us specifically whether any additional money at all goes to police forces for protection services to the royal family. She may care to write to me privately to explain the mechanisms used.

Cathy Jamieson: I thought that I had given a full and straight answer rather than a partial answer. I am happy to write to the member if he has specific concerns about a particular area. I am sure that we can try to resolve those issues privately.

General Questions

Scottish Ambulance Service

1. Mr John Swinney (North Tayside) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Executive what plans it has to review levels of service delivery by the Scottish Ambulance Service. (S2O-3058)

The Minister for Health and Community Care (Malcolm Chisholm): The Scottish Executive Health Department continually monitors and reviews the performance of the Scottish Ambulance Service. Following discussions at the service's accountability review in May, the department is expecting to receive a report from the Ambulance Service later this year on progress in implementing priority-based dispatch across Scotland. I have written today to the chairman to make it clear that I expect to see service improvement delivered to urban and rural areas of Scotland in equal measure.

Mr Swinney: I am grateful to the minister for his answer, particularly his commitment in relation to ambulance services in rural constituencies, of which I represent one. In the light of two major factors that are now affecting the health service in Scotland—the introduction of the new general practitioner out-of-hours services and the concentration of hospital facilities in fewer centres resulting in more patient journeys—why is the Scottish Ambulance Service proposing to reduce capacity in the rural areas of Perthshire and Angus that I represent? Why is there a dysfunction between the priorities of the health service in Tayside NHS Board and the priorities of the Scottish Ambulance Service at a national level? It appears to many of us that one arm of government does not know what the other is doing. Can the minister please bang some heads together to protect public services in rural Scotland?

Malcolm Chisholm: As far as I am aware, there are no proposals from the Ambulance Service to reduce provision in Highland Perthshire, which is the area that John Swinney is concerned about. He raises two issues. In relation to the out-of-hours service, it was part of the good out-of-hours consultation and agreement in Tayside that an extra ambulance should be provided at Aberfeldy. Having checked that, I can say that that is still going to be in position. There is another exercise involved in terms of the redistribution of the ambulance service in Highland Perthshire. Again, my understanding is that the service will still be maintained in that part of Scotland. If John Swinney has further information and concerns, I am prepared to look into the matter in more detail.

Alex Fergusson (Galloway and Upper Nithsdale) (Con): If John Swinney's question had been asked solely in the context of my constituency, I would have endorsed it 100 per cent. The advent of the new out-of-hours model that is proposed by Dumfries and Galloway NHS Board, along with the inconsistencies of NHS 24, is undoubtedly going to heap untold new pressures on the Ambulance Service. I recently met local managers who are seriously concerned about their ability to deliver on the targets. Will the minister ensure that the service is funded to the appropriate level to meet the extra challenges that it faces as a result of his reforms? Does he have a plan B in the event of the Ambulance Service not being able to deliver on its targets in some parts of the country, with a consequent collapse of the blue-light services that it is expected to deliver?

Malcolm Chisholm: The Ambulance Service is central to out-of-hours care and to emergency care more generally, as is NHS 24. No doubt, there are certain glitches, but all the patient surveys indicate that NHS 24 is being very positively received by patients, which is what matters. The Ambulance Service will be critical not

only in Dumfries and Galloway but throughout Scotland. I am sure that we were all pleased to see the television report earlier this week about paramedics in an ambulance in Lothian who administered clot-busting drugs on the scene of a collapse. The man involved is now alive and well to tell the tale. Let us commend all the new things that are being done by paramedics and the massive contribution that they are making to emergency care.

Mr Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): In fairness to the minister, I have to say that I would be surprised if he is aware of this situation. In north-west Sutherland, the Ambulance Service appears to be proposing the removal of staff, which would mean that an ambulance would be run by only one person, not two. For the life of me, I cannot see how people can drive and look after patients. Will he look at that proposal as and when it comes before him? I cannot see how any such proposal could in any way augment health services in my constituency.

Malcolm Chisholm: When I visited hospitals and other health services in the Highland region recently, the issue was raised with me of what seems to be an increasing use of single-crewed ambulances in the region. I have looked into that and I have written the chairman of the Ambulance Service—as I said in my first answer—saying that the use of single-crewed ambulances must be reduced in the Highlands. Some unavoidable instances of that may occur if somebody calls off at the last minute, but that practice should not be used. I have asked about that and will receive regular reports to ensure that the use of single-crewed ambulances in the Highlands is reduced.

Mr Duncan McNeil (Greenock and Inverclyde) (Lab): I endorse and welcome the minister's response about the valuable job that paramedics do. I am also pleased to hear that the Scottish Executive keeps the Ambulance Service under review and monitors it regularly. What research has been commissioned into the impact on the Ambulance Service operating in Argyll and Clyde of transferring large numbers of patients to Paisley Royal Alexandra hospital?

Malcolm Chisholm: The Ambulance Service was fully involved in changes that have taken place and was given extra resources in Argyll and Clyde because of the changes. However, Duncan McNeil is right. When any changes have taken place, it is important to monitor their effects, including the effect on the Ambulance Service. I can certainly look into that and give him further information about the effects so far.

Diabetes

2. Mike Pringle (Edinburgh South) (LD): To ask the Scottish Executive when the review of the "Scottish Diabetes Framework" will be published. (S2O-3013)

The Minister for Health and Community Care (Malcolm Chisholm): We intend to publish a document for consultation at the conference entitled "Diabetes in Scotland 2004: Strengths and Challenges" in November. The final report will be published in May 2005.

Mike Pringle: Will the minister assure me that the framework recognises the importance of preventing and tackling obesity, as it is a major factor in the onset of diabetes, especially in middle-aged men?

Malcolm Chisholm: Mike Pringle is right to emphasise the connection between obesity and diabetes type II but, of course, obesity has much wider health implications. Prevention will be given an enhanced emphasis in the review. It is clear that obesity is central, but the strategies to deal with obesity are wider than the diabetes strategy—they are central to the whole health improvement strategy. Dealing with obesity is one of the major challenges that we face as a nation, but the problem's scope is much wider than Scotland.

We are making much progress on many fronts on health improvement—I will touch on some of that in the next debate—but we know that we are moving in the wrong direction on obesity. It is important to state the seriousness of the situation and devise appropriate policies to challenge it. The Scottish diet action plan and all the food policies that we have, in conjunction with the physical activity strategy, are central. I am pleased that the World Health Organisation commended our approach of putting those two central strands together, but the challenge for us is to deliver results that are based on those good policies.

Christine Grahame (South of Scotland) (SNP): Is the minister aware that if the prevalence of obesity continues to grow at the same rate as now, by 2010, one in four Scottish adults will be obese? That will have an impact on type II diabetes. Against that background, has he considered the Finnish diabetes prevention study? If so, what comments does he have on it? If not, I will give him the reference later.

Malcolm Chisholm: I confess that I have not managed to read the Finnish diabetes prevention study. I will be happy to receive a copy from Christine Grahame. We certainly know that many good examples of health improvement successes come from Finland. They usually concern Finland's progress on coronary heart disease, but diabetes relates to that in many ways.

Without in any way being complacent, we should also remember the progress that we have made on coronary heart disease. For example, I was pleased to hear just this week that the progress in Forth valley that was being highlighted to me has been greater than that in North Karelia, which was the great demonstration site in Europe for progress on heart disease.

Mary Scanlon (Highlands and Islands) (Con): As the diabetes framework gives priority to patients with diabetes for chiropody treatment, how will the minister ensure that elderly patients whose mobility and independence depend on chiropody care do not lose out as a result?

Malcolm Chisholm: Some of the difficulties in podiatry services that Mary Scanlon highlighted before the recess arise because of the priority that we are giving to diabetes patients. Some of the changes that have taken place are the result of reprioritisation. Certainly, people with diabetes are being given priority as part of that.

Children's Hearings System

3. Eleanor Scott (Highlands and Islands) (Green): To ask the Scottish Executive when results from its consultation on the review of the children's hearings system will be made public. (S2O-3123)

The Minister for Education and Young People (Peter Peacock): Responses to the phase 1 consultation exercise have been available to the public in the Scottish Executive library since 18 August. Separately, we have commissioned an independent analysis of the responses to the exercise. That report is currently being finalised and we will publish it as soon as possible.

Eleanor Scott: Given that phase 1 of the review has been completed, when exactly does the minister expect to begin phase 2? How will children and young people be involved in that phase? Will he confirm that the Executive remains committed to the children's hearings system?

Peter Peacock: I will deal with the member's questions in reverse order. The clear outcome of the first phase of the children's hearings system review has been that the principles of the system are regarded by most people as exactly right. Those principles are that there should be a single system that deals both with those who offend and with those who are in need of care and protection. However, from the first phase of the review, it has become clear that a huge amount still needs to be done to make the outcomes for children significantly better than they currently are. That has raised a number of policy questions for us, which we are in the process of considering. We will, of course, make a decision about when to publish the phase 2 consultation shortly. We still

hope to do that this autumn, but there are major questions that we still have to answer. As part of the phase 2 process, we will be glad and willing to facilitate ways of hearing the views of young people about the hearings system and its future.

Vaccines (Advice to General Practitioners)

4. Mr David Davidson (North East Scotland)

(Con): To ask the Scottish Executive what advice it has given to general practitioners regarding the provision of the new thiomersal-free vaccine for whooping cough, polio, diphtheria, tetanus and haemophilus influenzae in advance of its own statement on the product. (S2O-3002)

The Deputy Minister for Health and Community Care (Mr Tom McCabe): On 8 August 2004, the chief medical officer, the chief nursing officer and the chief pharmaceutical officer jointly wrote to GPs and other health professionals to announce and explain the programme for the changeover to the new vaccine for children. The chief medical officer held a press conference on the following day to announce the change more widely.

Mr Davidson: I am sorry that I did not hear all that the minister had to say, but I get the impression that the notice that was given was very short. I raise the issue of public confidence in the vaccination programmes. There was great concern that parents were still being offered the old vaccine when they were being told in the press, through the minister's statements, that the new vaccine would be available. That caused problems for GPs. Surely the point is that parents are allowing their children to be vaccinated on the advice of their GPs and that the matter is for them to decide. The minister has caused complete confusion. What steps has he taken to make that good?

Mr McCabe: The member raises a number of issues. The information to which he refers appeared in a letter to a GP from an official of the Health Protection Agency in England, which was leaked to *The Daily Telegraph* newspaper. Although that newspaper was given the full facts, it decided to run a story that distorted the facts and caused considerable alarm. It is, of course, always necessary to announce such a change in advance of the implementation date. A period of time is required so that professionals can receive training, information can be disseminated and vaccines can be made available on site for delivery to patients. That is and always will be the case.

I turn to concerns that exist about the vaccine. This is a new vaccine. A similar five-in-one vaccine has been used in Canada since 1997 and there have been more than 10 million administrations. The vaccine is judged to be safe there. Our advisers in this country tell us

unequivocally that the vaccine is safe. They also told us that the previous vaccine was safe. The reason for the change is that the new vaccine is thiomersal or mercury free, which fits in well with the World Health Organisation's overall policy of avoiding unnecessary exposure to mercury.

Tourism (Fife and Central Scotland)

5. Scott Barrie (Dunfermline West) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive what progress it is making in promoting Fife and central Scotland as a tourist destination for international visitors arriving by ferry at Rosyth. (S2O-3085)

The Minister for Tourism, Culture and Sport (Mr Frank McAveety): Scotland's area tourist boards are responsible for promoting their individual areas. However, in conjunction with VisitScotland, Kingdom of Fife tourist board and other east coast tourist boards work in partnership actively to promote Scotland, Fife and the surrounding area to international visitors arriving on the Superfast service from Zeebrugge to Rosyth.

Scott Barrie: The minister is well aware of the tremendous success of the Rosyth to Zeebrugge route and that discussions are under way to establish a route from Rosyth to Scandinavia. For Fife and central Scotland to benefit fully from the tourism potential of such routes, will he ensure that promotional materials are available at the points of embarkation and on the ferries themselves and that adequate brown tourist signage is provided?

Mr McAveety: Such materials are already provided on the ferry itself. A new brochure in English and German is available at both Superfast ferry terminals and at the local tourist information centre. There is a VisitScotland presence at the terminal and discussions and partnerships with the local tourist board are continuing to address specific issues with regard to the ferry.

The issue of brown signage comes specifically within the remit of the transport division. However, dialogue is continuing between the tourism and transport divisions about how best to make available brown tourist signage that also reflects the motorway and road network in Scotland.

Bruce Crawford (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP): I am sure that the minister will agree that, as Scott Barrie has pointed out, the Rosyth to Zeebrugge ferry route has been an outstanding success. It has brought many new tourists and improved economic links into Scotland and Fife. However, would the route's success not be even more outstanding for Scotland if we could establish new routes into Scandinavia and Germany and turn the Rosyth and Forth area into

a North sea hub? What is the Executive doing to be proactive and secure such routes?

Mr McAveety: As I said earlier, active discussions are continuing among the tourism, transport and enterprise divisions to address the question how to improve the whole range of products and access points to Scotland. The Executive's record over the past five years of opening up Scotland to international tourists has been the best for generations. Obviously, I acknowledge the contribution that has been made by the ferry service itself. Having recently met the operators and local Fife representatives, I know that the service has genuinely made a difference.

Moreover, as part of its new focus, VisitScotland is clearly determined to identify where new markets in European tourism are emerging, particularly countries that would be best affected by the ferry service. Again, we are actively discussing how best to maximise that approach, but at the moment those matters are commercially confidential.

Mr Ted Brocklebank (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I, too, congratulate the operators of the ferry service from Rosyth to Zeebrugge. However, I am concerned that the long-term future of the service might not be as assured as some might believe, as it is largely dependent on the level of freight traffic that uses it. Perhaps, in that respect, the Minister for Transport would be able to respond to my question. How could the Executive encourage freight users to ensure the long-term future and viability of this much-praised service?

Mr McAveety: I am happy to respond with regard to the tourism agenda. The commercial ferry operator acknowledges that a balance must be struck between passenger and freight carriage. As a result, it is probably best to discuss that matter with the Minister for Transport. However, the member can rest assured that in our discussions with the operators they have been very positive about the response that they have received from customers and about the Executive's support. I am delighted to continue to provide that support and I am sure that we can continue to make the progress that we think is important to benefit Scotland and tourism in general.

Architectural Heritage

6. Irene Oldfather (Cunninghame South) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive what action it is taking to protect Scotland's architectural heritage. (S2O-3069)

The Minister for Tourism, Culture and Sport (Mr Frank McAveety): We are committed to protecting Scotland's architectural heritage through the legislation and policies that we now

have in place for scheduling, listing and the planning process and through our investment strategy for conserving the built heritage.

Irene Oldfather: I am sure that the minister will agree that, as we get to work in this inspirational building, it is appropriate that we reflect on other parts of our built heritage. Is he aware of the current situation that faces the Trinity church in Irvine and the Carrick-City of Adelaide, which is the only vessel in Scotland that Historic Scotland has classed as a grade A listed building? Will he assure us that he will work with Historic Scotland and the local community to find alternatives to demolition for both of these sites of national significance?

Mr McAveety: I know that Irene Oldfather has expressed considerable interest in both issues in the past and I welcome her commitment and contribution. I assure her that we want to work in partnership with local communities to develop projects right across Scotland's historic environment. As part of our review of grant mechanisms I have asked Historic Scotland to look at how we can engage more effectively through community involvement and community regeneration as a key element, rather than concentrating solely on the architectural or historic importance of buildings. We need to have balance, whether we are talking about the shipping environment or examples from the built environment such as Trinity church. Last weekend, Dundee launched its city heritage trust. Whether we are talking about cities or towns in Scotland, the Executive has shown its absolute commitment to ensuring that heritage is part of the regeneration of communities.

Point of Order

The Presiding Officer: The ministers have heard what you have said and they will take your remarks into consideration, Mr Ewing.

15:00

Fergus Ewing (Inverness East, Nairn and Lochaber) (SNP): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I gave notice of this point of order yesterday. I seek the Presiding Officer's guidance on what appears to be a manifest breach of protocol by the Scottish Executive.

Next week, we are to debate the Finance Committee's report on relocation, which is a substantial piece of work. Paragraph 17 of the protocol between the Scottish Executive and the Parliament states that, normally, the Executive response should be provided within two months of the publication of any committee report. Paragraph 17 further continues that if the Scottish Executive anticipates that it will be unable to comply within that two-month period, it is required to provide an explanation of why it cannot meet that deadline and also give a timetable of when its response will be published. It has done neither and it is therefore in breach.

Next Wednesday's debate must be informed by a response from the Executive. I therefore seek the Presiding Officer's guidance as to what remedy there is under standing orders against an Executive that breaches the rules so flagrantly. Does the rule book simply apply to others? Before close of proceedings today, will the Minister for Parliamentary Business give a clear explanation of what is happening and say when the report will be published?

The Presiding Officer (Mr George Reid): First, I thank Mr Ewing for giving me notice of his point of order.

As I have already confirmed to Mr Ewing, the protocol to which he refers does not have authority under standing orders. I have some sympathy with the Finance Committee's predicament, but it is not for the Presiding Officer to intervene. As paragraph 19 of the protocol goes on to indicate, the next course of action would be for the committee to agree that the convener of the committee should write directly to the minister concerned.

Fergus Ewing: Further to that point of order, Presiding Officer.

The Presiding Officer: If you keep it brief.

Fergus Ewing: There might not be an opportunity for the Finance Committee to deliberate on that matter before the debate, which is scheduled for next Wednesday. In the circumstances, will the Minister for Parliamentary Business make a statement about what is happening?

Scottish Executive's Programme

Resumed debate.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Murray Tosh): The next item of business is the continuation of the debate on the First Minister's statement on the programme of the Scottish Executive.

15:03

The Minister for Health and Community Care (Malcolm Chisholm): I concentrate today on the main concerns about the Scottish health service, namely service reconfiguration and waiting times, as well as on our proposed legislative measures. However, I begin by emphasising that health improvement will be intensified in the coming months, including action on smoking in public places, and that the quality improvements that we have made in health care—through national standards, new treatments and managed clinical networks—will be built upon and extended.

Those developments have already meant significant reductions in premature mortality from the big killer diseases. Since 1999 there has been a 6 per cent reduction in the deaths of people aged under 75 from cancer, a 14 per cent reduction in deaths from stroke and a 23 per cent reduction in deaths from coronary heart disease. One of the consequences of those and other changes is that many more people are now living with chronic illness and require support from primary and community care. That is where the new community health partnerships are so important, as they will ensure that front-line staff plan and provide an increasing amount of care in community settings. However, people do not just want more care in community settings; they want local hospitals to have a continuing role as well. I understand and support that desire, but it has to be satisfied in a way that is consistent with safe, high-quality care and with the new working time regulations.

