

MEETING OF THE PARLIAMENT

Thursday 30 March 2006

Session 2

£5.00

© Parliamentary copyright. Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body 2006.

Applications for reproduction should be made in writing to the Licensing Division,
Her Majesty's Stationery Office, St Clements House, 2-16 Colegate, Norwich NR3 1BQ
Fax 01603 723000, which is administering the copyright on behalf of the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate
Body.

Produced and published in Scotland on behalf of the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body by Astron.

CONTENTS

Thursday 30 March 2006

Debates

Col.

TEAM SCOTLAND	24517
<i>Motion moved—[Michael Matheson].</i>	
<i>Amendment moved—[Patricia Ferguson].</i>	
<i>Amendment moved—[Mr Jamie McGrigor].</i>	
Michael Matheson (Central Scotland) (SNP)	24517
The Minister for Tourism, Culture and Sport (Patricia Ferguson)	24520
Mr Jamie McGrigor (Highlands and Islands) (Con)	24524
Donald Gorrie (Central Scotland) (LD)	24527
Tricia Marwick (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP)	24529
Karen Gillon (Clydesdale) (Lab)	24530
Margo MacDonald (Lothians) (Ind)	24532
Mr Andrew Arbuckle (Mid Scotland and Fife) (LD)	24534
Mr Ted Brocklebank (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)	24535
Patricia Ferguson	24537
Brian Adam (Aberdeen North) (SNP)	24538
BRIDGE TOLLS	24541
<i>Motion moved—[Shona Robison].</i>	
<i>Amendment moved—[Tavish Scott].</i>	
<i>Amendment moved—[Murdo Fraser].</i>	
<i>Amendment moved—[Shiona Baird].</i>	
Shona Robison (Dundee East) (SNP)	24541
The Minister for Transport and Telecommunications (Tavish Scott)	24543
Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)	24546
Shiona Baird (North East Scotland) (Green)	24548
Bristow Muldoon (Livingston) (Lab)	24550
Bruce Crawford (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP)	24552
Kate Maclean (Dundee West) (Lab)	24553
Mr Andrew Arbuckle (Mid Scotland and Fife) (LD)	24555
Mr John Swinney (North Tayside) (SNP)	24556
Helen Eadie (Dunfermline East) (Lab)	24557
Iain Smith (North East Fife) (LD)	24559
Mr Mark Ruskell (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)	24560
Scott Barrie (Dunfermline West) (Lab)	24561
Mr David Davidson (North East Scotland) (Con)	24563
Tavish Scott	24565
Tricia Marwick (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP)	24567
QUESTION TIME	24570
FIRST MINISTER'S QUESTION TIME	24578
QUESTION TIME	24591
SCOTTISH ENTERPRISE	24607
<i>Statement—[Nicol Stephen].</i>	
The Deputy First Minister and Minister for Enterprise and Lifelong Learning (Nicol Stephen)	24607
CURRICULUM REVIEW	24619
The Minister for Education and Young People (Peter Peacock)	24619
Fiona Hyslop (Lothians) (SNP)	24623
Lord James Douglas-Hamilton (Lothians) (Con)	24625
Iain Smith (North East Fife) (LD)	24627
Dr Sylvia Jackson (Stirling) (Lab)	24630
Mr Stewart Maxwell (West of Scotland) (SNP)	24632
Bill Butler (Glasgow Anniesland) (Lab)	24634
Robin Harper (Lothians) (Green)	24635
Brian Adam (Aberdeen North) (SNP)	24637
Mr Frank McAveety (Glasgow Shettleston) (Lab)	24639

Margo MacDonald (Lothians) (Ind).....	24641
Dr Elaine Murray (Dumfries) (Lab)	24642
Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con).....	24644
Mr Adam Ingram (South of Scotland) (SNP)	24646
The Deputy Minister for Education and Young People (Robert Brown).....	24648
PARLIAMENTARY BUREAU MOTIONS	24650
<i>Motions moved—[Ms Margaret Curran].</i>	
Mark Ballard (Lothians) (Green).....	24650
The Minister for Parliamentary Business (Ms Margaret Curran)	24651
DECISION TIME	24653
POST OFFICE CARD ACCOUNTS	24666
<i>Motion debated—[Richard Lochhead].</i>	
Richard Lochhead (North East Scotland) (SNP)	24666
Mr David Davidson (North East Scotland) (Con).....	24669
Rob Gibson (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)	24670
Shiona Baird (North East Scotland) (Green)	24671
Stewart Stevenson (Banff and Buchan) (SNP)	24673
Mr Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD).....	24674
Christine Grahame (South of Scotland) (SNP).....	24675
Mr Adam Ingram (South of Scotland) (SNP)	24677
The Deputy Minister for Environment and Rural Development (Rhona Brankin)	24678