Jackie Baillie: Will the minister take an intervention?

Malcolm Chisholm: In a minute—I want to say a little bit more first.

We need to recognise that health care is a complex process that requires the highest standards of risk management and safety and that, in some cases, there will be more specialisation to maintain quality and to ensure that professionals can practise safely with the right blend of skills and teamwork. That said, I will look at the proposals of all the health boards that come to me to ensure that the maximum amount of care that can safely be kept local is kept local.

Jackie Baillie: I thank the minister for that very positive comment.

The clearest evidence that health boards are paying only lip service to regional planning, even though the minister asked them to be attentive to it, is provided by what is going on in NHS Argyll and Clyde. It takes two and a half hours to get to the hospital in Paisley and five hospitals in Glasgow are bypassed en route. Will the minister therefore reject proposals that do not demonstrate regional planning and are clearly not in the interests of patients?

Malcolm Chisholm: I agree entirely with Jackie Baillie on regional planning, on which the National Health Service Reform (Scotland) Act 2004 contains provisions.

On several occasions, I have made it clear that, in planning changes, boards will be required to co-operate with one other. I showed that to be the case earlier this year, in my response to the maternity proposals of NHS Argyll and Clyde—I returned its proposals and told it to do some more work with Greater Glasgow NHS Board. Patients do not recognise health board boundaries; boards must work across those boundaries. A few weeks ago, I had a meeting with the chief executives of NHS Argyll and Clyde and Greater Glasgow NHS Board to make that clear and another meeting between those two chief executives and officials in my department is being held tomorrow.

Tommy Sheridan (Glasgow) (SSP): Will the minister take an intervention on that point?

Malcolm Chisholm: In a minute—I want to make a bit more progress, because I think that I have only six minutes for my speech, more than half of which has gone and I have still to deal with waiting.

I believe that we need a strong national context for such work and that is why I set up an expert group to work on a national framework for service change and improvement. A key part of the framework exercise will be to engage the public in what is a crucial debate. I understand why calls are being made for a complete moratorium on change while that group does its work, but that would overlook some issues of clinical safety that cannot be postponed in such a way.

Yesterday, David McLetchie said that we had given up on the health service, but I assure him and his colleagues that we will never give up on the health service, which they did a long time ago. We are determined to drive through the change and reforms that are needed to give Scotland a modern, 21st century health service; to offer choice that will allow patients to access the high-quality services that suit their needs when they need them; and to ensure that services are truly patient centred—both in the relationship between

professionals and patients and in ensuring that patient experience drives the process of change and modernisation.

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

Malcolm Chisholm: I have one minute and 30 seconds left and I must deal with waiting and legislation, so I am going to have difficulties.

Waiting matters to patients and that is why it matters to me. I have been the first to recognise that there is a great deal more to do, especially in relation to out-patient waiting. That is why we have embarked on the most systematic redesign programme that there has ever been in Scotland to deal with that problem. It will lead to a maximum six-month wait for out-patient clinics by the end of next year alongside a maximum six-month wait for in-patients. We are making steady progress on our commitment on that and, this year, the lowest numbers ever are waiting more than six months for in-patient treatment. I am determined to achieve further reductions in waiting times once we have reached the six-month targets and I will set out our plans in more detail in the next few weeks.

This session, we will also be introducing further legislation in support of our efforts to modernise and reform health services in Scotland and to strengthen the role of patients and the public. A key purpose of the legislation will be to enable the introduction of free eye and dental checks for all before 2007. That significant preventive health and access measure will ensure that any problems that require attention are detected and treated early.

The legislation will also modernise our arrangements for the authorisation of post-mortems to ensure that the wishes of individuals, parents and families are fully respected and that they have a greater sense of control.

John Scott (Ayr) (Con): Will the minister give way?

Malcolm Chisholm: I am sorry, but I am in my last minute.

We will also update the arrangements for organ and tissue donation and transplantation to ensure that the views of individuals and those closest to them are respected. The update is designed to increase confidence in those arrangements and increase the availability of organs for transplant.

We will also introduce provisions to support the modernisation of dental and pharmacy services. Time constraints prevent my going into more detail on those provisions.

Our policy is designed to support the promotion of health and the modernisation and improvement

of health services in Scotland. It is based on the needs and experience of patients. It will be driven forward and coordinated from the centre so that there is a national context for change. The real leaders of change, however, are the thousands of front-line staff who work in the health service. I want to end by thanking them and pledging to support them in every way I can.

15:10

Shona Robison (Dundee East) (SNP): I will begin by welcoming the forthcoming health bill, which will include measures to provide a better legal framework for organ and tissue donation and transplant. As the First Minister said yesterday, it is vital that families are treated with respect and that their loved ones are treated with dignity. Along with many members in the chamber, I have been involved in too many constituency cases in which that has not been the case. Moves to ensure those changes are all to the good.

I also noted that the First Minister referred to payments to people with hepatitis C who had contracted the disease from blood or blood products. Although that is welcome, I state yet again the SNP's belief that those payments are inadequate. I also want to make the minister aware that many people continue to wait for payments from the Skipton fund. That is despite the fact that its website includes a pledge that payments will be made within three weeks. I know of one individual who has not received a single penny as yet and is about to be made bankrupt. I hope that the minister is willing to intervene on behalf of the individual concerned. If so, I would be happy to pass on his details.

I also welcome the legislation to introduce free eye and dental checks, which is yet another long-standing SNP policy. However, I want to inject a note of caution: it is all very well to introduce free dental checks, but that will mean nothing if people cannot access a dentist in order to get the free check-up in the first place. If the measure is to be worth while, we must solve the crisis in dental services across Scotland.

Yesterday, the First Minister said that over the coming weeks the Minister for Health and Community Care would outline the action that he intends to take to reduce waiting times. I got a real sense of déjà vu when he said that. How many more times are we going to hear the same promises of action only to have them followed by a complete failure to deliver?

The Parliament has some real challenges to respond to in respect of the health service. The SNP is often accused of wanting to solve problems by throwing money at them. We acknowledge that by 2005-06 a record £8.6 billion

will have been put into the health service. The question is, what is the return on that investment? Surely a commitment on performance should have been on the table. My colleague Christine Grahame received answers to parliamentary questions and highlighted that in 1999 when the Executive came to power 13,000 people were waiting more than six months for a first out-patient appointment with a consultant. By 2004, that number had soared to nearly 30,000—an increase of 129 per cent.

Minister, we need to see the public services deliver and you have to drive a harder bargain, whether that be over consultant contracts or general practitioner contracts, both of which gave good deals for doctors. I agree that change was necessary to tackle problems of recruitment and retention, but sometimes it seems awful like a one-way deal. I think that it is fair to say that the new GP contract was railroaded through the Parliament and that it is creating more problems than it is solving. There are real concerns in many communities about the delivery of basic out-of-hours cover. We need to drive a harder bargain on behalf of the patient and the public. Unfortunately, you, so far, have failed to do so.

We must challenge the accepted wisdom of the royal colleges, which state that only through specialisation can we deliver improvement in health services. Is that really true when there is a lack of generalists being trained, which puts our district general hospitals at risk? I do not think so. We know that clinicians want to work in big specialist centres, but we also know that the public want their health services delivered closer to where they live. We need to redress the balance in order for the public's voice to be heard.

I have spoken about investment in health. We had an opportunity to showcase what devolution could do for public services. Instead, to quote a leading broadsheet newspaper from this week, Scotland is

"in revolt over its vanishing hospitals".

The public are at a loss to understand why their health services are being cut when there is a record level of spending on health services. It is not just members on this side of the chamber who are saying that. As Nicola Sturgeon mentioned, members of the Labour group from throughout Scotland have been raising real concerns.

The centralisation of health services is taking place without any clear national strategy to direct unelected local health boards. For the Executive to talk about some future national plan that may or may not arise is frankly not good enough. Too many hospitals will have closed without reference to one another or to a national picture. That laissez-faire approach cannot be allowed to continue.

Mr Stone: My thoughts on maternity services are well known. I wish to explore Shona Robison's thinking. Would she concede—and I am thinking outside the box here—that if we take neurosurgery, for example, there might possibly be a case for overall centralisation with just one centre of excellence for the whole of Scotland, and that people requiring that sort of surgery or treatment would not in fact mind the travelling? I stress that that is totally different from maternity services or other equivalent things.

Shona Robison: Jamie Stone raises a valid point, and that is the debate that we need to have, so that we can decide what levels of service are appropriate across Scotland. The problem at the moment is that things are happening in an ad hoc and piecemeal way, without any reference to a national picture of where we think hospital services—whether they be consultant-led maternity services or neurosurgery—are best based. We must have that debate. If we do not, we will end up with a picture that no one wants.

We must take responsibility. We are in a new Parliament, and we need some new politics and new thinking. You will have the SNP's co-operation on that. We know that there will be difficult decisions to make, but we, as a Parliament, have to take responsibility. The Minister for Health and Community Care has to meet that challenge and has to take that on board. If you are willing to take that on board, health minister, I will support you in that.

The people you saw in the public galleries today represent just the tip of the iceberg of the public's feeling about their local health services. The public have put us here to do a job. They have put us here with trust to look after their interests. If we fail them over the health service, we will have failed to live up to their expectations of the Parliament.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I remind members that, when they use the word "you" in the chamber, they are in fact addressing me, not the minister.

15:18

Mr David Davidson (North East Scotland) (Con): Yesterday, Jack McConnell said:

"We are here to help people to realise their ambitions, their hopes and their dreams."—[*Official Report*, 7 September 2004; c 9871.]

We on the Conservative benches agree totally with that sentiment, but we need more than fine phrases; we need action to make fair access to health care a right for all Scots. Yesterday, of the 178 mini-paragraphs of his speech, the First Minister used just eight to talk about health. That seems typical of the past five years of an Executive that has presided over a stagnating

health service, in which morale has gone. We need to uplift the ideas of those within the service. Through the Parliament, we need to prepare ourselves to give our people a national health service that is fit for the 21st century.

Everywhere we go in Scotland, protests are afoot. It does not matter what the service is: people everywhere are up in arms. It might be about the removal of maternity or accident and emergency services or the closure of specialist beds, for example at Glasgow Homeopathic hospital. The Parliament is being lobbied on a daily basis by patients, staff and carers. Your own members, minister—sorry, Presiding Officer—members of the minister's own party are raising the same issue. We in the Parliament all recognise that those are major concerns for the people of Scotland. What we really want is to hear what the Executive plans to do to attract and retain the key NHS staff of whom we seem to be so dramatically short.

Yesterday, Ken Macintosh said that we need to be bold and adventurous. I think that that should especially be the case in the health arena. The centralisation bandwagon is presided over by the Minister for Health and Community Care, who has the power to make a difference but appears not to want to use it. The national health service is now more centrally controlled and more bureaucratic than ever before in its history, and the minister has again said that central control will be to the fore. Patently, that has not worked. I would like to know from where the 2 per cent of savings in health, about which the First Minister spoke yesterday, will come. In the spirit of enlightenment that I hope we will share in this chamber, I suggest to the minister that he starts off with the overburdening administration and bureaucracy of the health service—he would save more than 2 per cent there.

We have had a run-in of seven years to the reduction in junior doctors' hours and yet the Executive appears to have been caught napping, for want of another word. There is no obvious sign that preparations were made for that situation. A change to consultants' hours is coming—again, that does not appear to be prepared for.

That leads me to the next crisis that is approaching—the abject failure to prepare for health boards becoming responsible for out-of-hours care. It does not matter whether I quote surveys that I have done or listen to my colleagues, we all have the same problem—people in rural areas, and in particular medics in rural areas, are concerned for their communities. It is all very well to have a theoretical out-of-hours service, but what about the principle that it should be based on the time that it takes to see a medic in an emergency? Whatever the skills of the

paramedics, they are merely transient people on the journey. NHS 24 is not a substitute for a doctor and the Scottish Ambulance Service is concerned about the pressures that will likely be put on it. The minister talked about that earlier, during question time.

I do not argue about a reduction in GP hours to make the quality of life better for them or to attract new members to the profession, but the minister appears to have totally forgotten the need of health boards to prepare. The messages that I am getting indicate that the health boards did not have quality time. Perhaps the minister or somebody else will tell us how long ago health boards were instructed to prepare for out-of-hours care so that decent programmes could be introduced with the correct resources and the correct manpower to be able to deliver them.

I agree with Shona Robison that it is good to look at tissue donations, transplants and better support for the victims of hep C from blood products, and I look forward to seeing the vulnerable adults legislation. However, too many genuine issues are left tucked under the carpet.

The minister has hardly spoken about where all the extra money has gone since 1999. The health service has not delivered more care since 1999, despite the investment. Where did the money go? What went wrong? Who is accountable for all that? What about care in the community? There has been no mention of carers, today or yesterday, and nothing about the crisis in the nursing and care home sector, where homes are closing on a daily basis, as we hear in the press, simply because the agreement that they thought they had for cost recovery has not been implemented. Ministers appear not to want to deal with that.

Everybody knows about the difficulties in dental care. Where are the thousands of nurses that we were promised in the previous parliamentary session? I have not had an answer to that from the minister.

There has been no mention of genuine patient choice; lip service has been paid to patient choice. There has been no mention of encouraging the use of extra capacity from the independent sector, which has assisted in turning the corner on waiting times in England, or of the efficiency savings from foundation hospitals and diagnostic treatment centres. If those measures are working in England, why do we not have a debate about them in this Parliament?

What about how we deliver general care in the community? Waiting two years for an electric wheelchair is a nonsense.

I would love to be here when the ministers come clean on all those issues because it is time that we

went over the refuse of the past five years under the Scottish Executive to pick out what went wrong in the health service and to address that collectively, so that we can make it better and make it fit. We will continue to offer solutions and alternatives focused on patient need, patient choice, value for money and freedom for all health professionals to deliver professional care to the patients so that they do not have to waste their time on petty bureaucracy, which is a classic from this current coalition. It is time for the Executive to apologise for the past five years and to work with us to deliver health care for Scotland.

15:24

Mike Rumbles (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (LD): The Scottish Liberal Democrats have three key objectives for health policy in Scotland during this parliamentary session. The first is to transform the health of the people of Scotland by promoting healthier lifestyles and measures to prevent ill health. Secondly, we wish to see the unacceptably long waiting times for everyone who uses our national health service cut. Thirdly, we want to improve and expand local health care.

Earlier intervention and regular screening are essential if we are to achieve our first objective and promote a healthier Scotland. The Liberal Democrat manifesto commitment to introduce free eye and dental checks for all is an essential part of that programme. As the Deputy First Minister outlined yesterday, the Liberal Democrat focus on health promotion is being delivered. The legislative framework to allow free eye and dental checks for all is to be contained in the health service (miscellaneous provisions) (Scotland) bill, which will enable the delivery of that commitment by 2006. It is important to remind everyone why such a commitment is necessary. Under the current regulations there is far too much confusion about who is entitled to free eye and dental checks. A poll that was published this week shows that more than 70 per cent of parents have never taken their children for an eye check and have no intention of doing so. In part, they are put off by the impression that such tests cost too much, and the same problem applies when we consider children's oral health. If we want to ensure that there is a step change in the state of the nation's eye and dental health, we must ensure that everyone understands that those checks, which are preventive measures, will be free for all those who want them, regardless of their financial situation. Only then will we see real improvement across the piece.

As I said, our second objective is to cut the unacceptably long waiting times for everyone who uses our national health service. The number of

patients who wait more than six months for in-patient or day-patient treatment has fallen from more than 8,500 last December to 6,000 in June this year and is almost 4,000 lower than it was in the same period last year. I get more than a little fed up with people who regularly talk down our national health service. Specifically, I get fed up with those who continue to give the impression that waiting times have gone up for everyone, which is simply not true. Earlier this year, Malcolm Chisholm said:

"The reality is that if you need urgent NHS treatment you will get it right away. More than half of hospital patients are treated immediately and never join a list. And of those who do, half are seen within one month and nearly three-quarters within three months."

That is why the Executive's aim to ensure that no one waits more than six months for treatment by the end of next year is on target to be achieved.

Shona Robison: I wonder how many constituents Mike Rumbles has seen who have complained about the time that they have had to wait to get treatment.

Mike Rumbles: That is exactly the point that I am making. Shona Robison does not seem to understand that the Executive is taking action to reduce the long waiting times. The point is not how many people are on a list—quite frankly, my constituents are not interested in how many other people are on waiting lists. What interests my constituents is what is happening in relation to their treatment, and their waiting times are being reduced—that is a fact. I hope that the Executive will not stop there but will maintain the momentum to reduce overlong waiting times even further.

The third priority of the Liberal Democrats is to improve and expand local health care. As the Auditor General for Scotland made clear, many more patients are being treated successfully in local health centres and general practitioners' surgeries—that has to be a good thing. However, there are major challenges ahead for the national health service in Scotland. Will the Executive take the necessary action to ban smoking in enclosed public places? That is a major question. I sincerely hope that the Executive will do that, as such a ban is the single most important step that we could take to improve the health of the nation. I am proud that the Scottish Liberal Democrats have taken the lead in that campaign.

Christine Grahame (South of Scotland) (SNP): Will the member take an intervention?

Mike Rumbles: I have given way already.

Will the Executive take the necessary action to improve the dental health of the nation with targeted measures or will it take the easier option of allowing health boards to fluoridate the water supply? I do not believe that mass medication of the water supply is the way to go.

Finally, while I am mentioning the health boards, there is no doubt that there is a feeling out there among the general public—the people whom we represent—that the health boards are not responding as well as they could to the people they serve. Is the direct election of health board members the solution to that problem? I am not sure that it is, but radical change is certainly necessary.

In conclusion, much has been achieved in implementing our objectives to create an improved national health service focused on health promotion and well-being. However, much more needs to be done and the Executive must not shrink from taking the necessary action to improve our health record. It must continue to drive down waiting times for treatment, it must continue its focus on health promotion by implementing free eye and dental checks for all and it must take the single most important measure to tackle ill health in Scotland and legislate to ban smoking in enclosed public places.

15:30

Helen Eadie (Dunfermline East) (Lab): On behalf of my constituents in Dunfermline East, I join others in expressing sympathy and condolences to the people of Russia, who are suffering grievously following the horrors of the terrorist attack in Beslan. With other members of the Parliament, I visited Russia just three years ago and made good friends there. Their terror strikes us deeply at this moment.