Oral Answers

	Col.
SCOTTISH EXECUTIVE	24570
GENERAL QUESTIONS	24570
Community Dental Services	24570
Glasgow Housing Association	24576
National Health Service (Funding)	24574
Neurosurgery Services	
(Aberdeen Royal Infirmary)	24572
Scottish Water (Privatisation)	24571
Tobacco (Minimum Purchase Age)	24575
Urban Regeneration Companies	24573
Vulnerable Children and Young People	24573
FIRST MINISTER'S QUESTION TIME	24578
Asylum-seeker Children	24584
Cabinet (Meetings)	24578
Local Government Pension Scheme	
(Rule of 85)	24588
McKie Reports (Publication)	24585
Prime Minister (Meetings).....	24580
Secretary of State for Scotland (Meetings)	24582
SCOTTISH EXECUTIVE	24591
ENTERPRISE, LIFELONG LEARNING AND TRANSPORT	24591
Cycling.....	24592
Enterprise Economy	24593
Forth Estuary Transport Authority (Meetings)	24597
Glasgow Crossrail	
(Commonwealth Games 2014)	24594
Highlands and Islands Enterprise (Reorganisation).....	24591
Scottish Community and Householder Renewables Initiative	24598
Station Improvements (Edinburgh).....	24595
JUSTICE AND LAW OFFICERS	24598
Closed-circuit Television (Wick and Thurso)	24601
Drug and Alcohol Action Teams	
(Good Practice)	24603
Legal Profession and Legal Aid (Scotland) Bill	24602

Legal Services (Rural Access)	24598
Low Moss Prison	24603
Scottish Cup Semi-final (Public Order).....	24599
Victims of Crime (Information and Support)	24605

Scottish Parliament

Thursday 30 March 2006

[THE PRESIDING OFFICER *opened the meeting at 09:15*]

Team Scotland

The Presiding Officer (Mr George Reid): The first item of business is a debate on motion S2M-4196, in the name of Michael Matheson, on congratulations to team Scotland.

09:15

Michael Matheson (Central Scotland) (SNP): This debate gives members the opportunity to congratulate our athletes as they return home from Melbourne. The 18th Commonwealth games were, by all accounts, a triumph—for Melbourne, for the games movement and for the members of team Scotland, whose success has made our nation proud. For all 169 of our athletes, their hard work, passion and commitment to their sports have paid off. They returned with 29 medals: 11 gold, seven silver and 11 bronze. Never before have we won so many gold medals and never before has our team been so successful at an overseas games. Going strictly on the medal count, the annals of the Commonwealth games movement show that Scotland's best performance was 20 years ago at the Commonwealth games in Edinburgh, when the team delivered 33 medals. However, we should acknowledge the overall performance of team Scotland in Melbourne, which in my view was our best-ever team performance.

Unfortunately, our nation must at times wait lengthy periods for success in the international sporting arena. We have waited since 1974 for a Scottish swimmer to win double gold at a games, but then three have come along at once, a bit like buses. Caitlin McClatchey set the tone for the Scottish team's performance when she brought home our first gold in the women's 200m freestyle. While the Minister for Tourism, Culture and Sport had the pleasure of attending the Commonwealth games and cheering on our athletes down under, I assure her that there was a roar of joy throughout the nation when Caitlin secured the first gold for team Scotland. It was a remarkable achievement for Caitlin McClatchey, David Carry and Gregor Tait all to take double gold in the pool in the back yard of one of the most competitive swimming nations in the world, and it clearly took the Australians by surprise.

The depth of talent in the Scottish swimming team goes beyond those who got on to the medal podium. As well as taking 12 medals, our 19

competitors in the pool posted 27 personal bests and set three Commonwealth games records and 19 Scottish records. By any measure, that is an astonishing performance. Although our swimming team had the greatest success in Melbourne, we achieved medals in disciplines ranging from shooting, cycling, weightlifting and athletics to boxing, gymnastics, badminton and bowls. Although many of our athletes did not secure medals, many recorded personal bests, which demonstrates their passion and commitment to competing in their sport and for their nation.

I have little doubt that the success of team Scotland will inspire many young Scots to push on in their sport in the hope of representing their nation in future games and that it will inspire many others to take up sport with the hope of success. Team Scotland's success in Melbourne will also serve as a timely boost to the campaign for Glasgow to secure the 2014 games. We must harness the energy and excitement that the success in Melbourne has generated to ensure that it serves as a springboard for even greater success in the years to come. In sports in which we were not as successful at the games as we would like, we must start to build now so that we are more successful in the future. In areas in which we established a new benchmark of success in Melbourne, such as in the pool, we must ensure that we build on that success so that we are even better the next time round.

If we are to achieve greater sporting success, it is central that we have the right facilities for our athletes to develop. Imagine the possible scale of future Scottish swimming success if we emulated the city of Sydney, which has 88 competition-standard swimming pools for its population of 4.5 million. Our nation, with a population of 5 million, has only four such pools. As a result of our lack of facilities, too many of our top athletes must train outwith Scotland. The swimmers David Carry and Caitlin McClatchey both train at Loughborough University, while Gregor Tait is based in Wales. In cycling, Chris Hoy, Ross Edgar and Kate Cullen all train at Manchester's velodrome.