The words that I believe will echo throughout the ages—they always resonate with me—are, “All we ask is a chance to serve.” Those were some of the last words that our nation’s revered John Smith said the night before he died. Each of us in this chamber is surely privileged that we have asked for and been given the chance to serve our people. To do that in this amazing building is almost unbelievably wonderful. John Smith and Donald Dewar faithfully and selflessly served our Scottish people and I am truly sad that they cannot be here with us today. This building is symbolic. Scots have fought for hundreds of years to regain a Scottish Parliament. John and Donald and many other Scottish heroes championed the cause of returning a Parliament to our folks in Scotland. This home for the Parliament is a testament to the endurance and courage of all who fought not just for the right to have our say, but for a permanent place in which to say it and to make a difference for the people whom we serve.

The First Minister’s speech set out the priorities for the Scottish Executive and majored on our being a confident Scotland. He outlined 12 new bills that will respond to many of the concerns that I have to address on behalf of my constituents in

Dunfermline East. I am especially glad that among those bills will be one that contains measures to address the concern that parents in my constituency have raised with me about protecting young people from the paedophiles who are grooming children over the internet. We are modernising family law to ensure that children’s best interests come first. The fact that we are focusing on children—the flowers of our future—is paramount in our work.

Our people are confident about our achievements. The people of Scotland have a vision of what they want to see in their future and I believe that Scotland is confident that it can deliver a nation that is growing in prosperity and enriching further our reputation for being a caring society. The pride and confidence of the Scottish people is palpable as each year of devolution moves forward.

Our First Minister has set out the pathway for dramatic change in Scotland. He emphasised the message over and over again about our being a confident Scotland and I believe that every one of us in the chamber must echo that message and bring it home to our people in Scotland. He spoke yesterday about the new transport legislation, which for the first time will deliver co-ordinated policy in Scotland. He also spoke about delivering the commitment for free bus passes to all parts of Scotland. My pensioners in the villages of Benarty, Lochgelly, Cowdenbeath, Crossgates, North Queensferry, Inverkeithing, Dalgety Bay and Aberdour simply cannot wait for the day when the free bus pass takes them on a journey to far-flung parts of Scotland. The freedom to roam in their well-earned retirement is precious and the benefit that that freedom brings both to the individual and society is immeasurable. I know that, for such people, that change cannot come soon enough. Their mental health was greatly improved when Fife’s Labour administration first introduced its policy of free bus passes decades ago.

Although confidence was the theme of the First Minister’s speech, he also majored on two other themes—protection and prevention from harm for our people. Families in every town and village will welcome the emphasis on protecting our children and our nation’s health. In common with every other member in the chamber, I am concerned about the nation’s health. If “protection” is the key word in family law, “prevention” is the key word in the shaping of policy for the future of the health service.

The First Minister has said that a ban on smoking in public places has worked in the Republic of Ireland; Scotland, too, will address that issue. He also said that we need to prevent other causes of ill health and to work with professionals, some of whom are already giving prescriptions for

gyms rather than drugs. I hope that we listen to the message that one of my London colleagues gave, which is that Paris has more swimming pools than the whole of the United Kingdom put together. I hope that we will see a massive expansion of swimming pool provision throughout Scotland for those who are elderly and have mobility issues. I also want other diseases to be prevented, such as the silent disease, osteoporosis. Fractures cost the NHS in Scotland £200 million annually and the NHS in the UK £1.7 billion annually.

I know that our Scottish Executive is measuring up to the challenges ahead and to the test of our party in Scotland. Our Scottish Labour Party

“is a democratic socialist party. It believes that by the strength of our common endeavour we achieve more than we achieve alone, so as to create for each of us the means to realise our true potential and for all of us a community in which power, wealth and opportunity are in the hands of the many, not the few. Where the rights we enjoy reflect the duties we owe. And where we live together, freely, in a spirit of solidarity, tolerance and respect.”

15:36

Christine Grahame (South of Scotland) (SNP): Of course it is the case that after five years of the Liberal Democrats and Labour being in power the health service is in crisis. We can tell that it is in crisis because the Minister for Health and Community Care is looking terribly isolated in the chamber—other ministers have quit the scene.

I am grateful to *The Herald* for running its latest debate on health. I will quote from a letter to the paper, entitled “Price of progress”, in which a parent describes how, 20 years ago, their son complained of abdominal pain, which turned out to be a twisted intestine—within 20 minutes, the son had been operated on. The parent states that, because of the lack today of an accident and emergency department nearby,

“If my son had suffered his stomach ache today, 20 years and Lord knows how many millions of pounds later, he would be dead. That is progress.”

That is the touchstone for the health service, which is failing Scotland’s public all over.

On waiting times, which have been referred to, the Minister for Health and Community Care pledged that no patient would wait more than 26 weeks for their first out-patient consultant appointment and that he would achieve that by December 2005. Those are worthy words, but there is no prospect whatever of the minister succeeding, because in five years the number of people waiting more than six months has risen from 13,000 to 30,000. In certain specialties, the situation is even more disgraceful. In neurosurgery, there has been a 1,722 per cent increase in the number waiting. In cardiology, the

increase has been 793 per cent and, in respiratory medicine, the increase has been 723 per cent.

Malcolm Chisholm: My first point is a detail but, for the sake of clarity, I should point out that the figures are not the numbers on a waiting list, because one of the difficulties is that there are no waiting lists, although we are dealing with that problem. The issue is the number of people treated who have been waiting longer than that, which is clearly different.

I have been open about the problem of out-patient waiting. I identified it as the biggest single problem in the health service in my first year in office, which is why the key work of the centre for change and innovation is the most comprehensive redesign programme ever for out-patient clinics in Scotland, as I said in my speech. That process is now under way, which is why we saw a little progress last year, and it is because of that radical programme that we will meet our target by the end of next year.

Christine Grahame: I do not know what crystal ball the minister is looking into, but what he says is not based on historical evidence. If he will forgive me for saying so, he was not open in his answer, because in order to secure those figures I had to go to the Scottish Parliament information centre. The figures were not provided in the normal manner by being published in the written answers report.

Malcolm Chisholm: Christine Grahame and many members know that long written answers routinely go to SPICe. The situation is nothing to do with the particular question.

Christine Grahame: I will accept that with a certain grace. I still think that it is interesting that when an answer is not—how shall we put it?—convenient, it quite often comes in the form of a letter or a long answer placed in SPICe. However, we will pass on, because the information is now in the public domain.

Let us consider what is happening in reconfiguring—to use the coalition’s language—the delivery of NHS services throughout Scotland. The national framework team that is considering the matter will not report until March 2005, which is an absolute nonsense. Any dog in the street or child in primary 1 would say that to report after services have been closed down throughout Scotland is a waste of time, space and money and an insult to the public, who are being asked to take part in the consultation. The minister cannot simply dump the issue at the door of the health boards because he does not have a national framework in place to deal with the matter. Why the minister persists in not imposing a moratorium on the closure of services in the meantime is a mystery to me when doing so might just save his political career.

Mr Duncan McNeil (Greenock and Inverclyde) (Lab): Will the member take an intervention?

Christine Grahame: Can I get on? I have taken a lot of interventions, but I will let Duncan McNeil in in a moment, if he reminds me.

The minister says that he will take into account “health inequalities and other social factors”

in carrying out the national planning exercise. He also says, with regard to rural services, that he will look into

“the implications for patients who have to travel to distant sites”.

Although Mr Rumbles apparently has a contented electorate who have no problems in accessing the NHS, my electorate in the Borders have problems. Several kidney dialysis patients in the Borders have to make round trips of 100 miles several times a week for dialysis treatment. Those people are unwell when they start and they are a lot more unwell when they come back. I do not know how the minister is taking that into account now, let alone in the restructuring.

Mr McNeil: Does the member agree that we need an honest debate on the challenges that we face? She mentioned *The Herald*, but does she agree with that newspaper that her new leader, Mr Salmond, is avoiding the real issue by refusing

“to give unmitigated support for the maintenance of local hospital services”?

Christine Grahame: The point that I am making is that it is nonsense to have a survey into restructuring the NHS Scotland-wide while services are closing at the same time. Of course specific specialties may have to be nationally centred, but we are not even debating or deciding on that. Duncan McNeil knows that from his own neck of the woods. In the meantime, the minister, or whoever is summing up, should say that we will have a moratorium until the framework team’s report is issued. That would be a satisfactory starting point.

The minister is simply firefighting—he firefights here, he firefights there. In many respects, he reminds me of Callaghan, who came back to the UK from his holidays in the middle of the winter of discontent and said, “Crisis? What crisis?” Well, Mr Chisholm, there is a crisis. I see that the Minister for Finance and Public Services has come to support the minister—that is very kind of him. The first thing to do to stop the crisis is to have a moratorium on service closures until the national framework strategy has been delivered.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Before I call Alasdair Morrison, I point out to members that he will speak in Gaelic. Headphones have been inserted into each console for the purposes of the

simultaneous interpretation and members should ensure that the channel is set to 1.

15:44

Mr Alasdair Morrison (Western Isles) (Lab): Oifigeir Riaghlaidh, tha mi uabhasach toilichte a bhith a’ gabhail pàirt san deasbad seo, agus tha mi a’ smaoineachadh gu bheil e iomchaidh gum bi mi a’ labhairt mo chiad bhriathran san togalach seo nam chiad chànan.

Annas an togalach ùr dhealasach seo an-dè, mhìnich am Prìomh Mhinistear, Seac MacConaill, cuid de na nithean a bhios sinn a’ deasbad an seo anns na bliadhnaichean a tha romhainn. Annas an t-seann Phàrlamaid, chuir sinn an cèill laghan cudthromach. Bidh cuimhne phearsanta aig gach ball air an t-seann dhachaigh aig mullach na sràide, ach dhòmhsa, mar Ghaidheal, is e Achd Ath-leasachadh an Fhearainn (Alba) 2003 a’ phrìomh chuimhne a bhios agam.

Following is the simultaneous interpretation:

I would like to take part in the debate and I think that it would be suitable for my first words in our new permanent home to be in my first language.

Yesterday, Jack McConnell outlined the details of a legislative journey that will greatly benefit people in every corner of Scotland. In our previous home, we delivered some significant legislation. I am sure that every member has fond memories of our old home at the other end of the Royal Mile.

Bill Aitken: On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I am sure that what Mr Morrison is saying is very interesting—or at least as interesting as what he normally has to say—but we are not getting an interpretation.

Members: Yes we are.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I would rather that members let me deal with the point of order. I am not getting anything, either, but I am quite happy to listen to Mr Morrison speak in his native Gaelic and wait until the simultaneous interpretation comes through. Those of you who have sound will doubtless enjoy the speech in English and Gaelic simultaneously.

Christine Grahame: On a point of order, Presiding Officer. We can hear the simultaneous interpretation.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I gathered that from the earlier intervention, but can we please get on with the speeches?

Mr Morrison: Cha tuigeadh Mgr Aitken ciall ann an cànan sam bith gun luaidh air Gàidhlig no ann am Beurla.

Mar a thuir mi, bidh iomadach cuimhne againn air an t-seann dhachaigh aig mullach na sràide,

ach dhòmhsa, mar Ghaidheal, is e Achd Ath-leasachadh an Fhearainn a bhios na phrìomh chuimhne.

Thairis air an dà latha a chaidh seachad, tha mòran bhall air a bhith ag ràdh gur e na bhios a' tachairt am broinn na Pàrlamaid an rud as cudthromaiche, agus chan e an cumadh no an dath a tha air na ballachan. Shuas an rathad, dhearbhadh am pàrtaidh Làbarach agus a' chobhanntachd gum b' urrainn dhuinn laghan matha a chur an cèill ged nach robh lùchairt Pàrlamaid spaideil againn. Choilion sinn rudeigin a bha na amas aig Keir Hardie, agus chì mi am ministear a thug am bile sin troimhe—Ailean MacUilleim—san t-seòmar an-diugh. Tha buaidh achd an fhearainn follaiseach ann an iomadach ceàrnaidh air a' Ghaidhealtachd. An-diugh fhèin san sgìre Phàrlamaid agam, ann an Uibhist a Deas, an Eiriseigh, am Beinn na Faoghla, an sgìre na Pàirc ann an Leòdhas, agus cuideachd ann an Nis agus am Barabhas, tha daoine a' cleachdadh achd an fhearainn airson cruth is cumadh ùr a thoirt air am beatha fhèin agus air na cothroman a bhios aig a' chloinn aca—cothroman nach b' urrainn an sinnsearachd fiù 's smaoineachadh mun deidhinn.

Tha suaicheantas Gàidhlig air duilleig-aghaidh pàipear-naidheachd Gaidhealach, pàipear beag an Eilein Sgitheanaich—faclan a bha air an cleachdadh aig na Land Leaguers. Is iad na faclan “An Tìr, an Cànan 's na Daoine”. Tha mi air iomradh a thoirt mu thràth air ceist an fhearainn, is tha mi a-nis a' tionndadh gu cànan. Bha mi toilichte dha-rìribh cluinntinn a' Phrìomh Mhinistear a' cur a thaic agus cumhachd an Riaghaltais aige air cùlaibh na neamhnaidh prìseil as e mo chiad chànan. Tha sinn air ceuman mòra a ghabhail às leth a' chànan o chionn seachd bliadhna. Bha mòran air taobh a-staigh a' phàrtaidh Làbaraich a' strì às leth na Gàidhlig thairis air iomadach bliadhna nuair nach robh e fasanta sin a dhèanamh. An-diugh, sa Phàrlamaid seo agus ann an Westminster, tha suidheachadh againn a tha cus cus nas fàbharaich. Aig a' Mhòd Nàiseanta Rìoghail san Òban an-uiridh, dh'fhoillsich am Prìomh Mhinistear is ministear na Gàidhlig, Peadar Peacock, a' chiad dreachd de Bhile na Gàidhlig (Alba), agus chaidh fàilte bhlàth a chur air.

Following is the simultaneous interpretation:

Mr Aitken would not understand sense in any language.

As I said, we will always remember the old home at the other end of the Royal Mile and, as a Gael, I found the passing of the Land Reform (Scotland) Act 2003 to be a legislative highlight.

Over the past two days, many members have said that what is important about any Parliament is not its architectural intricacies, but what happens

within its walls. Up the road, the Labour Party and its coalition partner demonstrated that we could pass much-needed legislation in what was a limited and, at times, inadequate parliamentary campus. We delivered on what was an aspiration since the days of Keir Hardie. The impact of the land reform legislation has been significant. Today, many communities in my constituency, in South Uist, Benbecula and Eriskay and in Park, Lochs, Ness and Barvas in Lewis, are using the Land Reform (Scotland) Act 2003 to shape for themselves and for their children better lives and greater opportunities—opportunities and life chances that their forebears could only dream about.

Written in Gaelic on the masthead of one of the newspapers in the Highlands, the *West Highland Free Press*, are words borrowed from the slogan used by the land leaguers in the 1800s and the beginning of the 20th century: “The land, the language, the people”. I have already mentioned the land and our legislation's positive impact in that regard. For obvious reasons, I was delighted to hear the First Minister again reaffirm his Administration's commitment to what is a national jewel, the Gaelic language. Since 1997, great strides have been taken to support Gaelic. Many in the Labour movement championed the cause of Gaelic when it was unfashionable to do so. Today, in this forum and at Westminster, there is a more favourable and receptive atmosphere. At the historic 100th Royal National Mòd in Oban, the minister with responsibility for Gaelic, Peter Peacock, unveiled the first draft of the Gaelic Language (Scotland) Bill. It was universally welcomed.

John Farquhar Munro (Ross, Skye and Inverness West) (LD): Mòran taing airson mo leigeil a-staigh. Bhon a tha Alasdair Moireasdan a' bruidhinn air a' Mhòd agus air taic airson Gàidhlig, tha mi airson cantainn gun robh a' chiad sreath den bhile Ghàidhlig a thàinig thugainn gu math lag. Cha robh duine a' faicinn mòran ann a bha a' dol a dhèanamh adhartas mòr dhan Ghàidhlig. Is e am prìomh rud a tha a dhith air saoghal na Gàidhlig foghlam tro mheadhan a' chànan, gu h-àraidh anns na h-àrd-sgoiltean, agus barrachd cuideachadh airson luchd-teagaisg a tha deònach a bhith ag obair ann am foghlam Gàidhlig agus a bhith ga teagasg. Tha mi a' tuigsinn gu bheil 30 luchd-teagaisg a dhith oirnn a h-uile bliadhna ann am foghlam Gàidhlig. A bheil Alasdair Moireasdan den bheachd gu bheil am bile Gàidhlig, san ìre aig a bheil e an-diugh, mar a tha e a' dol a bhith air a stèidheachadh ann an lagh an-dràsta, a' dol a dhèanamh feum dhan Ghàidhlig? An cum e Gàidhlig beò anns na bliadhnaichean a tha air thoiseach oirnn?

Following is the simultaneous interpretation:

I remember the Mòd and the contribution to Gaelic. People could not see much in the first part of the draft bill that would do much for Gaelic. The main thing that the bill lacked was anything about education through the medium of Gaelic, especially in high schools, or about training for teachers who were willing to teach through the medium of Gaelic. I understand that, every year, there are 30 teachers fewer than we need for teaching through the medium of Gaelic. If we want to keep Gaelic alive, we need to make changes to the draft bill.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I will compensate you for the time that it took to make that intervention, Mr Morrison.

Mr Morrison: Bheir mi freagairt ghoirid, agus is e sin gu bheil am bile a' dol a dhèanamh feum ach, mar a tha fios aig a h-uile ball, tha a h-uile bile a tha a' tighinn fa choinneamh na Pàrlamaid ag atharrachadh gu mòr bhon latha a thèid fhoillseachadh gus an latha mu dheireadh a thèid e troimhe. An-dè fhèin, thuirt am ministear, Peadar Peacock, gun robh e ag èisteachd ris na tagraidhean a tha daoine air a bhith a' dèanamh bho chaidh am bile fhoillseachadh o chionn bliadhna.

Tha e do-dhèante dhòmhsa smaoinichadh no bruidhinn air an iomairt airson bile na Gàidhlig gun chuimhneachadh is innse a dhèanamh air caraid a chaill sinn nas tràithe air a' bhliadhna seo. Bho chionn 40 bliadhna, na phàiste ann an gàirdeanan a phàrantan, dh'fhàg e baile Karachi airson Alba. Na ghille òg agus na dhuine a' fàs suas anns a' bhaile air an robh e air leth measail—baile Ghlaschu—bha e a' siubhal gu sona eadar dà chultar. Nas anmoiche na bheatha, chaidh e a dh'ionnsaigh an treas cultar. Is e a' Ghàidhlig agus a' Ghaidhealtachd rudan a bheò-ghlac Ali Abbasi. Abair eisimpleir math den fheallsanachd "Aon Alba. Iomadach Cultar". Cha robh Ali Abbasi dìreach a' faicinn Gàidhlig mar an ceathramh chànan aige no mar rud fuar—bha i a' toirt dha sealladh eile air an t-saoghal mhòr. Bha e sona ga bruidhinn agus bha e sona nar measg.

Is e am Prìomh Mhinistear an aon fhear as urrainn ceartas a dhèanamh air an strì a rinn Ali mus deach am bile fhoillseachadh an-uiridh. As t-fhoghar seo chaidh, bha e air leth moiteil agus am brath-naidheachd na dhòrn anns an deach ainmeachadh mar am fear a bhiodh a' cur leughadh leabhraichean fa chomhair sgoilearan Gàidhlig. Is e fìor ghaisgeach a bha ann, agus cha robh eagal sam bith aige air a dhol am bad dhaoine a bhiodh a' cur sìos air a' Ghàidhlig—chuireadh e às an leth sa mhionaid gun robh iad ri gràin-chinnidh. Airson iomadach bliadhna, bidh teaghlach agus cuideachd Ali Abbasi ga chaidh. Bidh iad ga ionndrainn mar mhac, mar bhràthair, mar uncle. Bidh àite sònraichte aige ann an iomadach cridhe, ach am measg luchd-labhairt na

Gàidhlig ann an Alba bidh e air a chuimhneachadh mar Ali Abbasi, caraid nan Gaidheal—Ali Abbasi, sàr charaid nan Gaidheal.

Nuair a thig e chun a' bhòt mu dheireadh airson a' bhile, tha mi cinnteach gun dèan sinn mar a rinn sinn airson nan daoine a bha fo sgàil nan uachdaran suarach gràineil ro fhada agus gun cuir sinn tron Phàrlamaid achd cànan às am biodh Ali Abbasi nach maireann moiteil.

Following is the simultaneous interpretation:

A short answer is to say that the bill will benefit Gaelic and that, when the bill is next revealed, it will look very different from how it looked previously. Peter Peacock and others have been working on it since it was first unveiled.

It is impossible for me to talk about the efforts to secure the bill without reflecting on and paying tribute to the contribution of a friend who passed away earlier this summer. Forty years ago, as a babe in his parents' arms, he left Karachi and came with his family to settle in Scotland. He moved very happily between two cultures and then embraced a third—Gaelic and our language were his passion. What a good example of "One Scotland. Many Cultures." Ali Abbasi was not just learning the language; he looked on it as another means of communication. Gaelic gave Ali another window on the world and the language gave him a sense of contentment and solace. He was at home.

The First Minister is the one man in the Parliament who can do justice to Ali's constant lobbying in the run-up to the announcement of the proposed Gaelic Language (Scotland) Bill. Last autumn, Ali proudly clutched the official Government press release in which the First Minister announced his appointment as Scotland's first Gaelic reading champion. He was a great champion, indeed. He never shirked from saying the unpopular or battling with people whom he described as racist—those few Scots who routinely dismiss Gaelic and any support for it through precarious times. Today and for many years to come, the Abbasi household will mourn the loss of a son, brother and uncle. Ali Abbasi will have a special place in many hearts. In the Highlands and Gaelic Scotland he is, quite simply, the friend of the Gael.

I have every confidence that, when it comes to the final vote on the Gaelic Language (Scotland) Bill, we will pass the bill—as we have passed historic legislation that has unshackled communities from the grasp of rapacious landowners—and that we will do the Gaelic world justice. I have every confidence that the proposed legislation will pass any test that the late Ali Abbasi would have thought appropriate.

15:51

Alex Johnstone (North East Scotland) (Con): I am glad that John Farquhar Munro behaved himself during the simultaneous interpretation that we have just heard, because I remember an incident that took place when we first used the facility four years ago, when he apparently made a remark in Gaelic that was not fed down the line but caused a fit of giggles between the two girls who were responsible for the interpretation. I have never had that explained to me.

I will address the issues that fall largely within the remit of the Environment and Rural Development Committee. The programme for government this year will include the passage of the Water Services etc (Scotland) Bill through the Parliament—the process will start tomorrow. On the Conservative benches, we welcome the steps that the Executive is taking to open up competition in the water industry through the bill. Retail competition for business will help. However, we lament the decision to stop far short of introducing the real choice and efficiency that is needed for the water industry in Scotland.

The Executive argues that allowing retail competition for households would force a change to the current system, in which local authorities bill domestic customers for their water and sewerage charges. That would mean that water charges would no longer reflect the customer's ability to pay. Although we strongly agree that it is important to ensure that people who require water services are able to access them, regardless of whether they can afford to pay, we have a significant problem with the suggestion in the bill that we should institutionalise the fact that those who can pay should pay more in order that those who cannot pay should not pay. That would effectively make water services the basis for a system of taxation. That is nothing new—we have been going down that road for some time—but I lament the fact that, although the Water Services etc (Scotland) Bill might have offered us an opportunity to bring that approach to an end or at least to reverse the trend, it unfortunately seeks to do exactly the opposite.

A couple of other issues fall broadly within the environment remit. I call again for the provision of strategic guidelines for the erection of wind turbines in Scotland. I am a realist and I know that wind turbines on land will play an important part in the future generation of electricity in Scotland. However, I am concerned about the situation that the Executive has got us into. A target has been set to achieve a high level of electricity production from renewable sources on a timescale that means that the only mature technology available is the only choice for the companies that seek to achieve the target.

Sarah Boyack (Edinburgh Central) (Lab): Is the member aware that, in many countries around the globe, a huge amount of the renewable energy resource is provided by the sun, through solar power, solar heating and so on? We are now making that happen in Scotland, too, so his doom and gloom is inappropriate in this debate.

Alex Johnstone: I am absolutely aware of that, but because only a limited mature technology is available in Scotland, we have seen a rush for one technology. There is a need for strategic guidelines, which have not been adequately defined by the Executive. That is what is causing disruption in many of our rural communities, especially where the scenery is likely to be damaged in the long term.

I sometimes find it hard to work out who is speaking on behalf of whom in the chamber. At the start of the debate yesterday, a Liberal Democrat opened and the first speech delivered by a Labour member was John Home Robertson's. I do not know whether he was speaking for himself or for the Labour Party, but he once again did something for which I applaud him: he spoke about the importance of nuclear energy to the economy of Scotland.

We Conservatives want to ensure that Scotland's growth continues. For that to happen, we have to guarantee that, when a factory opens its doors and switches on its power plants, it will be supplied with electricity. We are not suggesting that that electricity should necessarily be cheap or plentiful; we are saying that supplies should be adequate and affordable. If that means that we have to consider the replacement of nuclear capacity in Scotland, we must make that decision and grasp that nettle. I do not know whether John Home Robertson's speech yesterday was a measure of the intent of the Labour Party to move down that road, but it is time that we had that discussion. Conservative members are prepared to grasp the nettle if that is what is necessary to ensure long-term growth and the long-term creation of jobs in Scotland.

My final point relates to the common agricultural policy reform process that we went through earlier this year. The minister's decision to create a national beef envelope—and to exploit it in order to transfer funds from one group in the beef industry to another—is one that I cannot accept and will continue to regret. I accept that it is necessary for support to be channelled towards those who keep cattle in the north and west and the more marginal Highland areas of Scotland. However, doing that through the national beef envelope—whereby a significant proportion of the support for farmers and beef producers in the east of Scotland has been redirected to support those in other areas—is redistributive and has been

badly received by beef producers in the east and north-east of Scotland. Today, one man asked me to demand the resignation of the minister. I will not be so rash, but I ask the minister to take the opportunity to reconsider the measure before it is passed into law.

15:58

Nora Radcliffe (Gordon) (LD): Like Alex Johnstone, my interest is in the green thread of the Executive's programme. The most obviously environmental legislation that is coming up is the strategic environmental assessment bill. I have a sense of déjà vu: as a district councillor, I was able to have a protocol adopted across my council, which required every report to the council or to any of its committees to have a section headed "Environmental Implications", whether or not the writer of the report perceived there to be any. Often the heading was followed by the word "None". However, the protocol was surprisingly effective in focusing attention on, and in flushing out, potential environmental impacts and having such a section in the report enabled elected members to challenge officers when possible impacts had been overlooked or not considered. After a few such challenges, every officer and every department was much more alert to potential environmental impacts in matters that, at first glance, had had none.

I hope that we deliver strategic environmental assessments that are properly inclusive of the citizen and which are transparent, accessible and enforceable. I expect confidently that the requirement for strategic environmental assessments will be just as effective as the old Gordon District Council protocol.

Tomorrow, the Environment and Rural Development Committee begins taking evidence on the Water Services etc (Scotland) Bill. It will be an interesting and intricate bill that will continue to protect water services from the privatisation route that the voters of Strathclyde rejected so unequivocally all those years ago. There are some tricky issues around who pays for water services and how, and the committee will have a number of nettles to grasp in the weeks ahead.

I move on to affordable housing. A house should be whole-life affordable, especially for people on low incomes. Investment in a house that is properly designed, properly built and properly insulated and which has efficient heating and lighting can provide a warm home for a tiny outlay of running costs. Are we sure that we are doing all that we can to ensure that social housing meets such standards? Is best value defined in ways that make spending to save possible and attractive?

Planning has a role to play, as well. The way in which individual houses are laid out in a scheme

can either maximise benefits from solar gain and shelter or it can ignore them, and layout can provide for pedestrians and cyclists or ignore them. There is a lot of available expertise that should be used on those matters. The other plea that I make on planning is that there should be a continual effort to ensure effective enforcement of planning conditions. Too many communities are blighted and too often serious pollution is caused by businesses or individuals that flout planning conditions, apparently with impunity. That simply is not good enough.

The Executive has made economic growth a priority. We want more jobs, and there are many opportunities for green jobs. We squandered a lot of the economic benefit of developing wind power and we watched as Denmark profited. Even so, it is still the case that an orderly progression of new wind farms would create the stable and steady demand that would support Scottish manufacturers and allow them to take on or keep on a skilled work force.

Our scientists and engineers are in the vanguard of wave and tidal power. Installations such as the European Marine Energy Centre Ltd in Orkney will play a part in keeping the benefits of that developing technology at home—but only a part. Government support, both monetary and in providing an encouraging fiscal environment with long-term stability, and private venture capital are also crucial elements. A small company in my constituency is beavering away at developing hydrogen applications, but with very little interest or support from Government here. I am told that that is in marked contrast to what the company has found in Japan.

On transport, an efficient and complete infrastructure, good public transport and better rail services are all possible and desirable. We can and will work for those.

Infrastructure includes broadband—an essential tool in today's world—which is proportionately much more important in a rural setting. Why has it been rolled out backwards, as I would describe it? If we want to think big, what about creating a fibre-optic network instead of just using the existing copper wire? Broadband can facilitate home working, and someone working one day a week from home instead of driving to work contributes a 20 per cent reduction in the pollution and congestion they cause.

We have talked a lot yesterday and today about new legislation, but we should reserve time to follow up on legislation that we have already passed. What progress has been made on river basin plans? How effective are the provisions in the Nature Conservation (Scotland) Act 2004? How are our national parks developing? What are the national waste plan and area waste plans achieving?

I do not add my voice to the chorus that says that we should raise our game. The Scottish Parliament has done an enormous amount of good work to date—much of it work that would not have been done if there had not been a Scottish Parliament. I look forward to continuing a good game on a wonderful new pitch.

16:04

Dr Elaine Murray (Dumfries) (Lab): There is a joke about a Westminster colleague who dreamed that he was making a speech in the House of Commons and woke up to find that he actually was making a speech in the House of Commons. In a way, I feel a little bit like that MP because I cannot quite believe that we are here now. I have to ask myself a question similar to that which philosophy students used to have to answer: how do I know that I am not dreaming that I am in this wonderful building?

The building is a terrific and magnificent edifice. Whether it represents value for money will be for future generations to judge, as will whether or not it has remained fit for purpose in 50, 100 or 200 years' time. However, the building is much more than just a physical presence at the bottom of the Royal Mile; it is a statement of the Scottish Parliament's permanency. The individuals who inhabit the building will change, but Scotland's Parliament is here to stay and those who hoped to destroy devolution by attacking the building will have to move on. I hope that they, too, will raise their game.

The Executive once considered the merits of an Edinburgh biennale being held in the not-too-distant future, not only to celebrate this architectural triumph, but to focus the eyes of the world on the flourishing of Scottish architecture and culture in recent years. Scottish architecture is a success story that does not receive sufficient attention. It may be difficult for the ministers who are present to answer, but I would be grateful if ministers advised us whether that proposal remains under active consideration.

There is much to welcome in the Executive's legislative programme and its wider policy framework, and the way in which those build on the Parliament's achievements of the past five years. One of the most common issues that my constituents bring to my attention is housing. That is not directly a health matter, but we know that poor housing is a major factor in ill health. Fortunately, actions that the Executive and the Parliament have taken in the past five years have begun to have an impact. In my constituency, I have seen excellent social housing developments in various communities, which not only provide much needed good-quality housing for rent; some that I have visited are of extremely high-quality

design and finish. They, too, are examples of excellence in Scottish architecture.

However, housing need remains a huge issue in terms of the number of houses that are required—many of my constituents have lived in inadequate accommodation for far too long—and in terms of the necessity to regenerate areas where the housing type is inappropriate and has encouraged social problems. I very much welcome the First Minister's commitment to increase investment further and to provide more homes for rent and for low-cost ownership, because as house prices rise in my area and other parts of the country, first-time buyers and people who are on lower incomes are beginning to experience difficulty in purchasing properties.

Many private landlords are good landlords but, sadly, some are far from that. I am well aware of constituents who live in absolutely appalling conditions in private lets—that happens in urban and rural communities. The poor condition of some housing in rural areas can be less visible than it is in urban areas. It can also be difficult for tenants to move out of substandard accommodation, because few alternatives are available in their vicinity. I have spoken with constituents who are frightened to ask environmental health services into their private lets because they will have nowhere else to go, other than perhaps a car.

Alex Johnstone: Will the member give way?

Dr Murray: I am sorry; I am running out of time.

Demographic change—other members have referred to it—is a significant issue in my constituency. Unlike many rural areas, we probably have an increasingly aging profile. I do not suggest that that in itself is a problem and I certainly understand why older people may wish to retire to beautiful areas such as Dumfries and Galloway, but we have a problem in recruiting a number of key workers such as carers, nurses, radiographers, audiologists, podiatrists and dentists. I had a wee wry smile about free dental checks, because I fear that some of my constituents will have no teeth left to check by 2007. We also have shortages of some medical consultants.

The answer to that is not to force young people to stay, study and work in the places they come from. New experiences through studying and working in other parts of the world and other parts of the country can be invaluable in developing people's experience and skills. However, we need to attract people back when they have gained those experiences and we need to attract new people to our country—especially to regions that have demographic problems.

That will not happen if politicians or the media continually carp, moan and talk down our country or its regions. Nobody will want to come here if we keep on telling people how awful it is. Unfortunately, some of my local media run stories every week that tell people how dreadful Dumfries and Galloway is. If I were a young professional looking for a job in Dumfries and Galloway, I would be far too frightened to go there.

All of us have a responsibility to develop policies and to change Scotland for the better. I say to the Opposition that it is entitled to put forward an alternative to the Executive's programme, but it should not simply moan about the state of the nation without offering practical alternatives. That will not be good enough in the future.

I am pleased to welcome the Executive's programme for the coming year. I look forward to future developments and to all of us playing a constructive and focused part in them.

16:10

John Swinburne (Central Scotland) (SSCUP): Just before the referendum on devolution, Canon Kenyon Wright addressed a meeting of the Motherwell District Chamber of Commerce. He painted a euphoric picture of a consensual Parliament that would appear in Scotland. I have not yet run into that consensual Parliament. However, I have found that there are many good people in the Parliament who want to do good for the country. At times, we see them staggering under the load of their portfolios. One of them, Malcolm Chisholm, has just left the chamber. In his absence, I say that he is succeeding in making Scotland a healthier nation. People will be aghast at that thought, but in my lifetime the life expectancy of a working man has risen from 49 years to 78 years. That is the only measure that one can use to judge the failure or success of any health service.

There is an awful lot of work to be done. Today we listened to people from the Glasgow homeopathic hospital. Radical thinking is required in this chamber. The issue of health should be taken out of the political arena, as we are dealing with a crisis. The electorate—the people outside this chamber—should see the Government acting in a sensible and consensual way and attacking the problem of poor health, rather than approaching it as a yah-boo football game in which people can gain petty points by saying "His waiting list is longer than mine," and other such rubbish.

There are problems, which we can solve if we all pull together. However, it is up to the Executive to invite every other party—whether it be Tommy Sheridan's party, the SNP, the Conservatives, the

Greens or the independents—to make a contribution. We must proceed in a consensual manner. As was mentioned yesterday on the Lesley Riddoch programme, if we miss this opportunity, the people out there will treat this place with total contempt. Let us rise above the sort of politics that I have described and lift our sights. We can do it, but only with greater consensus. Let's go for it.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Trish Godman): I have been unable to call six back benchers, which I regret. However, I will take a note of their names.

16:13

Tommy Sheridan (Glasgow) (SSP): John Swinburne finished with a note of consensus. I am reminded of the First Minister's opening comments yesterday on the absolute horror and tragedy of Beslan in Russia. He said that it should remind all of us of the importance of democracy in enabling us to discuss, to debate, to disagree and to move forward in a peaceful fashion. However, when dealing with some of the difficulties that face areas of Scottish life such as the health service, we are in danger of ignoring the democratic wishes that are expressed at election times.

I ask the Minister for Health and Community Care, in particular, to examine the reason for the save Stobhill campaign that delivered Jean Turner to the Parliament. In 2003, Jean Turner stood on a very clear programme: to save Stobhill hospital. There was no other part to Jean's programme. She said quite clearly that she wanted to fight on a single issue, which was to save a hospital. It is very difficult for someone to win a first-past-the-post contest on a single issue, and when they do not have a political party or any other machinery backing them. However, Jean Turner won in a previously safe Labour seat. The truth is that the Parliament has ignored the democratically expressed wishes of that community because, regardless of that election victory, the closure of Stobhill as a general hospital has not only proceeded, but has accelerated.