The minister's amendment refers to the national and regional sports facilities strategy. Given the lack of an indoor velodrome in Scotland, perhaps she will spell out to us exactly where the proposed new velodrome will be, when it will start to be built and whether it will be completed within the timescales that were outlined when it was announced. Kate Cullen summed up the situation when she said to the Australian media:

"we only have an outdoor velodrome in Scotland—I mean, how stupid is that?"

Had she been training in Scotland's only velodrome instead of competing in Australia, she

would have had to shovel the snow off it before she used it.

The results of sportscotland's audit of local sports facilities were supposed to be published last summer. The Executive advised the Enterprise and Culture Committee during the course of its inquiry into Scottish football that the results would be published by the end of 2005. The committee's report on the inquiry, which was published last year, called for the audit results to be published "without delay". The most recent response from sportscotland is that the results will be published by the end of May at the latest. The minister's amendment refers to the "imminent publication" of the results. I hope that that is not the same definition of "imminent" that has been used in relation to the relocation of sportscotland—a saga that has gone on for the past couple of years.

To develop our future sporting stars, it is essential that we have in place the right facilities to aid their development. By ensuring that good sports facilities are available, we will give our athletes the best possible start in their sporting careers, so that they can achieve medal success for team Scotland. For that reason, I hope that the Executive will view as urgent the publication of the long-delayed audit of sports facilities.

I have read the Tory amendment, but I have no idea what the purpose is of the quotation from Simon Clegg of the British Olympic Association, who is the chief architect and exponent of the proposed Great Britain football team and who is certainly no friend of Scottish sport. Mr McGrigor clearly signs up to Simon Clegg's remarks. Does he suggest that we should have a team GB for the Commonwealth games, as it might be more successful?

Now that our athletes have returned home, I hope that all members will join me in congratulating team Scotland on its tremendous success in Melbourne, while recognising that that success should act as a springboard for greater success for team Scotland in the future.

I move,

That the Parliament congratulates Team Scotland for winning 29 medals at the 18th Commonwealth Games in Melbourne, which is the largest number of medals ever won by a Scottish team at an overseas games; recognises that this success is due to the hard work and dedication of our athletes and coaching staff; believes that Team Scotland's success in Melbourne should act as a springboard to ensure even greater success for our sportsmen and women in the international sporting arena and will also inspire many young Scots to participate in sport; recognises that access to good sporting facilities plays a significant role in the development of our nation's sporting talent, and calls on the Scottish Executive to publish sportscotland's audit of local sports facilities to ensure that the necessary facilities are in place to develop our future sporting talent.

09:25

The Minister for Tourism, Culture and Sport (Patricia Ferguson): I very much welcome the debate, given our outstanding success at the 18th Commonwealth games in Melbourne. At yesterday's Cabinet meeting, my ministerial colleagues and I put on record our congratulations to the athletes, officials and volunteers who proudly flew the flag for Scotland.

I anticipated the debate with some interest and pride. That pride continued even after seeing the motion in Mr Matheson's name. I had thought that the debate would be about the success of our team and our pride in that success. If there is one thing that we can learn from team Scotland in Melbourne, it is that unless we all work together we cannot achieve anything, so it was disappointing to hear the tone of the latter part of Mr Matheson's speech, particularly in light—

Michael Matheson: That is rich.

Patricia Ferguson: It is rich for Mr Matheson.

The tone of Mr Matheson's speech was disappointing in light of the comments that have been made in Scottish National Party manifestos about the need to take money away from elite athlete support and about the fact that sportscotland—

Michael Matheson: Do not mislead the chamber.

Patricia Ferguson: Mr Matheson seems to think that I am misleading the chamber. I am obviously not misleading the chamber. The SNP's manifestos are published documents. It is on record that not only does the SNP not want our athletes to be supported in the way that they are, but it has doubts about the involvement of sportscotland, which is one of our main delivery agencies.

Although our medallists have, quite rightly, received at home the recognition that they deserve, we should recognise the many achievements of those who did not win medals but who achieved personal bests. On that point, I am in perfect accord with Mr Matheson. In addition to our medallists, six of our athletes finished in fourth place, meaning that more than 21 per cent of the team finished in the top four, while 72 per cent of the team finished in the top eight.

Our thanks and congratulations should go to the coaches and officials who provided such excellent support to the athletes; they should also go to the volunteers and supporters who made the trip to Melbourne and contributed to the success of team Scotland—a team that was not just the most successful that we have ever sent overseas, but the largest and, as the Commonwealth Games

Federation said earlier this year, the best prepared.

When we are considering sporting success we should also remember the performances in recent weeks of our elite athletes who took part in the winter Olympics and paralympics, and of course the success of our rugby team in winning the Calcutta cup. They have set a standard that we must use as a springboard for future achievements.