What the Minister for Health and Community Care needs to consider is that, if we live in a genuine democracy in which we are concerned about the disengagement of more and more citizens or about the fact that barely half the Scottish electorate are even bothering to use their vote, people in an area such as Strathkelvin and Bearsden who use their vote to buck the political trend deserve to be listened to. That is why I ask him to re-examine and reconsider any decision he makes about supporting Stobhill's closure.

I was also struck by the First Minister's comments about a smoking ban. I hope that we

quickly introduce a proposal to ban smoking in public places. However, I was interested to hear the First Minister say that he was not convinced about the arguments for a ban until he visited Ireland and saw this pro-health measure with his own eyes; discussing the ban with those who implemented it has changed his mind.

I challenge the First Minister to make the same type of visit to Finland to discuss universal healthy free school meals with people who put that measure at the heart of their health programme. The First Minister is not convinced that such meals will lead to an improvement in dietary health across Scotland. However, if he visits Finland, he will speak to health ministers and others who will tell him that the measure was at the very core of the transformation of the Finnish health record. Although that country used to have a worse record than us in coronary heart disease and other dietary health-related illnesses, it is now top of the health league table.

People sometimes wonder where the millions that are being poured into our health service and the billions that are being deployed to try to address health problems are going. I will tell you where some of it is going: it is going into the pockets of the members of the private finance initiatives and public-private partnership consortiums to ensure that the Royal Bank of Scotland and others can own vital resources such as our hospitals. Instead of frittering public money away into the pockets of those private profiteers, we should be investing money from public sources. For example, we need to open our eyes to the fact that we have £10 billion in local authority pension funds in Scotland. Is it beyond the wit of this Parliament to be able to unlock that £10 billion for investment in public sector projects while guaranteeing a rate of return to those pension funds to allow them to meet their future liabilities? We require that type of thinking in this Parliament if we really are going to be up to the mark.

This is a grand landmark building. Indeed, it is far too grand and far too much of a landmark to remain a parish council. It has to become the seat of a new independent Scotland. *[Applause.]*

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Before I call Mark Ballard, I remind the gallery that is not appropriate to applaud.

16:19

Mark Ballard (Lothians) (Green): We have spent two days discussing a legislative programme that contains a range of proposals—many of which are welcome—that we must properly scrutinise and discuss in Parliament. However, listening to the speeches today and

yesterday, there is a general feeling that there is incoherence and contradiction in the Executive's agenda. Perhaps there is a lack of a new vision to match our new building. I will come to the contradictions later.

I am not saying that there have not been any big visions expressed in the debate. There has been the vision of sustainability that my colleague Shiona Baird outlined, as well as the vision of safe, healthy and sustainable development in food, which my colleague Mark Ruskell outlined. In the non-partisan spirit of the new politics, I say that I was taken with what Susan Deacon had to say about whether we have the Government systems that can carry out the Parliament's and Scotland's shared vision of participation and consultation.

I believe—Susan Deacon expressed this very well—that we have to reform our public services and Government systems, but not to abolish them as the Tories still seem to be saying. Parliament has made great progress in making public service delivery more community oriented, but we have now to take the next step and make it more community led. That would be a bold new vision for this new building. I thank Susan Deacon for that.

What of the legislative programme? To my mind, the centrepiece of the Executive's environmental programme for the coming year is strategic environmental assessment. After doing the absolute minimum that is required to meet the European Union requirements, and with organisations such as the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds doubting that the statutory instrument that was introduced the day before the deadline did even that, the Executive is now proposing a proper bill for strategic environmental assessment. As Nora Radcliffe pointed out from her experiences, such requirements have a positive impact because they focus on the environmental impact.

I welcome assessment of the strategic impact on the environment of all new Executive programmes, plans and—I thank the Executive for this—strategies. Those assessments must be properly monitored and carried out independently, and we will scrutinise the detail of the bill to make sure that it will achieve that.

Jackie Baillie and others outlined how the needs of communities should also be a yardstick for measuring progress. I argue that the impact on communities and on the environment—the sustainable development agenda—should be the yardstick for the Executive's and the Parliament's progress, rather than the one-dimensional agenda of gross domestic product growth. That would be a powerful and positive new vision for the Parliament.

There is a contradiction between growth in GDP and the needs of communities and the environment, which is an example of the lack of coherence of which I spoke earlier. The First Minister and the Executive are trying and failing to be all things to all people. Ministers talk the talk of sustainability and environmental justice while other departments are actively undermining the sustainability of Scotland. Coming to terms with climate change and many other pressing environmental issues will force the Executive radically to alter many of its policies.

However, it is not just the Executive that cannot manage to form a joined-up policy on the environment. The SNP is wedded to the idea that North sea oil revenues can bankroll an independent Scotland. However, an independent future for Scotland cannot be built on a volatile oil market and the declining resource that is North sea oil. We expect fossil fuel-based economics from George W Bush, but I thought that the SNP was rather smarter than that. Why do the SNP and the Executive allow their transport policies continually to undermine efforts to tackle greenhouse gases, as my colleague Chris Ballance outlined? If the Executive is serious about supporting waste minimisation and waste reduction—

Sarah Boyack: Will the member take an intervention?

Mark Ballard: I want to finish my sentence.

I would like the Executive to take up the idea of one of its back benchers for a plastic-bag levy; I am very disappointed that such a proposal is not included in the Executive's programme.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Your intervention must be short, Miss Boyack.

Sarah Boyack: My point is about transport. The Executive has more than doubled the amount of money that it is putting into transport and 75 per cent of that expenditure will be on public transport. The idea that climate change is being ignored is just not true. We are not going far enough, but that is partly because we need to change a culture. Surely the Greens would be better off working with us than constantly dismissing the facts.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Miss Boyack, you need to finish now.

Sarah Boyack: I have been at public meetings at which Greens have said that they were in favour of road improvements on safety grounds. Safety was the only reason why the roads in question received such improvements.

Mark Ballard: I was not criticising the Executive; I was pointing out the contradictions between what the Executive says and what actually happens. I welcome new money for new railways, just as I

welcome walking and cycling plans. My concern is about the way in which that is undermined by the Executive's continuing promotion of new road development. As Chris Ballance said, the spending of up to £1 billion on the M74 undermines all the good work that I recognise that the Executive is doing.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You must finish now.

Mark Ballard: If the Executive is really serious about that issue and many others, it needs to have something stronger—we must have policies for social and environmental justice. That is the new vision that we need.

16:26

Christine May (Central Fife) (Lab): It is a pleasure to be speaking for the first time in our wonderful new Parliament building, which is everything that I expected of it and more.

Congratulations and thanks go from me—and, I hope, others who were supportively critical—to the people who had the vision and the drive to get us here. They also go to those contractors, craftsmen and Parliament staff who have worked their socks off to make that vision a reality. They include many people such as the young man whom I met in the lift this morning, who has worked 86 of the past 90 days to help to get us here. I thank all of them.

The only complaint that I have heard so far came from my researcher, who said that a pillar was blocking his view. Unfortunately, proposals to improve views for researchers are not included in the Executive's legislative programme, but they are one of the few things missing from a comprehensive and ambitious set of proposals that has Scotland's economic future and well-being at heart; besides, such proposals would not be a priority anyway.

Yesterday the First Minister outlined his vision for Scotland. He talked of a land of ambition and opportunity that embodies Labour's values of fairness, solidarity, tolerance and respect—values that have underpinned everything that the coalition did in the first parliamentary session and everything that it has done to date in the current session.

The Executive's programme contains a great deal and covers a wide range of subjects. It seems to have been drawn up in such a way that the objectives of every proposed bill complement the Executive's overall objectives of prosperity, social inclusion and environmental protection. That is in stark contrast to the Opposition parties, which take their own narrow agendas, fit their proposals around them and either do not know or do not care what those proposals will cost or what impact they will have on other areas of government.

Many Labour members have spoken of the need for real and funded partnership to achieve the correct climate for economic growth. Marilyn Livingstone referred to the success of the Fife community safety partnership in tackling a huge swathe of issues to do with community safety. I support her call, and that of others, for realistic funding for Fife constabulary to help us to achieve our objectives.

Other members, such as Des McNulty, have referred to the need to build confidence by ensuring that communities have a democratic voice and a genuine sense of choice when they participate with us in many of our partnerships. Cathie Craigie was one of many members who referred to the need for training and, indeed, retraining, especially in areas in which unemployment and deprivation remain high, such as old mining towns or other areas that have been decimated by the loss of heavy industry; Methil in central Fife is such an example. Community learning partnerships will play an increasingly important role in ensuring that training and skills develop in those areas, enabling employers and local people to create and sustain employment.

Richard Baker highlighted the work that is being done to streamline higher and further education funding and to achieve a long-term solution to funding and other issues. The work of Glenrothes College and Fife College along with the universities in my area is just what is needed to ensure continued skills development.

Over the past five years, the Executive has demonstrated that the best way to progress is through partnership. It has worked with the national Government to get the best deal for Scotland and has introduced parallel laws where appropriate. The Executive has also worked with the private sector to provide much-needed services—public initiatives using private money and expertise in partnership for the greater good and different departments working together to solve the same problem but from a different angle.

We would have none of that if any of the Opposition parties were in power. With the Tories, it is private without the public—business or bust—and so long as the fat cats have money, it does not matter about anything else; with the SNP, it is Scotland without the UK—a country with no defence, money or future, but that would be okay because we could blame the English; and with the SSP, it is all hail the socialist republic of Tommyland in which everyone is equal and free to live without the threat of ever making any money, being prosperous or having anything because the Government has spent the lot.

I will not even start on the Greens. They are our only nationally elected pressure group but they could not balance their conflicting priorities if the

lives of their compost-guzzling worms depended on it.

Shona Robison: Is that the member's definition of raising her game?

Christine May: It is not my definition of raising my game—I will come to that.

Labour and the coalition are raising their game, but the Opposition parties have demonstrated clearly that for them it is the same old game at the same old level. The legislative programme is ambitious in its objectives and inclusive in its scope. It does not simply ask the questions, "What are we going to do about health, education or crime?" but asks "How can we make Scotland a better place for everyone, improve the lot of our young people and, at the same time, safeguard the environment, improve our communities and make Scotland a more prosperous and successful country?"

We will do that by taking a joined-up approach to government and by realising that it is possible to have the conditions for economic growth only if we improve health, communities, social justice and the environment. My colleagues Jackie Baillie and Johann Lamont pointed that out this morning. That is the only way to make our country great: a country of ambition; a country of opportunity. We need collectively to talk Scotland up. We can be supportively critical but ensure that the opportunities are developed and that they are there to be grasped. I commend the proposals to the chamber.

16:32

Bill Aitken (Glasgow) (Con): The one recurrent theme that has run throughout the debate—indeed, Christine May has just referred to it—has been the word "ambition". It has become apparent that some Executive ministers are resentful that they have been accused of a lack of ambition. Let me offer them some words of comfort: nobody seriously doubts that they have the ambition to create a better Scotland. The real difficulty, and the difference between us, is how it should be created.

Let me make it quite clear that we will seek to co-operate on a number of facets of the Executive's legislative programme, although we will do so with the caveat that we will seek to amend the programme to make it work better—I am sure that that is only to be expected. No right-minded person could possibly object to legislation that increases the protection of children and other vulnerable sections of society. I am thinking of the legislation that seeks to inhibit the abhorrent practice of female circumcision. We will also look with considerable interest at the provisions of the proposed housing bill.

We support measures that will increase public confidence in charitable giving and the proposed charity law bill might make such a provision. As ever, we flag up the caveat that the Executive must legislate with a light touch; it should not interfere too much in the operation of the voluntary sector.

As ever, the Executive's failure has been a lack of specifics, in particular in relation to the economy. Frankly, Scotland is lacking in competitiveness. We have to take measures to increase the level of competitiveness, not only to grow our economy but to safeguard existing jobs. When we have the totally unacceptable situation of Scottish business rates being 7 per cent higher than business rates down south and Scottish business—sometimes quite small enterprises—being confronted with water charges that have increased by 500 per cent, serious questions have to be asked about the Executive's ability to deliver a more competitive Scotland.

Last week's launch of "The Framework for Economic Development in Scotland"—the FEDS 2 document—was rather depressing. It was a plaintive call on the Executive's part for business to sharpen up its act. At the same time, the Executive is forcing businesses to compete on highly unlevel playing fields.

Helen Eadie: Would the member care to elucidate the Tories' policies? I remember that, when Michael Howard was in office, the Tories' boom-and-bust policies led to interest rates being at 15 per cent for a whole year, to 1 million households being in negative equity, to 100,000 families losing their homes and to 3 million people being unemployed. Would the member like to elaborate on that?

Bill Aitken: The member might not be aware of it, but I remind her that the Labour Party has been in Government for some seven years now. We are confronted with the situation that exists today. I am not optimistic about what will pertain in the future—perhaps the member should address herself to that. When the Executive is prepared to do something about business rates, water charges and the burgeoning public sector, I will be prepared to listen to Helen Eadie.

Despite the First Minister's statement, and indeed what Mr Finnie said on television last night, members will be totally confused about the Executive's attitude towards our education system. There seems to be an acceptance that the status quo is not satisfactory, yet there is no cogent, coherent plan for how the Executive will improve matters. That is typical of the Executive's approach. May I respectfully suggest—I trust that Mrs Eadie is listening—that, until parents are allowed more input into their children's education and until real choices are permitted on curricula, matters are not going to progress.

Perhaps most worrying of all is the lack of information on how the Executive proposes to combat the fact that universities down south will be able to charge top-up fees and the effect that that will have on the research that our universities are able to conduct.

As I listened to Cathy Jamieson this morning, I had a sense of foreboding. Even under her and Hugh Henry's stewardship, the possibility of being murdered in one's bed is remote. However, the probability of having one's life disrupted by housebreaking, vandalism and disorder is very high. Cathy Jamieson's concern about the high recidivism rate of those who have been in custody is likely to draw her along the route of reducing the number of people in custody. Perhaps she should note that there is a very high reoffending rate among those who have done community service. We will, by all means, look constructively and coherently at the measures that the Executive proposes, but if the Minister for Justice comes forward with the soft, soft approach that she has demonstrated in the past, we will reject it. We cannot continue along the lines of fines that are frequently unpaid, community service that is, in many cases, not done, and so-called diversions from prosecution that simply do not work.

There is a very real loss of confidence in the justice system, with a growing confidence on the part of offenders that they can continue to offend with impunity and that nothing will happen. That is the nub of the problem with the Executive's justice policy.

Perhaps the most depressing contribution that the Executive has made is in the health service. Is it not bizarre that a 42 per cent increase in funding has not brought about an improved health service? That is appalling and shocking. The fact that the Executive seems quite content to continue on the same old basis and with the same old ethos, knowing that the service will not get any better, almost defies description.

As we end the debate in this august new chamber, many of us might feel, to paraphrase a Neil Diamond song, that—except for the place and a few other changes—the story is the same.

16:39

Roseanna Cunningham (Perth) (SNP): I should say at the outset that I am mystified by the psychology of Christine May who, as I understand it, is Irish born. I wonder whether her comments about independence would apply to the country of her birth and whether they would be received in a positive manner when she visits Ireland on holiday. It is interesting that she applies a different standard to the country where she now lives and where she represents constituents.

In his statement yesterday, the First Minister listed the five bills that we have brought down the High Street with us, which are scheduled to finish their parliamentary progress in the coming year. Included in that list was the Water Services etc (Scotland) Bill that is moving into stage 1 at committee. Of course we all want to see an improvement in the quality of Scotland's drinking water and sewerage efficiency. However, of greater concern to Scotland is the burgeoning water bureaucracy, complete with bonuses and all. The Minister for Environment and Rural Development, who has yet to speak, could make a start by merging the water industry commissioner's office with the water quality regulator's office and allowing the current consultation on Scottish Water to effect real change to that organisation.

I have dealt with some of the issues concerning the legislation, but more important is what has not been addressed. As my colleagues John Swinney and Alex Neil said, there is a pressing need to confront the development embargoes that are in place throughout Scotland, including in my constituency, which are caused by the constraints that are imposed by lack of sewerage capacity.

Although the blanket embargo that Scottish Water placed on Perth has been lifted—I thank Ross Finnie for his assistance—there are still nearly 1,300 potential open-market house sites and more than 250 sites that are earmarked specifically for affordable housing that cannot be developed because of drainage constraints. That is in one constituency only. By the time that we multiply the numbers throughout Scotland, we see that lack of infrastructure seriously impedes development. It is not enough to talk about dealing with the problem at some vague time in the future, as indicated by the Deputy First Minister yesterday morning. Scotland needs more affordable housing now and we cannot allow a development deadlock to put the hems on that ambition. There is not much point in talking about economic development when lack of infrastructure is such an obstacle to that development.

I am conscious that Ross Finnie has yet to speak, so I hope that he will address some wider rural affairs issues such as the lack of a decent rural public transport network. The Deputy First Minister said that about two thirds of all transport money was spent on public transport, but huge parts of Scotland must be wondering where that money has gone. The centralisation of health services, which we have heard discussed in detail, is a particular problem in rural areas and I hope that the Minister for Environment and Rural Development will at least refer to that.

In a broader environmental sense, it would be useful if the minister would also say whether he

will have any input into the on-going search for nuclear waste dumping opportunities and the Ministry of Defence plans to break up nuclear submarines, as they might affect Coulpport. Those are environmental issues that will affect Scotland in the near future.

I presume that renewable energy, which has been mentioned, is a matter for the Minister for Environment and Rural Development and his colleague the Deputy First Minister. There is an urgent need to widen the renewable energy base across a variety of sectors instead of focusing only on onshore wind farms. Before we rush to nuclear power—as was suggested again by John Home Robertson—with all its long-term implications, could we at least look at widening the potential for alternative sources of energy? We also need clearer planning guidance at all levels and I ask the minister to comment on that. We need to address the point that was raised by Alex Neil about the effect of the British electricity trading and transmission arrangements on costs for alternative energy suppliers in Scotland. Those arrangements will have a big impact, which needs to be addressed.

The draft Gaelic language bill was, at one and the same time, a welcome if long overdue development, but also a bit of a disappointment. The First Minister spoke at length yesterday about how this was to be a year in which the Executive focused on young people and he claimed that it was vital to ensure that Gaelic not only survives but thrives. However, John Farquhar Munro's concerns are well founded. If, when the bill is published, the Executive has not responded positively to the overwhelming demand that was voiced during the consultation period for a right to Gaelic-medium education to be written into the bill, it can expect to find that disappointment being expressed a lot more vocally by many who, up to now, might have given it the benefit of the doubt.