I was privileged to be in Melbourne to witness the success of our athletes, which was achieved by their skill and talent. However, I was also there to promote Scotland's bid to host the 20th games and to learn from Melbourne's experience. It was particularly noticeable that not only did the people of Melbourne embrace the spirit of the games, but everywhere one went in the state of Victoria people were enthused and excited by the games. We can expect the same to occur in Scotland if Glasgow wins the right to host the 2014 games. It is clear that sporting success brings a tremendous feel-good factor. When our rugby team won the Calcutta cup in February, the thrill and excitement around the country was palpable. I know, too, that when Scots were eagerly following our athletes' performance in Melbourne in the early hours of the morning, headlines such as "Two more gems in Scots' gold rush" generated and fed the excitement felt around the country.

Major sporting events generate tremendous interest and excitement and can inspire people of all ages to participate. If we are successful in our bid for 2014, we will want to capitalise on the many benefits that it will bring. We are determined that we will build on the momentum of that success. We will discuss with our partners in sport and in local authorities how best we can do that.

Brian Adam (Aberdeen North) (SNP): Will the minister confirm that the First Minister has suggested that a 50m pool might be built in Aberdeen as part of the north-east's regional sports facilities? Has there been any contact between Aberdeen City Council and the Executive on that matter?

Patricia Ferguson: As Mr Adam may know, for some time we have been in discussion with Aberdeen City Council about basing a regional facility there, for which we have put funding in place. Unfortunately, the council has not approached us about a 50m pool, but we would want to take that forward with it.

The motion refers to the audit of local facilities. Sportscotland plans to publish the summary reports in May. Of course we need to have facilities that are fit for the 21st century to ensure that our aspirations as a sporting nation can be met, but we also need to address the level of

provision, the types of facilities that are required and where they should be located, and more effective use of the school estate. We must do that in partnership with our colleagues in local government. However, we must not forget that we already have some tremendous facilities: the national swimming academy in Stirling; Hampden park, which will play host to some of the Olympic football tournament; the national rowing centre at Strathclyde park; and, of course, Murrayfield. I could go on.

Christine May (Central Fife) (Lab): Does the minister agree that as well as facilities we need well-qualified staff—not only volunteer coaches, but professional coaches and teaching staff? What discussions has the minister had with the Minister for Education and Young People about that?

Patricia Ferguson: I shall come to that later.

It is important to note that we are investing in facilities in a strategic way, through the national and regional facilities strategy. That strategy was produced in partnership with local authorities, sports governing bodies and sportscotland, and it is supporting 10 projects which, when completed, will have delivered £230 million-worth of facilities.

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

Patricia Ferguson: I am running out of time. I am sorry.

The Executive and sportscotland will work with those partners to fill geographic gaps in the coverage of regional facilities. That is where the conversations with Aberdeen City Council might be useful. Once complete, we will have a first-class network of facilities throughout Scotland for our elite and developing athletes to train in, which will also be accessible to local communities. We have answered the calls for an indoor velodrome, which will be built in Glasgow, and we have listened to the requests for additional football facilities and a new indoor arena. Our strategy will deliver those and other strategic facilities. Let us be clear, though: athletes train where they do for a number of reasons. Facilities are important, but athletes go to where there are coaches, the right weather conditions and competition. That is why the Australian sprinter Craig Mottram trains in London and the English swimmer Becky Cooke trains in Stirling. Athletes must be able to make decisions for themselves.

Our athletes' success in Melbourne is largely down to their talent, but that talent has to be given the opportunity to develop. It is no surprise that the vast majority of medallists in Melbourne are supported in some way, either through the athlete support programme, the Scottish Institute of Sport network or the world-class performance programme. I was delighted to note that the

Chancellor of the Exchequer's budget statement announced significant additional investment, which will benefit our top athletes. We are currently engaged in a review of the institute network to see how best we can build on its achievements in providing a range of services to our top athletes. We are also considering how best we can support our developing athletes to ensure that they are given the best possible support to continue and build on the success of Melbourne.

However, we remain committed to the vision and principles of sport 21. To ensure future success, we need to encourage our young people to participate in sport. The active schools programme is already making a significant contribution to participation in sport and physical activity. It is one example of the work that has been going on throughout the Executive. It is currently under review—

Fiona Hyslop (Lothians) (SNP): Will the minister give way on that point?

Patricia Ferguson: I do not have time now, Ms Hyslop.

The programme is currently under review to allow the partners to prepare a plan that will help us to deliver the sporting nation that we want to see enjoying the 2014 Commonwealth games, particularly if they are held in Glasgow.

As a nation, we have some way to go towards meeting our sport and physical education targets. I hope that the new sport 21 delivery plans will help to move us forward. However, the Executive cannot achieve those targets in isolation. We need others to help us to meet the challenge and to replicate the good examples in West Lothian Council and Highland Council areas, for example. We need to ensure that, once young people are engaged in sport, they can continue with it after school. The links that are being established between schools and local clubs are vital and are beginning to be strengthened through the active schools programme. Clubs are the breeding ground for the next crop of elite athletes. It is essential that we have strong, vibrant club structures that are linked with local communities, and that in turn work with the institute network. The introduction of regional sports partnerships will assist in the development of player pathways by putting in place a more strategic and co-ordinated approach to the development of sport.

Today's debate comes immediately after the Melbourne games. It is fair to say that our team's success is a great boost for the 2014 bid. I want to build on our success at Melbourne and ensure that we have the right investment so that the maximum number of Scots compete in team GB in 2012 in London and in team Scotland in 2014 in Glasgow. That investment will be not only about achieving

success, but about ensuring that we have a lasting sporting legacy for our country and all its citizens. If we can give our athletes any reward as they return from Melbourne, it will be to put in place that legacy, which will reflect the glory that they have undoubtedly attracted to themselves over the past fortnight.

I move amendment S2M-4196.2, to leave out from “; believes” to end and insert:

“and the valuable support provided by the Institute network, **sportscotland** and the World Class Performance Programme; believes that Team Scotland's success in Melbourne should act as a springboard to ensure even greater success for our sportsmen and women in the international sporting arena and will also inspire many young Scots to participate in sport; recognises the significant benefits to be gained for Scotland from London 2012 and a successful bid for Glasgow to host the Commonwealth Games in 2014; acknowledges that access to good sporting facilities plays a significant role in the development of our nation's sporting talent; welcomes the investment in facilities through the Executive's National and Regional Facilities Strategy which will provide a first-class setting for our elite and developing athletes and which can also be enjoyed by local communities, and welcomes the imminent publication of the reports on the audit of local facilities.”

09:37

Mr Jamie McGrigor (Highlands and Islands) (Con): Michael Matheson spoke about my amendment; the only thing wrong with it is that it should have a comma after “infrastructure”. I was minded to lodge the amendment because I had a sense of déjà vu regarding the SNP's previous constant demands for a Scottish Olympic team, which were soundly rejected by Parliament as recently as 6 October, although Nicola Sturgeon was all for it the other day at First Minister's question time.

Far be it for me to suggest that the Scottish National Party is seeking to gain political capital on the backs of the truly amazing Scottish athletes who have done us all proud in Melbourne; it just looks that way to some people. I wonder whether the SNP has surveyed the opinions of the athletes and governing bodies—particularly the Scottish Institute of Sport—that have done so much to help secure the medals, particularly the medals in swimming. Perhaps it has, which might be why Michael Matheson seems to be dropping the SNP's previous call for a Scottish Olympic team, which is a U-turn, indeed.

Michael Matheson: Given the fantastic success of team Scotland in the Commonwealth games, I am even more confident that a Scottish Olympic team could succeed for us and I am disappointed, although not surprised, that a unionist such as Jamie McGrigor should have such limited ambition for Scottish athletes.

Mr McGrigor: That intervention speaks for itself. Michael Matheson does appear to want a Scottish Olympic team.

Michael Matheson: Yes I do.

Mr McGrigor: I ask him to tell us, because we are not clear.

Michael Matheson: Yes I do.

Mr McGrigor: None of the experts wants to dilute the potential of team GB, which through collective strength might even be able to challenge the might of Goliaths such as team USA. They are inclined to agree with the cycling gold-medal winner Chris Hoy, who, when asked whether he supports the idea of a Scottish Olympic team, said:

"I think if we do that it would dilute the resources and the expertise we've got in the British team."

The Scottish Conservatives agree with him and with Simon Clegg, the chief executive of the British Olympic Association, who said:

"The British Olympic Association also strongly believes that we are stronger collectively than as individual countries."

In Athens, teams of mixed British nationalities worked together, as in the case of Shirley Robertson, the Scot who achieved the ultimate glory of an Olympic gold in sailing with her two English crew members, Sarah Ayton and Sarah Webb. Incidentally, as with many Scots athletes, most of her training was carried out south of the border. Different loyalties do not have to be divided loyalties; the Conservatives echo the view that Chris Hoy expressed when he said:

"I am a very proud Scot, but I am also proud to be British and I think they don't have to be mutually exclusive. You can be part of a Scottish team and part of a British team."

He is dead right. The SNP does not have a monopoly on patriotism, even if it would like to. The saltire is a symbol for every party in Parliament and, if I may say so, is the smartest part of the union flag. Even our First Minister, Jack McConnell, and the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Gordon Brown, agree on the importance of Britishness—and they do not agree on much.

The Scottish Conservatives have put their whole-hearted support behind Scottish sportsmen and sportswomen. We are thrilled by the recent successes of Scottish athletes and we realise that that success has been brought about by clever planning. Unlike the SNP, we do not want to change a winning formula. It has taken Scotland a long time to achieve such success; political distractions could easily upset a delicate balance.