Public services are a big issue throughout Scotland and health is the biggest public services issue. I noted David McLetchie's comment yesterday morning on the size of government. He said that he would return it to the level it was at in 1999, but he did not elucidate exactly what he meant by that. I am sorry that he did not give us more specifics, because I would like to know who he would sack and how that would affect the national health service, particularly given the Conservatives' record on the health service.

Yesterday, the First Minister spoke about the planned health bill, but we have not heard much about that this afternoon. I have little confidence, following his performance at First Minister's question time this afternoon—sorry, I mean yesterday afternoon. No, was it today? I am getting so carried away that I cannot even

remember what day it is. I have little confidence that anything that comes from the Executive this year will be good news for the groups throughout the country that are campaigning hard to retain essential services in their local areas. That is the biggest issue in the current health service debate, but it has reached national prominence only now that it affects Labour constituencies. Those of us who have been fighting on that issue in the Parliament for years are glad to have the belated support of Labour MSPs, but it is a pity that they were not there rather earlier. It seems that Labour MSPs want to act out the role of staunch defenders in their local patches but they keep schtum when they are involved in debates in Parliament. They should have taken up the cross-party group opportunity that was offered to them, but God forbid that they might find common cause with members from other parties or, worse yet, realise that the problems that are being faced and the issues that are being raised in their constituencies are not isolated examples after all but are replicated throughout the country.

Mr McNeil: Will the member take an intervention?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The member is in her last minute.

Roseanna Cunningham: The role of those back benchers in local health campaigns is symbolic of the way in which the Executive works: talking a good game and delivering nothing.

In the past two days, people have talked about the new Parliament building. In this building we are surrounded by concrete, but in the Executive's programme there is nothing concrete about affordable housing; there is nothing concrete to alleviate poverty and its effects; there is nothing concrete to ensure business growth and, through that, employment opportunities; and there is nothing concrete to ensure faster and more efficient delivery of health services to the whole of Scotland. We have heard a few promises, but mostly we have heard vague, recycled generalities. A fitting verdict on the Executive's programme might be: nae vision, just a lot of déjà vu.

16:47

The Minister for Environment and Rural Development (Ross Finnie): This has been a quite remarkable debate, and in some ways a unique one. It is unique because of the consensus that we have enjoyed for the whole of the two days, which is exemplified by the joining of the views of Fergus Ewing and Tommy Sheridan in agreeing that this is a magnificent building. I am glad that every member feels that way, because so do I. I well remember my son—who is a young

architect and who sensibly eschews any involvement in political life, having seen what it has done for his father—calling me one evening and providing the political advice that only a son can provide. He said, “You do understand that the reconvening of the Scottish Parliament is an occasion for a significant architectural statement?”, and the phone went down. I think that I can safely report that this is a significant architectural statement that will add considerably to the finest of Scotland's architectural heritage.

The debate opened with a statement of some ambition. In the Executive and the coalition, we wish to create the conditions for economic growth—not unfettered growth, as the Greens suggested, but growth that recognises and lives up to the environmental imperatives, not least those of sustainable development. That ambition for growth has as its purpose to improve conditions for the individual citizens of Scotland, to bring about social justice and to close the opportunity gap.

It is not about waiting for growth to happen or the trickle-down approach; it is about taking action now to start achieving some of those conjoined objectives. Our aim is to have a Scotland of greater tolerance, fairness and respect and to make Scotland the best small country in the world.

That general ambition is the context for today's debate. The Executive is not claiming that the programme that we have presented for the next 12 months will necessarily achieve all those ambitions—in general in the Parliament, we are not in the business of quick fixes. As a Parliament, we have a duty to acknowledge that most of the issues with which we deal are highly complex and require to be delivered with care and attention to detail. We cannot promise the citizens that we will find the solution tomorrow, and we in the Executive do not claim that we can do so.

Mr Swinney: My intervention is on the complexity of government and ensuring that the Government engages properly in resolving issues on behalf of communities. There is an admirable commitment from the Government to the whole process of community planning, with our local authorities in the lead on the issue, but there is enormous frustration among local authorities that they cannot involve organisations such as Scottish Water in local community planning activities. The economic development objectives that the Government is pursuing, which we on the SNP benches support, are fatally undermined, because Scottish Water is not involved in sensible dialogue with local authorities about priorities. In the absence of such dialogue, I encourage Mr Finnie to intervene to create commonsense and joined-up government that will support development in the local authority areas of Scotland.

Ross Finnie: I will address Scottish Water, because Roseanna Cunningham has also raised issues about it and it is important.

Generally, we have all agreed that there is a need for us to have vision. We have different visions and I understand that parties' different political philosophies will give rise to different ambitions. We should not try to pretend that there will not be such differences.

Before I respond to many of the points that have been made, I will dwell on one of the environmental matters that has not been ventilated much during the debate: the Executive's commitment to improving the environment and making Scotland more sustainable. We made a commitment to that at the outset, in the partnership agreement, by stating that we wanted a Scotland that delivers sustainable development and puts environmental concerns at the heart of public policy, and to secure a greater sense of the environment right across the Executive's work. We have done quite a bit to develop that even since then. There is the imminent statement on a green jobs strategy and we have subjected the current spending review to sustainable development criteria and put it before the Cabinet sub-committee on sustainable Scotland. That is a measure of how seriously we take the matter.

Of course, legislation alone cannot deliver a better environment.

Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green): Will the minister take an intervention?

Ross Finnie: I want to make a little progress.

Legislation alone cannot deliver sustainable development, but it can achieve a huge amount, which is why sustainable development and Scotland's environment feature in this legislative programme. As has been said, pride of place goes to strategic environmental assessment.

I am glad that the Greens have now checked their facts and have acknowledged that we implemented the European directive on strategic environmental assessment in good time, but the proposed environmental assessment (Scotland) bill goes far beyond that.

Robin Harper (Lothians) (Green): Will the minister take an intervention?

Ross Finnie: The member has been reading all night.

Robin Harper: The Executive implemented the directive by a last-minute statutory instrument and is now working on producing a bill. However, given what a powerful tool we are talking about and the Executive's repeated commitment to sustainable development in the past five years, why did the Executive not get down to the work that it is doing now three years ago?

Ross Finnie: There is always the question, "Why didn't you do it before?" If we had acted three years ago, we would, I presume, have ended up by simply implementing the European directive, but that is not what the Executive is doing. We are going beyond the requirements of the directive. The only reason why we implemented the directive at this time is the time that was required to develop the broader range of measures. As Robin Harper knows, the directive requires us to subject to assessment only those policies and programmes that arise from legislation. We are going beyond that; we are encompassing them all. I would have thought that, of all the parties, the Green party would have been more gracious in accepting that proposition.

The bill will bring a range of benefits. First and foremost, it will protect the environment by ensuring that we avoid damaging it. The bill will protect the environment through the quality of decision making. Critically, at the outset, every public plan and programme will be required to have regard to the environmental implications.

Patrick Harvie: Will the minister give way?

Ross Finnie: I have to make progress.

The ramifications of that are absolutely enormous, because for the first time many bodies will have to think in ways in which they have never had to think before, and they will have to consider the environment at the outset. The public will also be given far greater rights: the right to comment and to have their comments taken into account and the right to be informed of decisions. We have never operated in that way before. The bill will be a major advance in how we respond to the requirements of the environment and will embed in our thinking—across public bodies and public life—the question of sustainability.

In his conclusion, Mark Ballard made points on our commitment to SEA that the Greens have made throughout the debate. I hope that they understand that by putting the spending review to the Cabinet sub-committee on sustainable Scotland the Executive is beginning to embed sustainability in all its policies. As Sarah Boyack pointed out, the fact that the Executive has the ambition of changing the whole balance of its transport expenditure, such that, by the end of the review, 75 per cent of our expenditure will be on public transport, cannot be anything other than a serious commitment to dealing with greenhouse emissions and reducing our reliance on other forms of transport.

Bill Aitken and other Conservatives were critical of our approach to the economy. In particular, Bill Aitken repeated comments made elsewhere about his view of FEDS. I am bound to say that he ought to have regard not to his personal view, but to

what economic commentators of repute said about FEDS and, indeed, what the business community said about FEDS. They said that we are operating within a perfectly logical and sensible framework. Bill Aitken ought to read their comments before he makes the kind of comments that he made.

On justice, for goodness' sake, the Minister for Justice has made clear her commitment and that of the Executive to addressing the problem of reoffending. Reducing the number of people who go to prison is not about taking a soft option; it is about recognising that prison is a wholly inappropriate disposal for a large number of offences.

Many members who contributed to the debate tried to say that absolutely nothing has happened in the health service. Never once has the Minister for Health and Community Care or anybody else suggested that there are no further improvements to be made, but he pointed out clearly that the developments that the Executive has embarked upon have already produced reductions in premature mortality from the big killer diseases, with a 6 per cent reduction in deaths in under-75s from cancer, a 14 per cent reduction in deaths from stroke, and a 23 per cent reduction in deaths from coronary heart disease. Members should not paint the picture that absolutely everything has gone wrong when manifestly it has not.

Shona Robison: As a West of Scotland MSP, what is Ross Finnie's message to the local hospital campaigners in his area?

Ross Finnie: My grouse is with NHS Argyll and Clyde. If Shona Robison has read the local paper, she will know—[*Interruption.*] Well, it is. It has not put its proposition to the Minister for Health and Community Care. Shona Robison and Roseanna Cunningham may laugh. I know that they want to destroy all the bodies. I am at one with the proposition that the centralisation of the services is not appropriate. I have made that point clearly and publicly.

John Swinney and Roseanna Cunningham raised Scottish Water. Let us be clear that in 1999-2000, when we embarked on the largest single investment programme in Scottish water, with £1.8 billion from the Executive, that followed a serious amount of public consultation. I deeply regret—although it is a matter of fact—that nobody, not even the local authorities, raised the issue of development constraint at that time as being a major issue. I deeply regret that, because we might have fashioned the programme slightly differently. However, we cannot suddenly switch off a commitment to improve water quality through regulation or legislation, and we cannot suddenly switch off programmes to deal with meeting the regulations on sewage. That is simply not possible.

I regret that but, as Roseanna Cunningham was gracious enough to admit, we have embarked on a programme and taken steps whereby we can try to unblock some of the development constraints. I am not for a minute suggesting that we have managed to solve all the problems, but it is true that we are now seriously engaged in trying to take that programme forward. A £1.8 billion programme, with the amount of capital that is involved, cannot suddenly be turned off and turned on once we have made the commitment.

Mr Swinney: I am grateful to the minister for giving way again. In the context of the point that he is making about a £1.8 billion investment, I urge him to recognise the fact that there are numerous constraints on development that are now affecting the economic health of different parts of Scotland. If the Government is serious about making economic growth its top priority, that requires his urgent ministerial attention to the problem. To date, he has passed the issue to Scottish Water. I urge him, as courteously as I can, to take a personal interest in resolving some of the issues that have been brought directly to him in that respect.

Ross Finnie: With respect, I am taking a personal interest, as can be seen from my comments in response to Roseanna Cunningham and my attempts to solve some of the problems that are close to Mr Swinney. However, he cannot seriously be suggesting to the regulators that, with building at £40 million a month, the need to meet the regulatory requirements should suddenly be ignored because the programme has been diverted. The issue is complex and it cannot be resolved instantly, but I am quite seized of the need to be involved in it.

On the other rural issues that Roseanna Cunningham raised, such as renewable energy, we are committed not only to going down the route of developing wind power, but to developing other forms of renewable energy. My friend the Deputy First Minister and Minister for Enterprise and Lifelong Learning has been clear about that, and he opened a centre for wave and tidal power in his own constituency. We also have the intermediary technology institute in Aberdeen. All those initiatives are directed to ensuring that Scotland can play its part in harnessing its wave and tidal resources—something that Scotland is uniquely qualified to do. That is a clear commitment from the Executive.

On nuclear waste dumping, as was mentioned in yesterday's debate, issues of planning and of strategic environmental assessment come into play, so both the Scottish public and the Scottish Executive have a role in determining such issues.

Let us remind ourselves of what the Executive has set out before Parliament in this debate. We

have set out what we believe to be a perfectly respectable ambition on our part, and that is only part of what we seek to achieve. In our legislative programme for the coming year, we are putting before the Parliament our commitment that we will require all public plans and programmes that may have a significant environmental impact to be subject to environmental assessment.

Our legislative programme will give statutory underpinning to the whole question of integrating our transport provision. It will create single funding agencies so that we have a strategic overview of further and higher education. It will secure the status of the Gaelic language and review and modernise charity law. It will introduce free eye and dental checks, crack down on binge drinking and introduce tolerable standards for thermal insulation. It will give rights to unmarried fathers, reduce acrimony in divorce and provide safeguards for cohabiting couples. It will also outlaw the barbaric practice of sending females abroad for genital mutilation and give protection to children who are being groomed on the internet.

The legislative programme will play its part in realising our ambition and in making Scotland a more caring, more tolerant and altogether more compassionate society, and I commend it to the Parliament.

Business Motions

17:01

The Presiding Officer (Mr George Reid): The next item of business is consideration of business motion S2M-1630, in the name of Patricia Ferguson, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, setting out a timetable for legislation.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees—

(a) that consideration of the Fire (Scotland) Bill at Stage 1 be completed by 19 November 2004;

(b) that the Justice 1 Committee reports to the Justice 2 Committee by 17 September 2004 on the European Communities (Lawyer's Practice) (Scotland) Amendment Regulations 2004 (SSI 2004/302); and

(c) that the Justice 2 Committee reports to the Justice 1 Committee by 24 September 2004 on the Register of Sasines (Application Procedure) Rules 2004 (SSI 2004/318).—[*Patricia Ferguson.*]

Motion agreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next item of business is consideration of business motion S2M-1643, in the name of Patricia Ferguson, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, setting out a timetable for legislation.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees—

(a) that the timetable for completion of consideration of the Breastfeeding etc. (Scotland) Bill at Stage 1 be extended to 24 September 2004; and

(b) that the timetable for completion of consideration of the Emergency Workers (Scotland) Bill at Stage 1 be extended to 1 October 2004.—[*Patricia Ferguson.*]

Motion agreed to.

International Suicide Prevention Week

Resumed debate.

The Presiding Officer (Mr George Reid): We move straight to the next item of business, which is a continuation of the members' business debate on motion S2M-1578, in the name of Duncan McNeil, on international suicide prevention week.

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.

17:07

Stewart Stevenson (Banff and Buchan) (SNP): It is a slightly unusual privilege to read in the *Official Report* that I rose to start my speech at 17.21 yesterday and am still continuing it nearly 24 hours later. I rather hope that that record will not be beaten, even though it was dictated by the rather unusual circumstances.

I congratulate Duncan McNeil on bringing this important subject to Parliament. I share his disappointment that the debate has been fractured. However, I am sure that the fact that it spreads over a long timescale will cause it to be read with particular interest. I will not speak at quite the length that I originally intended to because we have two members' business debates to conduct tonight.

One of the important things about suicide is that it comes in a variety of forms, not all of which politicians or anyone else can reasonably expect to have influence over. One form that is troubling the modern world is what I would term political suicide. It is not a new phenomenon, as anyone who has stood on the heights of Masada will know. Several thousand years ago, the community there committed mass suicide, apparently by choice, when confronted by the horrors of being overrun by a hostile mob. One has sympathy with that community. In 1968, Jan Palach immolated himself in Wenceslas Square as an expression of his personal despair at the quashing of the Prague spring. Of course, the Czech Republic is now a member of the European Union.

More sinister and worrying today is murder by suicide, whereby many young people are

persuaded to commit suicide in order to murder others. I make this important little point before I move to the meat of the matter: we want Scotland to support real and locally appropriate democracy as the only way forward throughout the world. That is an important part of the prevention of political suicide, which happens in environments in which there is a democratic vacuum that provides no opportunity for the proper expression of political views.

Individuals are at the heart of this debate on international suicide prevention week. Of course, a number of factors can drive people to commit suicide. People who are physically ill can be driven in their extremity to take their own lives—perhaps when they are suffering from a terminal illness. That is not good for anyone—perhaps, for the person concerned. I hope that there will be many more opportunities throughout Scotland for people who are terminally ill to receive the appropriate pain management that means that they are less likely to take that extreme measure, which affects their families and friends.

Probably at the core of the matter is whether we offer the appropriate support to people who are mentally disturbed and whether we detect and catch such people early enough to ensure that they receive the support that means that they do not feel driven to commit suicide as a way out of their despair. Of course, there can be subtle interactions between mental and physical illness: a school classmate of mine had the grave misfortune to have a serious intestinal problem that required him to have a colostomy bag, the physical effects of which affected his mental state. He committed suicide.

Finally, there are people who commit suicide out of the blue—we do not know why. In my own family we experienced that seven years ago and to this day we do not know why that family member committed suicide.

We cannot help everyone who might commit suicide, but I hope that international suicide prevention week will help to raise the profile of the problem and reduce the numbers of people who do so.

17:12

Janis Hughes (Glasgow Rutherglen) (Lab): I too congratulate Duncan McNeil on securing this important debate.

It is so sad that something as preventable as suicide kills more young men than road accidents do and remains the main cause of death for men aged between 15 and 44, as Duncan McNeil said yesterday. It is particularly sad for members of the Scottish Parliament, because people in Scotland

are twice as likely to kill themselves as people in the rest of the United Kingdom.

I welcome the work that the Scottish Executive is doing on the matter. The investment of £12 million over three years directly to support national and local efforts represents funding that can achieve tangible results. I also admire the Executive's commitment to prevention and cure, because by acting to reduce the risks that might lead to suicidal behaviour, while working in the longer term to enable people to recover and deal with issues that might contribute to that behaviour, the Executive is approaching the matter in the right way. As the motion says, the choose life strategy aims to reduce suicides by 20 per cent over the next 10 years. Although such a reduction would represent a welcome start, Scotland's suicide rate would still be 50 per cent higher than the rate south of the border. There can be no doubt that Scotland has a particular problem. It is therefore surely incumbent on the Scottish Executive to take whatever further action it can to reduce the number of suicides.

To be proactive is always better than to be reactive but, sadly, not all suicides are predictable. We often hear that people who have taken their own lives appeared happy on the outside. It might be difficult for professionals to identify such people, but we must all strive to create a society in which people do not feel that they have no alternative to suicide. It is important to recognise that prevention might not always be possible, but there are actions that we as a society can take to help to prevent suicide, particularly in situations in which suicidal behaviour is perhaps predictable, for example in relation to the priority groups that are identified in the choose life strategy.

As is often said during our debates on mental health, one in four of us will develop mental health problems at some point in our lives. That is why it is vital to have joined-up thinking to ensure that people are given appropriate levels of support at the very earliest stage possible.