We recognise the value of sport—at the grass roots and at the elite level—in promoting good health, improving self-esteem and fostering a

sense of community and teamwork. Successful Scottish athletes have enjoyed the best training facilities and coaching that the United Kingdom has to offer. Special congratulations must go to Chris Martin, the swimming coach, and to the Scottish Institute of Sport, which was clever enough to employ him. The institute's long-term plan of good programmes, good coaching and high competition levels, combined with expert medical and scientific support, has been bedded in to provide a wonderful infrastructure for our Scottish swimmers. The valuable training camps that were set up in Bendigo in Australia, in Mexico, in the USA and in Perth in Australia have brought the swimmers together in a highly competitive environment of great intensity.

Margo MacDonald: Will Jamie McGrigor give way?

Mr McGrigor: I am sorry—not at the moment.

All those factors have contributed to the phenomenal successes that Scots achieved, so I say to the SNP that we should allow the new system to bed in and to continue, and that we should not change horses in midstream. The Executive can improve the grass-roots situation, in which only one primary school pupil in 20 receives the Scottish Executive target of two hours of physical education a week—Peter Peacock admitted as much in June 2004.

Fiona Hyslop: Will Jamie McGrigor give way on that point?

Mr McGrigor: I am sorry—I do not have time.

Schools and head teachers need greater autonomy to pursue the priorities on PE, and local authorities must ensure that there is suitable funding for that aim. As Bill McGregor, head of the Headteachers Association of Scotland, said:

"If more money was devolved to heads and they were given the freedom to spend it then there would be a far better chance of matching resources to the needs of pupils."

I agree with Michael Matheson that the sportscotland audit of local sports facilities should be published—it is a disgrace that that has not happened. I also hope that the Scottish Institute of Sport will review the nine core sports and that it will consider adding cycling and shooting, which are sports at which Scots excel. The Scottish Conservatives want the best interests of athletes and Scottish sport to be served. It appears that that is happening at the elite level, so politicians should leave the successful formula as it is and the SNP should stop playing political football with the issue.

I move amendment S2M-4196.1, to insert at end:

"notes, however, the words of Simon Clegg, the Chief Executive of the British Olympic Association, who said that

"the British Olympic Association...strongly believes that we are stronger collectively than as individual countries...Any distractions, dilution or further fragmentation of sport in the UK will seriously undermine the once in a lifetime opportunity British sport has to capitalise on the unique benefits of hosting an Olympic Games", and therefore believes that there is a need to support both grass-roots sport infrastructure and elite athletes through the valuable work of the Scottish Institute of Sport which aims to change the culture and raise the ambitions and aspirations within sport in Scotland."

09:43

Donald Gorrie (Central Scotland) (LD): On behalf of the Liberal Democrats I, like all other speakers in the debate, congratulate team Scotland on its performance. The team has done amazingly well, considering the great problems with which athletes in Scotland must struggle in order that they can progress. The team provides role models and an opportunity to publicise sport better, to get more people involved in sport and to do better in the future.

However, there is no point in our sitting around congratulating ourselves; we must build on our success and do better next time. We should learn from the fact that we had a brilliant curling team in 2002 but did not build on its success, which has not led to any sustained increase in curling activity. We must ensure that that does not happen in swimming and the other sports in which we were successful. We must ensure that swimmers, and players of the other sports at which we were successful, increase in number, and that we provide the necessary facilities and back-up. Swimming pools are expensive to build and run and we live in a climate in which councils are under severe financial pressure, so the Executive must ensure that there is an adequate partnership between central and local government to provide the facilities that people need. We need facilities at all levels—not only elite pools—throughout the country so that people can take up sports and gradually get better at them.

As well as facilities, we need more volunteer coaches and officials and we need more professionals to back them up. Having been a slightly slower runner than Ming Campbell, I know more about athletics than I do about other sports. The two Edinburgh athletics clubs of which I am honorary president have serious problems with attracting coaches for some field events, although the clubs have quite good running coaches and performers. I am sure that the same applies in other sports. Attracting coaches—professional or voluntary—is important for clubs but is also very difficult.

Another issue is that most sports are based on clubs that are run by volunteer officials, who are needed to keep the thing going. Small additional sums would help clubs to provide, for example,

buses that would enable people to attend competitions. The sums that we are talking about are in the region of some hundreds of pounds or in the low thousands. Local or central government grants to clubs for such matters would make a tremendous difference because the volunteers would not need to beat their heads trying to raise piffling sums of money.

The minister should get her Cabinet colleagues who signed up to the motions of congratulation to provide money, too: money for sports should come from the health budget, the education budget and the crime reduction budget because sporting activity helps people in many ways.

Patricia Ferguson: Such work takes place already. The active schools programme is funded jointly by my education colleagues, and my health colleagues help to fund YDance, which encourages young women to be active. Also, my justice colleagues help to fund midnight soccer and basketball leagues. That work is already happening and we will expand on it.

Donald Gorrie: I am pleased to hear that, but we need a lot more of it. If the midnight football initiative works, we should make it available in every town in Scotland rather than just have a few efforts here and there.

We need much more sporting activity in schools, both during school time and after school, whether led by teachers or run by club coaches. We also need better liaison between clubs and schools, which currently works well in some areas but not in others.