Sadly, I am aware of the anguish surrounding deaths by suicide—both through representing constituents and through personal experience. The feelings of helplessness and guilt are overwhelming and make losing a loved one even more difficult to deal with. It is vital that we ensure that all agencies are working together to provide the kind of co-ordinated care and support that ensures that vulnerable people in our society feel that there is somewhere they can go for help. It is concerning that people with mental health issues often have to wait excessive times for appropriate treatment. It is important that we remember that national health service waiting times are a problem for issues of the mind as well as for issues of the body.

In its own way, this debate is important in tackling suicide in Scotland. We must use every opportunity to raise awareness of the scale of the problem. We can only hope that highlighting the issue will assure people who may be at risk that they are not alone. Although I agree that more can always be done, a lot of help is available. That help is available not only for young people; we should not forget that a quarter of all suicides are among the elderly.

I am delighted that this issue has been chosen for the first members' business debate in the new Parliament building. Highlighting the help and support available is vital in suicide prevention. However, we must realise that there is no easy answer. People become suicidal for various reasons. If we could cure bullying, unemployment, homelessness, substance misuse and mental illness in one fell swoop, we would, but it is not as simple as that. However, I congratulate the Executive on the work that is being done and I thank Duncan McNeil for bringing this matter to the chamber.

17:16

Mary Scanlon (Highlands and Islands) (Con):

I thank Duncan McNeil for securing the first members' business debate on the first and second day in this new Parliament building.

In the first session of the Parliament, I spoke during a members' business debate on suicide, and I had my own members' business debate on men's health. We must continue to consider both those important issues. Janis Hughes mentioned the suicide rates in Scotland compared with those in England; I would mention the suicide rates in the Highlands, where the rate of female suicides is very similar to that in the rest of Scotland, but where the rate of male suicides is much higher.

I agree with the objectives set out by the Executive at national and local level, especially the raising of awareness, early intervention, more effective care and support, the improvement and increasing of the provision of services, the removal of the stigma that men feel about seeking emotional support, the offering of effective and sympathetic support to family members and sensitive media reporting.

Over the summer recess, I had several meetings with Dr Cameron Stark, a public health consultant in Highland NHS Board with special responsibility for addressing the high suicide rate. I also met many families who had lost a loved one to suicide. Most recently, I met John Burnside, who lost his son Richard—or Titchy, as he was known. I learned a lot from those families, and—although, as Janis Hughes said, every suicide case is unique—some common elements come through. I

listened to a mother who begged that her son be taken into prison because she knew that that was where he would get the help he needed. I have also listened to families who are still begging for help to save someone in their family from suicide. However, when people seek help for depression and mental health problems, they will often receive a costly prescription rather than someone to listen to them. When they seek help for drug and alcohol problems, the help is either not there when they need it or not sufficient in relation to the care and support that they need. Even when alcohol and drug problems start to be addressed, many of the underlying mental health problems have to be faced. At that point, people often say, "I had to face my demons." Help is desperately needed, and rarely there.

People are not always treated with the respect and dignity—which were mentioned by the First Minister yesterday—that they deserve. In fact, it can be a humiliating and degrading experience for many. Over the recess, I am sorry to say that I saw the police acting with more compassion and sensitivity than some—although not all—health workers. I commend the NHS in much that it does, but I also commend the police.

For many people, debt problems are a serious issue and they do not know where to turn for help.

As Janis Hughes said, families are left with the burden of asking themselves whether they should have noticed the signs and done something. There are so many questions and it often takes months or years to get the answers. In social work, the constant turnover of staff and shortage of social workers mean that such support can take much longer to appear than would be expected.

When people are taken into psychiatric hospitals, they sometimes find little to do all day and are left to their own devices to pass the day as they can. Hospitals should offer intensive therapy, care and support, not just bed and breakfast with the prescription pills thrown in. A patient who was admitted to Newcraigs hospital has compared that experience with her recent experience in Castle Craig hospital, where she was admitted to tackle her alcoholism. In Newcraigs hospital, there is nothing to do all day. In Castle Craig hospital, patients rise for breakfast at 7 and then undertake a full programme of therapy and events that goes on all day. Given the shortage of hospital beds, I ask the minister whether we can provide more intensive therapy when patients are admitted.

I am grateful to the Mental Welfare Commission for Scotland, which met several families in Inverness last week—a meeting that they said was positive and productive and at which action points and timescales were agreed for the issues to be addressed. It is by listening to families and their

experiences that progress can be made. The suicide awareness group in Inverness is a leading catalyst for change, working with NHS Highland, the Mental Welfare Commission for Scotland, the Scottish Association for Mental Health and other organisations. The group has been inundated with inquiries not just for solace but for help to prevent suicides.

The choose life strategy says that suicide is preventable, and the first step towards reducing the number of suicides is to raise awareness of the subject and to encourage people who feel suicidal to speak up and seek help. We should all remember how we may respond to that cry for help and think about how we can be part of increasing awareness and understanding of suicide and how we respond to constituents and families who come to our offices.

In conclusion, as convener of the cross-party group on funerals and bereavement, I raise again the question of unresolved grief and whether attempted suicides in psychiatric hospitals should be audited. I commend John Burnside, who lost his son two weeks ago, for speaking out about the curse of alcohol. I hope that the matter will be addressed in forthcoming legislation.

17:23

Dr Elaine Murray (Dumfries) (Lab): I, too, congratulate Duncan McNeil on securing the first members' business debate in the new Parliament building and on his choice of a very important and serious matter. It is unfortunate that technical problems meant that the debate has had to be conducted 24 hours after he made his introductory speech.

As Janis Hughes and Mary Scanlon have said, suicide is a Scottish problem. I believe that it is a cultural problem for us, as it is strongly linked to low self-esteem, which we have both as a nation and as individuals. I recall, as a young girl growing up in Edinburgh, that showing off was probably the cardinal sin. We seem to believe that God will bring us down if we think too highly of ourselves. That attitude is often displayed in the way in which we consider our football team, our athletes and, I dare say, even our Parliament. We tend to assume that, because something is Scottish, it is going to be second rate and, unfortunately, I think that people believe that of themselves. That is part of the legacy of our Calvinist tradition that can be very damaging to us as a nation, as we tend to sell ourselves short. It can also be damaging for individuals. It contributes not just to our high suicide rate, but to many of our other health problems.

As Mary Scanlon said, earlier this year there was a spate of suicides in the Highlands. There

was a similar terrible series of suicides in the Annan area of my constituency last year. It was almost like an epidemic, as if suicide was catching. Nobody understood why several people—mainly young—in a pretty Border town such as Annan and the surrounding area committed suicide within a short time. That included two people who killed themselves on the same weekend and, on two consecutive weekends, two people who hung themselves from the same tree by the river. That absolutely shocked the community.

Later that year, I spoke with the mother of one of the young men who took their lives. It turned out that he had been the victim of bullying. She came home after a night out to find him hanging in the hall. She was a lone parent; he was her only child. She had gone out that night with no inkling of his mental state—he had seemed perfectly cheerful when she left. When she came home, he was dead. Naturally, she has found it extremely difficult to reconstruct her life, and her mental health and resources have been put under incredible strain.

As others have said, the causes of suicide are complex and individual. However, recent statistics show that young people—especially young men—and the elderly, as Janis Hughes said, are the most vulnerable. At stages in people's lives, they may feel especially uncertain of their role and whether it has value. A young person who may have relationship problems, who cannot envisage what their future could be or who has financial problems or problems with drug or alcohol abuse may question the value of their existence. An older person whose family has grown up and moved away, who has perhaps lost their lifelong partner or close friends, or who suffers from chronic ill health that will only deteriorate may also have difficulty in seeing any point in struggling on.

Such individuals may not show obvious signs of depression. They may feel unable to talk to anybody about their feelings of despair and may be ashamed of those feelings. That shame only adds to their lack of self-esteem. Sometimes, close friends or relatives can guess that something is going very wrong with their loved one but feel that they cannot get through to them or cannot obtain professional help. On other occasions, suicide seems to come out of the blue leaving those who are closest to the victim blaming themselves for not noticing the signs. That is why it is crucial to talk openly about mental and emotional health issues and about suicide prevention without prejudice or stigma. We must reject the old notion that people who attempt or commit suicide are cowards or selfish. Those people are in despair. They have lost all sense of self-worth.

That is why it is important that the issue is not seen just as a health problem. It is important that our education system in its broadest sense builds self-confidence and self-esteem in our children and young people. That is linked to developing a more flexible curriculum that enables young people to build confidence in themselves and in what they can do, and to moving away from an education system that is about failure to one that is about success. If we cannot do that, our people will continue to take their own lives, whether deliberately by pill, knife or rope, or inadvertently by drugs, drink, alcohol, bad diet or lack of exercise.

17:28

Maureen Macmillan (Highlands and Islands (Lab)): I realise that my time is short, so I will not go over what others have said. Others have highlighted the tragically high suicide rate among young men and its possible causes and, of course, the statistics show that young women make unsuccessful suicide attempts, so the methods that are used could be considered. I suspect that it is easier to access shotguns, for example, in the Highlands and in other rural areas, and young men often use that method.

We should not forget the high suicide rate among men who are over 65—not just older people in general. Compared with women, many more men who are over 65 commit suicide. According to Age Concern Scotland, the most common cause is depression, which is often brought on by social isolation. A challenge to which our health and social services should rise is to ensure that old men—especially those who have been widowed—do not feel that there is no future.

I ask the minister how we can best support families who have been bereaved by suicide, whether it is the suicide of a child or a parent. As Janis Hughes said, bereavement through suicide can cause a different reaction from other types of bereavement because families feel more shock and guilt and they blame themselves more. They feel anger—sometimes justifiably—at the health services if mental health problems have led up to a suicide, and they may feel isolated because they feel that their acquaintances are judgmental, perhaps especially in small communities.

It is worrying that statistics show that one suicide in a family makes it more likely that another suicide will follow in that family, perhaps through guilt or because—especially for young people in that family—suicide becomes a possible way out of difficulties. We should examine that issue and support should be given to other family members for that reason.

We probably need a variety of support methods. Some people will depend on their family, friends, general practitioner, minister or priest and, in the right circumstances, self-help groups can play a part. Voluntary organisations also have a tremendous part to play—Mary Scanlon mentioned voluntary organisations in the Highlands that do so. However, they need backing with funds and training to ensure that they are not too narrowly targeted. I ask the minister: who is working with children and young people who are bereaved by suicide, so that they do not choose the same route for themselves?

17:30

Pauline McNeill (Glasgow Kelvin) (Lab): Presiding Officer, I apologise for not being here at the start of the debate. As you know, a photo call of committee conveners was arranged at very short notice. Unfortunately, I lost my way when I was returning to the chamber and no one could give me the right directions.

I congratulate Duncan McNeil on securing this debate and, if no one has done so already, I wish him many happy returns. This evening's members' business debate is extremely valuable in raising the profile of an issue that desperately needs our attention. The presence of such dramatic figures as those for Scotland would be cause for concern in any nation. I will not be the first MSP to have dealt with the tragic outcome of a suicide case, and with cases from which it may be possible to learn from mistakes that might have been made.

I have learned from the case of 17-year-old James Hanlon, who died following his decision to discharge himself from a psychiatric hospital after he had been diagnosed with some type of psychosis and had historic prolonged use of cannabis. His parents were not notified of that act of discharge, despite his long history of mental illness, and he went home to take his own life. They have made representations to me, as their MSP. They say that, regardless of his age, some other person should have been notified that he had been discharged from the hospital. To this day, they believe that he was placed in an adult ward because there is a shortage of adolescent beds and that the current approach of psychiatry does not seem to be able to deal with a person who uses, or is addicted to, cannabis or some other substance and who has a psychological condition.

When I spoke to the family yesterday to tell them about this important debate, they were able to tell me that 22 mothers, all of whom had lost a young son, were present at a support meeting that they had attended the previous night. Almost without exception, those sons had used cannabis. We need to consider such examples to see whether

they can tell us anything about what we could do better.

At the Gartnavel royal hospital in Glasgow, there are 16 beds that cover the whole of the west of the Scotland—the hospital does not serve only Glasgow—so there is a need to redesign the service for people aged 16 to 25, to recognise the high incidence of mental health issues among young people, who are vulnerable to suicide. We now have some specialist services to deal with the onset of psychosis in that age group and I am pleased to say that there are some developments in Glasgow, but we need to continue to invest in those developments. We know that suicide is a complex public health issue and that it is often mistakenly viewed as a single stressful event. The majority of suicidal people want to live, and research shows that some give warning signs. As a society, we must learn more about those signs; we must learn more about the why, and what we can do about it.

17:33

The Deputy Minister for Health and Community Care (Mr Tom McCabe): This is an important week for our Parliament, and this has been a valuable debate. Saving lives and giving people hope for the future is fundamental to achieving the Scotland in which we all want to live.

The motion that is before us today was lodged by Duncan McNeil, the MSP for Greenock and Inverclyde, and it says much for his commitment to facing up to the challenges that exist in his constituency and throughout Scotland. I sincerely congratulate him on helping us to send such a pertinent message at such an important time for Scotland.

Suicide is a devastating event that affects many people in our communities. Every death by suicide is a tragedy that robs our country of a life that has not yet reached its full potential. Our efforts to prevent suicides and cope with the aftermath of a suicide are a vital part of our efforts to address inequalities in health, to improve the health of the people of Scotland both physically and mentally and to achieve greater social justice and inclusion for vulnerable people.

I want to take a moment to mention a leaflet called "After a Suicide", which has just been produced by the Scottish Association for Mental Health with some financial support from the Scottish Executive. However, it was possible to produce the leaflet only because it received so much input from families who have suffered from just such a tragic event. I will ensure that the leaflet, which contains much useful experience and advice, is made available to every MSP.

Our suicide prevention strategies across Scotland have increased substantially over the past two years, following the launch of our choose life national suicide prevention strategy in December 2002. Local and national agencies are working hard to put in place a sustainable infrastructure of local action, planning, support, advice, training, research and evaluation work that will help us to meet the target of reducing suicides across Scotland by 20 per cent by 2013.

We are already beginning to see the early green shoots of success. Last year, there was a 12 per cent drop in Scotland's annual suicide figures, which are now the lowest they have been since 1991. However, I do not want to suggest that we are complacent. It is, of course, too early to determine whether that drop in annual figures for the whole population can be sustained over the longer term or whether the decrease is a result of more attention being paid to suicide prevention. National suicide figures rise and fall for a variety of reasons, so we will arrange a detailed analysis of the figures and trends in the near future.

I repeat that we are certainly not complacent. We are really only beginning the task of suicide prevention as one part of our public policy approach to improving Scotland's emotional and mental health and well-being. The work of our national programme for improving mental health and well-being has made a good start; as chair of its national advisory group, I am pleased with its progress to date. One example is our internationally recognised anti-stigma see me campaign, which is beginning to challenge negative attitudes to mental ill-health. We are promoting greater public awareness of positive mental health and have embarked on the ambitious programme of mental health first aid training that I launched last year. More than 900 people have now taken part in the national pilot of the MHFA course and we are now developing the course for a national roll-out next year.

Furthermore, the work of the breathing space advice line also continues. This free and confidential service will have achieved full national coverage by the end of the year.

However, let me take a few moments to concentrate on our specific efforts with regard to suicide prevention. Every local authority in Scotland now has a dedicated suicide prevention action plan as part of its community planning partnership work. We are investing more than £9 million over three years to help to support those plans at local level. Moreover, every area now has a dedicated suicide prevention group and a choose life local co-ordinator. Last year was very much about getting plans in place, identifying local priorities and making decisions about where best to invest resources and efforts. I heard the pleas

that Duncan McNeil made yesterday for us to examine how our efforts are being received. We expect these plans to have a significant impact over the next two years and we have commissioned a national evaluation of the choose life strategy, which will report on progress by this time in 2006.

Mary Scanlon: When it gathers new information and audits existing information, will the Executive also listen to families to find out how often help was sought by the suicide victim; whether such help was for drug, alcohol, mental health or self-harm problems; how often that help was not available; and how those circumstances contributed to their deaths?

Mr McCabe: We have many professionals in the field who work with us and who are striving to find the answers to those difficult questions, which will prevent so many tragic losses in Scotland. However, I suggest that no one can tell us more than the families who have experienced such tragic events, so it would be wrong if they were not an integral part of our work to prevent suicide in Scotland. I am happy to assure the member that families' experience will be fundamental to how we shape our efforts on this matter in future.

At national level, we have a dedicated choose life implementation team that is led by Caroline Farquhar. The main focus of recent action has been on establishing a national suicide prevention training strategy. The work is based on the successful applied suicide intervention skills training—ASIST—programme that was developed by LivingWorks Education in Alberta, Canada. To date we have trained 48 people from all over Scotland to be ASIST trainers and by March next year the figure will have risen to 150. I was delighted to be able to meet some of the trainers from Canada and the international LivingWorks network who trained our first set of trainers in May 2004. I am extremely impressed by that training work—so far 790 people in total have received the training. I was pleased to hear from those greatly experienced professionals that they are impressed by the approach that is being taken here in Scotland. They believe that our approach is groundbreaking and they are encouraged by the work that we are doing.

In this week—national suicide prevention week—there will be a burst of activity both in ASIST and in suicide awareness talks, which aim to raise awareness of the subject in every part of Scotland. We are also making efforts to target particular groups of people; for example, the choose life team has developed strong links with the Scottish Prison Service, the Samaritans and Childline and is providing funding to those organisations to support their efforts to prevent suicide. In particular, the SPS has received

£500,000 and much of the focus is on reducing self harm, which is predominantly a female issue in our prisons.

Only by making those community-based efforts will we achieve our goals. Only by making suicide prevention a community issue that is owned by everyone will we be able to save lives. That requires sustained national and local effort of the type that is being carried out under choose life and all the other related initiatives. Our aspiration is that all that work should achieve real and lasting benefits for Scotland as a place that cares about and delivers better mental health for all.

Sports Facilities (North-east Scotland)

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Trish Godman): The final item of business today is a members' business debate on motion S2M-1593, in the name of Brian Adam, on the north-east of Scotland's sports facilities. The debate will be concluded without any questions being put.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament regrets that the Scottish Executive and sportscotland felt unable to come up with the monies requested by Aberdeen City Council and its partners to create modern sports facilities in the city; believes that this will compromise the project; notes that there is a dearth of top-class facilities in the north and north east of Scotland, and considers that the Scottish Executive should rethink its decision and come up with the resources that are needed to allow this project to progress.

17:42

Brian Adam (Aberdeen North) (SNP): Today the First Minister is rightly honouring Scotland's Olympians and as we look back to the successes of those who participated, we also have to look forward to the future; perhaps even to the Commonwealth games returning to Scotland. In the north-east of Scotland, we are particularly proud of the contributions of Katherine Grainger and David Carry. I readily recognise that the Executive, through sportscotland, has a programme of investment in facilities and athletes. That is why today's debate is about how, where and the extent to which that investment is made. I am delighted that the motion before members this evening has attracted cross-party support.

Unfortunately, one or two members are not able to attend for a variety of reasons. Shiona Baird was particularly anxious that her contribution should be read into the record. She wanted to offer her support for the motion being debated and she is particularly concerned that if Aberdeen City Council's bid for money is successful, it will contribute to enhancing the health and well-being of many people in the north and north-east.

The city's bid for funding for the development of a regional sports facility has its origins in a meeting called by Aberdeen City Council involving a range of public and private sector organisations in the north-east. The project that evolved from those discussions was a bid for funding for the development of a regional sports facility on the site of the former Linksfield Academy. It would comprise a range of indoor sports facilities, including a large games hall, a full-size, indoor, artificial-surface football pitch and indoor athletics facilities including a 110-metre straight, with the main funding partners being the University of Aberdeen and Aberdeen City Council.

Richard Lochhead (North East Scotland) (SNP): In the light of the Scottish Government's commitment to reducing obesity in Scotland and tackling our appalling health record, does the member agree that the establishment of facilities such as are outlined in the proposals will help to achieve those objectives in the city of Aberdeen and in the north-east generally?

Brian Adam: I am more than happy to acknowledge that that is the case. There is much more to the project than the provision of sports facilities for a few people; we hope that the facility will be used by many people and will enhance the health of them all.

There is a widespread perception that the north-east has been short-changed across a range of public funding. That is true of health, because of the Arbutnott formula; local authorities, because the per capita grant that Aberdeen City Council and Aberdeenshire Council receive is among the lowest in the country; and policing, because Grampian police force gets at least 10 per cent less than the Scottish per capita allocation.

Although the partners involved in developing the Aberdeen project were disappointed by the Executive's decision to allocate only £5 million to it, they are continuing to work hard in conjunction with sportscotland to review and revise the project in the light of the Executive's financial allocation, with a view to ensuring that it can become a reality. It continues to have strong support from Aberdeen City Council and the University of Aberdeen, and a revised version of the project is being prepared for consideration by the various partner organisations in the coming weeks.

Some concerns have been raised, but I trust that they were just misunderstandings. One such matter is the inclusion in the bid calculation of Aberdeen City Council land, which is an extremely valuable asset. If it were to be put on the open market, it would yield a significant multimillion pound capital receipt for the council, which could be used for a variety of purposes. The fact that the council is prepared to provide that asset should be acknowledged, the reference to council assets in the bidding guidance notwithstanding. There were some claims in the press that such assets should not form part of the calculation.

The guidance states that bidders should expect to obtain a maximum of 30 to 40 per cent of the cost of a project. I understand that, although Aberdeen City Council bid for a higher percentage than that, its bid was not the only one that did so; the City of Edinburgh Council's bid was also higher than the stipulated level. I also understand that it has been suggested that the council knew all along that sportscotland would not recommend an award of more than £5 million. However, sportscotland only makes recommendations; the

ministers make the decisions. It is quite reasonable for the council and, indeed, members who represent the north-east to make approaches to ministers before the final decisions are made. That is why, on behalf of a cross-party group of members from the north-east, I sought a meeting with ministers before the decision was made. Unfortunately, ministers declined to offer us a meeting.

Aberdeen City Council's bid was made in the context of considerable investment by a wide range of public bodies in the city's sports infrastructure, including the Robert Gordon University's development of a significant new sports centre at Garthdee and the council's refurbishment and extension of the Garthdee ski slope, its improvements to the nearby pitches, which it carried out in conjunction with the Robert Gordon University and its improvements at the Rubislaw/Harlaw playing fields. In addition, the new Aberdeen ice rink, where the curling club will practise, is being built in my constituency.

I ask the minister to seek further discussions with Aberdeen City Council and its partners, as well as sportscotland, to develop and enhance further the proposals. I hope that their bid for further financial support will be met with approval by the minister and his advisers.

17:49

Mrs Nanette Milne (North East Scotland) (Con): Before I begin, I apologise to the members who are present, because I will have to leave immediately after I have finished speaking, to attend an important committee briefing, which was scheduled before the parliamentary timetable was changed.

I congratulate Brian Adam on securing a debate on sports facilities in the north-east so early in the history of the new Holyrood building and on once again raising the north-east's profile in the Parliament.

There has been an increasing awareness in recent years, by a number of public and private sector organisations in Aberdeen, that major investment is needed in the sports infrastructure of the city if the needs of its citizens are to be satisfied into the 21st century.

For a number of years, the city's two universities—and I should declare an interest as a governor of the University of Aberdeen—strove to upgrade the sporting facilities that they offer to students. Nowadays, those facilities are a major factor in attracting students to our universities and colleges.

As we have heard, the news that the Scottish Executive was to set up a funding stream for the

development of a range of national and regional sports facilities and stadia came at a time that Aberdeen City Council and the Robert Gordon University in particular had embarked on major sports infrastructure projects in the city. The news gave birth to the proposal for a regional multisport facility to be built adjacent to the University of Aberdeen with the university and the council as the main funding partners. Such a facility would fulfil a major unmet need for indoor sporting opportunities in Aberdeen, the most northerly of the big four Scottish cities, the climate of which often renders outdoor tracks and pitches unusable and unplayable.

Naturally, there was huge disappointment in the city when its funding bid was only partially accepted by the Scottish Executive. That was because a wide range of public and private sector organisations had been involved—with sportscotland—in putting the bid together. I was delighted and relieved, however, to learn that the partners have not been deterred by their setback. As Brian Adam said, even now they are working with sportscotland to review and revise the project in accordance with the financial allocation. They are determined to achieve their goal.

The proposed regional sports centre would allow local people of varying ages to have greatly improved access to and involvement in many popular activities such as football, basketball, volleyball, hockey and athletics. It would overcome the major disadvantage that promising young athletes—both locally and as far afield as Orkney and the minister's constituency of Shetland—experience at the moment. Those young athletes have to endure a punishing schedule of travel to and from facilities in the central belt and beyond in order to train in their chosen sports.

The centre would enable the city to attract national and international competitions in a range of sports and give it a role in major events such as the Commonwealth games or Euro 2012 that might come to Scotland. Its proposed location in the northern part of the city, adjacent to the University of Aberdeen, would greatly assist the university in its competition to attract students as well as providing readily accessible activities for the local community in a relatively disadvantaged area. It would fit with the Scottish Executive's policy aims for the improvement of the physical well-being and health of the nation through active participation in sport, strengthen the economy, boost tourism and attract students to further and higher education.

There is a degree of urgency in getting the project off the ground. I urge the minister to look carefully at the revised project when it is finalised. I also encourage the Executive to look on it favourably with a funding package that will enable

the project to come to fruition at the earliest possible opportunity.

17:53

Richard Baker (North East Scotland) (Lab): I congratulate Brian Adam on securing the debate. It is one that has been contentious at the local level. I want the minister to go away in the knowledge that we are building consensus in Aberdeen. An indication of that was given not only in Brian Adam's speech but in Nanette Milne's contribution.

Of course, all politicians in the city agree that, following the awards that were made by sportscotland and the Executive, we want the plans for the excellent sports facilities to go ahead. We want to work with the bid partners, sportscotland and the Executive to make the proposed facilities a reality.

Brian Adam referred to the negotiations that took place on the bid. As he said, the crucial thing is that everyone is now working to improve it. I assure the Executive that all partners in the bid, including the city council and the university, are determined to work with sportscotland to improve it. I am sure that the partners have our support in doing so.

I agree with the motion and its reference to the need to have

"top-class facilities in the north and north east of Scotland"—

as indeed is the case in other parts of Scotland. I have spoken to sportscotland about the situation. It emphasised that one of the reasons that it rejects claims that it has a central-belt bias is that its strategy promotes the need for such facilities in every part of Scotland.

Allegations of central-belt bias have not been helpful for anything—and I am afraid that they have come in particular from councillors in Aberdeen City Council's administration. We must be careful not to cry wolf on such subjects, particularly when any such claims are totally unjustified, as is clear in this case. At the same time, we now have to go forward and ensure that, in future, such claims are even more clearly unjustified. It is important to emphasise the consensus to make progress towards having such facilities in the north-east. The case deserves ministers' reconsideration of what central support can be given to the new and better bid that will be made by the city.

The fact that Dundee and Inverness have, so far, not had awards makes it even more vital that we get in Aberdeen the facilities for athletics, football and other games that the new project will create. We have to give sporting opportunities to

all, in every part of Scotland, and we should seek to give young people in every part of our nation the chance to become the athletics stars of tomorrow. I urge the minister to ensure that the Executive does all that it can to help those ambitions become a reality and to help Aberdeen's bid in identifying whatever additional sources of funding and support may be available.

I hope that the strenuous efforts to do more to make the project happen in the city might be reciprocated with additional support from ministers and sportscotland. It is vital that the project goes ahead for the sake of regeneration in an area of Aberdeen that needs such support and investment. People from that community are here today. They know how vital it is for their area that the project goes ahead. It is vital to allow young people in the city, in its universities and throughout the north-east the chances that they deserve to enjoy and succeed in sport. That applies not just to people in Aberdeen, but to people throughout the north-east—indeed, people from the whole of the north could benefit.

If we are to promote healthy living in every part of Scotland it is essential that such facilities are created, and particularly in Aberdeen. I stress to the minister that the main focus of our energies in Aberdeen when it comes to the sports facilities project should be to build consensus and partnership at all levels, because we all want to make it happen.

17:57

Nora Radcliffe (Gordon) (LD): I, too, must apologise to members; I should be at the meeting that Nanette Milne has just left to attend, so I will be shooting off after my speech, too.

A blueprint for world-class sports facilities in Aberdeen was unveiled last summer. The Linksfield project, at a cost of £26 million, would provide an indoor athletics area, featuring a 135m, six-lane running track, a jumping area and facilities for pole vault, shotput and discus; a pitted area for gymnastics; an indoor pitch for football and other suitable sports; six squash courts; a large indoor games hall, which could cater for international volleyball, badminton and trampolining and which would include space for temporary spectator seating; fitness suites; a performance gym; and two other gymnasia. A climbing wall and a weights room were suggested. Also pencilled in as part of the overall beach scheme were a new municipal football and events stadium, a soccer academy with up to 10 pitches and an upgrade of the Kings Links golf course.

The Linksfield plan was designed to fit in with the Executive's desire to create a network of regional sporting centres. It was intended to

benefit the health and fitness of local people and to give elite athletes the facilities to train and to compete on the national and international stage.

A bid for £16 million of funding went to sportscotland. The remainder of the costs of the project was to be picked up in equal measures by Aberdeen City Council and the University of Aberdeen. In July, the Executive announced the cash allocation for the planned centres. From a pot of £50 million, £45 million was disbursed to projects in the central belt, whereas only £5 million was offered to Aberdeen. Following that announcement—and not surprisingly—north-east press coverage howled that there was central-belt bias.

That was countered on the following day by claims that the city council had made errors in submitting the application. The matter centred on the fact that the council had included in its share of the funding the value of the land for the site of the proposed facilities. At the time of the application, Aberdeen City Council had checked the regulations: because Linksfield was not an existing sports facility, the land value could legitimately be included.

That is now water under the bridge. The current situation is that an application for a second stage of funding is under way with the results expected towards the end of October. I am given to understand that a further £1 million at this stage would be enough for the project to go ahead. As the centre would benefit the whole region, not only Aberdeen, and allow athletes at national and international levels to train near their homes, I hope that the second-round bid will be wholly successful.

18:00

Alex Johnstone (North East Scotland) (Con): In deference to Brian Adam, I intend to keep my comments reasonably brief. Aberdeen is a centre of excellence in a range of activities, educational and industrial among others, but it has also proved itself to be a centre of excellence in sport. The city has provided not only a sporting but an educational service to the whole of the north of Scotland, including the northern isles. Therefore, if we are to have a sporting future, it is reasonable to expect that Aberdeen will play a significant part in it—more so than it has in recent years.

I remember that when I was first interested in international football, Scotland had two world-class players—Martin Buchan and Dennis Law, both of whom were Aberdeen men. I am sure that such things could happen once again. If we are to encourage young people to become involved in sport, we must give them someone to use as an example, because success begets success. Even

if they do not become international competitors, people who are actively involved in sport will be healthier in the long term, as was pointed out.

In order to achieve that, Aberdeen needs to look at its facilities and consider how it competes with other cities not only in Scotland, but throughout northern Europe. It is important that we do not get into a bidding war between the central belt and the north-east, because it would not be productive to go down that road. However, I make a plea to the minister that any world-class sporting facilities in Aberdeen should serve not only Aberdeen but the whole of the north-east and the northern isles. That would ultimately produce the kind of results that we need to encourage young athletes, sportsmen and sportswomen to become more involved in their sports and to go on to represent their country. We need to set that kind of example to the others who will follow them.

I encourage the minister to engage positively with Aberdeen City Council, to negotiate further and to do all that he can to ensure that such facilities are provided in Aberdeen. I will continue to support the bid for as long as it requires his attention.

18:02

The Deputy Minister for Finance and Public Services (Tavish Scott): I thank Brian Adam and all the members who have contributed to the debate this evening, not only for their contributions, but for the tone of their remarks and the reasoned manner in which they have made their case.

I take Alex Johnstone's point about Martin Buchan. If I remember rightly, it was Martin Buchan's cross that gave Dalglish the near-post header to make the score 2-0 in 1978, when we qualified for the world cup—but perhaps we will not dwell on the rest.

The debate is important and follows on from the announcement on 29 July that the bids submitted under our national and regional facilities strategy were invited to progress to stage 2 of that process, with which Mr Adam and his cross-party colleagues are entirely familiar. The strategy aims to put in place a network of world-class training and competition facilities throughout Scotland. As Brian Adam rightly reflected, and as we did at First Minister's question time today, it is appropriate to congratulate team GB on its excellent performance in the recent Olympics and, in particular, the performances and results of the Scottish athletes involved and their connection with the north-east. We are here tonight and they are at Bute House and I suppose that that is entirely as it should be.

Our top and aspiring athletes will have more of the top-class facilities that they need for training

and competition, which will help them to achieve at the highest levels in the coming years. However, it is not just facilities, coaching equipment or the range of back-up services that win medals. As *The Herald's* Doug Gillon pointed out last Saturday—and I paraphrase his comments somewhat—without the fundamental will and work ethic, no one succeeds at the highest level.

More than £50 million, including the £16 million that was set aside for facilities linked to the Euro 2008 bid, has been allocated from public funds to help to build the new national and regional multisports facilities. Scotland's bid for Euro 2008 has left a positive and lasting legacy—a pledge made and now delivered. That funding, together with investment from partners, will deliver a total investment of up to £230 million in new and refurbished sports facilities. Scotland's communities, and particularly our young people, will be able to enjoy increased opportunities to take part in many different activities, which will help to improve their health and general well-being, as Richard Lochhead and Brian Adam mentioned.

Brian Adam: The minister rightly pointed out that the funding is for new and refurbished facilities, but one thing that appears to have held back the Aberdeen bid is the fact that it is a new one. The financial criteria do not appear to take that into account. There is a significant difference between refurbishing existing facilities and providing new ones. The city council's significant contribution, not only in terms of land, has not been appropriately recognised, which is one of the sources of grievance. Without going into the biases or otherwise of the funding formula, I believe that it might be worth re-examining that aspect.

Tavish Scott: I understand that the initial stage of the two-stage process has been undertaken and that it was extremely transparent. It was understood—if any of the bidding consortia or formulations needed to clarify points, those discussions could have taken place. I take Nora Radcliffe's point that we are where we are in the process; I suspect that the issue is now about taking the matter forward in the most positive manner to achieve the objectives that I am sure members from all parties share.

Today's debate has focused on the points that Brian Adam raised in his motion. It is important to recognise that every application that was submitted was assessed using the predetermined criteria that were issued to all potential partners, including local authorities, in September 2003. I hope that, to some extent, that answers Brian Adam's point. The successful applications were those that met the criteria and the respective allocations were distributed fairly and transparently

using a consistent approach based on the type of sports facility that was being built.

I understand that sportscotland worked tirelessly with Aberdeen City Council on its bid and that guidance was also provided by the consultants who were involved in the strategy. The application from the city was given a provisional allocation of £5 million, which is in line with the sums that were provided to successful bids for similar facilities. The allocation is provisional because further discussions are required and I understand that those discussions are continuing. The Executive is aware that, as colleagues have said this afternoon, the allocation does not meet the amount that was sought by Aberdeen City Council and its partners. However, part of the stage 2 process will involve sportscotland working with the council to satisfy itself that the council can bridge the funding gap to meet the overall costs of its proposals. There should therefore be no doubt that Aberdeen is most certainly still on the pitch.

I have read Mr Adam's comments on central-belt bias and I hear what has been said about that by him and others. It is important to recognise that the aim of the strategy is to put in place a network of regional training facilities throughout Scotland that will serve the geographical areas that are covered by the six area institutes of sport. At this stage, the needs of only four of those areas have been addressed. The Executive and sportscotland will continue to work with partners in the Highlands and Islands, Tayside and Fife to meet the full aims of the strategy. We will also work with partners with a view to filling other geographical gaps in our regional network, including the Borders, Ayrshire and Dumfries and Galloway.

In addition to the funding that has been made available by the Executive, it is important to recognise that Aberdeen has done well out of the lottery sports fund since the fund was established. Almost £4.5 million has been invested in 20 projects, including £800,000 towards the Aberdeen curling group project.

Nanette Milne—I understand why she can no longer be with us—spoke about the geographic argument and I add the fact that Josie Jamieson from my constituency won the under-20s javelin at the Bank of Scotland junior sporting championships at Grangemouth a fortnight ago. Sporting excellence, achievement and promise for the future are about a combination of many factors and I have no doubt that Brian Adam and many other colleagues recognise that decisions are taken in that context.

New national and regional facilities will help Scotland to realise what I am sure is Parliament's ambition of making Scotland a major events destination. Providing more high-quality training and competition arenas will allow us to build on

our recent successes in attracting major sporting events here in the future. I look forward to seeing the proposed bids move quickly to become a reality—our athletes deserve it, our communities deserve it and Scotland deserves it.

Meeting closed at 18:10.

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