At national level, the minister should scrutinise the sports' governing bodies, some of which are good but some of which leave a great deal to be desired. I think that Scotland has gone backwards in athletics. I am not entirely clear about the causes of that, but the people who are running athletics must show how they will do better in the future.

As the minister mentioned, the Glasgow games will be a great opportunity to provide facilities, coaches and so on. However, we need lasting improvements. In other countries, splendid new facilities have sometimes been neglected and have become eyesores. We need lasting improvements to the quality of life in Scotland from sport.

The Scottish temperament is quite suited to sport, but our weather is not. We should, therefore, concentrate on providing more indoor facilities. We have an opportunity to make Scotland a much better society. I think that the minister has the right intentions, but the Executive and the local authorities need to deliver. Otherwise, all our speeches are just wind.

The Presiding Officer: We move to the open debate, for which the three speakers will have a maximum of five minutes.

09:49

Tricia Marwick (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP): As other members have done, I congratulate team Scotland on being an inspiration to us all. I recall the Tokyo Olympics of 1964—a long time ago—which my dad let me stay up to watch. I still remember the theme music even now, but I was just blown away by the performance of Lynn Davies—the first time I saw a man flying. I have, therefore, been committed to television sport in particular for some time. Those who know me will appreciate that I do not take an active role in sport, but sport fascinates and inspires me; team Scotland is an inspiration to the whole of Scotland.

On Monday evening, I attended in Glenrothes a public meeting that attracted more than 400 people. The subject of the meeting was the threat from Fife Council to the future of the Fife institute—to give its proper name, the Fife Institute of Physical and Recreational Education. While the Executive has been rightly concerned about obesity and lack of fitness in young people, for the past five years Fife Council has by stealth been working up proposals to engineer a situation whereby that institute will be closed and a new joint facility for Glenrothes and Kirkcaldy will be situated elsewhere. Thanks to the work of the community action group and the Freedom of Information (Scotland) Act 2002, the people of Glenrothes are now aware of a facility that is renowned both locally and nationally—in Glenrothes, Fife and throughout Scotland. Since the brief for a joint facility was drawn up secretly in 2001, the amount of money that Fife institute receives from Fife Council has declined steadily, such that its funding is now one third of its 2001 level. As a consequence, the institute is in need of refurbishment. Although Fife Council submitted an application for funding to sportscotland last year, the application was turned down on the grounds that Fife Council had not provided sufficient information and lacked a long-term commitment to Fife institute.

Tomorrow, Fife Council's adult services committee will consider the future of the Fife institute. At a time when more leisure and sports facilities are needed, Fife Council wants fewer. It would substitute a centre of excellence with mediocrity. Every school in the area uses Fife institute for swimming lessons. That is why schools in the town have no swimming pools.

Christine May: Does Ms Marwick accept that the paper that Fife Council members will consider tomorrow contains no proposal to reduce the number of facilities in Fife?

Tricia Marwick: I accept that there is now no proposal to reduce the number of facilities, but that is only because Fife Council's plans were exposed by the working group. Christine May will acknowledge that one proposal for consultation would have the inevitable consequence, unless action were taken, of diminishing the wonderful facilities that are currently available in Glenrothes, which would be to the detriment of the people of the town. I would have thought that, as the local MSP, Christine May would put all her weight behind the community action group's aspirations to retain the level of service in the facility in Glenrothes.

Christine May: Will the member take an intervention?

Tricia Marwick: No, Christine May has had her opportunity.

Sportscotland's "Research Report no. 77; Research Digest no. 57" used Fife institute as an example of best practice for its rehabilitation and social inclusion programmes. The institute's extensive social inclusion activities include programmes that deal with national health service referrals, one of the most modern rehabilitation programmes in Scotland and programmes that cater for multi-disability athletes who compete at paralympic level.

Fife institute also hosts several major swimming meets. The number of those will increase during refurbishment of the Commonwealth pool, which was built at the same time as the facility in Glenrothes. As one who came to live in Glenrothes in 1975 and whose children learned to swim there, I thought that I knew all that there was to know about Fife institute. However, on Monday I learned something new—it appears that the institute's infrastructure and foundations were built to accommodate a 50m pool, although the final build was only a 25m pool. Of course the 25m pool is adequate, but it is tantalising to know that we have the infrastructure for a 50m pool in Fife. The institute needs only the refurbishment that it deserves to provide us with a fifth 50m pool in Scotland. What a wonderful facility that would be for swimmers throughout Scotland.

I invite the minister to study the situation in Fife carefully and to explore with Fife Council and sportscotland what can be done to secure Fife institute's future, and what money can be made available to ensure that the institute remains the centre of excellence that it has been since it was built those many years ago.

09:54

Karen Gillon (Clydesdale) (Lab): It is a great pleasure for me to participate in today's debate to celebrate the success of team Scotland in the

Commonwealth games and, as the minister mentioned, the success of our rugby team in the Calcutta cup, which was a fantastic display, if ever there was one. It has been an amazing few months for Scottish sport, and it is right that we should celebrate that. Who would have thought that on the first day of the Commonwealth games we would have celebrated two gold medal wins? When I jumped and cheered for Caitlin McClatchey when she won the first gold medal, I did so with no less vigour than for Kelly Holmes, when she won double Olympic gold at the Athens Olympics, or for Allan Wells in 1980, when he donned the British vest and won gold for Britain and the British team at the Moscow Olympics.

I understand the nationalist obsession with a separate Scottish Olympic team, but I do not agree with it. That does not make me any less Scottish or less patriotic. Members who have seen me on the terraces at an international rugby or football match will appreciate just what it means to me.

Shona Robison (Dundee East) (SNP): I have not had that pleasure.

Karen Gillon: If the member wants to come to a match with me, she is welcome to do so.

The success that we have had must serve as a springboard for further success. On Friday night, I attended my local sports council awards presentation evening. The enthusiasm and vigour of the young athletes who were present that had been generated by our sporting success was amazing. Those young athletes are already achieving tremendous success at all levels. At 12 and 13, they are already Scottish champions in their sports. They are now setting themselves the target of being in the British team for the London Olympics in 2012 and are hoping beyond hope that Glasgow will be successful in its bid for the 2014 Commonwealth games. They are already booking the buses to take their friends and families to the relevant events. Other young athletes are winning gold medals at world championships in their sports. Gary Brown won two gold medals at the cerebral palsy world championships that were held recently and is hoping to progress further in his chosen sport.

Progress is being made, but all of us will agree that we could do more. Anyone who has listened to me during the seven years that I have been a member of Parliament will know of my obsession with sport and its importance in all areas of Scottish life—in health, in education and for its own sake. Members are aware of Parliament's concern that there should be much better co-ordination across departments. I accept that work is beginning, but more could be done. School sport is particularly important, but we need to make the boundaries clear and we need to ensure

that whenever we talk about sport in schools, the issue is not fed back just to the sports minister—education ministers must also recognise that they have a clear role in and responsibility for the delivery of sport in schools.

I actively support the provision of two hours of PE in schools, because the more young people who are active, the bigger our sporting base will be. More people will develop their skills and become elite athletes.

Fiona Hyslop: Is not it worrying that the teacher census that was published this week recorded that only 117 primary teachers' main subject is PE?

Karen Gillon: Fiona Hyslop is right—I was going to make the point that the provision of PE teachers is an issue for the minister. We must also consider how we can enlarge the pool of coaches who are involved in our schools, although that is no substitute for PE teachers who are involved with our young people. It would be useful if the Minister for Education and Young People could announce how he intends to tackle the issue and ensure that we have the required number of PE teachers.

The audit of local sports facilities has taken far too long to come together. It would have been sensible for the Executive to have set a more realistic target. Instead, we have a moveable feast and have been told that the audit will be published at various times.

We must use the progress that has been made at the Commonwealth games as a springboard for success, both at local level—which may mean someone's child going to an event once a week and enjoying themselves—and at national level, with people achieving Scottish success. That success may even be at international level. Whatever it is and whoever is involved, sport is a great thing. The more we can do to enhance the provision of sport in Scotland, the better our country will be.

10:00

Margo MacDonald (Lothians) (Ind): Yesterday I disagreed with my good friend Donald Gorrie on trams, but today I want to support every syllable of what he said. He was absolutely right to refer to our lack of success in building on success such as we had at the Commonwealth games.

I plead with the minister to take a personal interest in how sportscotland or whoever relates to the governing bodies of different sports. As Donald Gorrie said, some are fine, but some are not. That is important because when it comes to provision of facilities, I presume that we will prioritise the sports that will benefit most people. We need, therefore, to know what underpinnings for sports coaching

and administration are in place. People forget such important details—local authorities boast about the number of all-weather pitches they have, but the length of the artificial turf that is used dictates what sports can be played on it. I ask the minister to take a close and detailed interest in what is happening in governing bodies and local authorities.

The SNP is absolutely right to describe the provision of facilities as a priority if we are to enhance sporting success in Scotland. Yesterday, I attended a swimming meet in Edinburgh, which was organised by the active sports programme. I go every year and it gets better every year. I congratulate the Executive on that initiative, which has allayed some of my fears that it might be trying to get PE teaching on the cheap. However, I am glad that Karen Gillon alluded to the fact that last year a 17 per cent decrease in the number of PE teachers in primary schools was recorded. Members may share my concern that the Executive will not meet its target for 2008 because the numbers of PE teachers that are required are not in training.

The Minister for Education and Young People is aware of another initiative, which will be piloted in Edinburgh, I believe, and which will seek to make use of many of the students who are currently doing physical activity courses in our further education colleges. I will leave it to the minister to go into the detail of the scheme, but it is another small triumph for team MacDonald.

I turn to the issue of teams and what we call them. The SNP is right to say that there could be a Scottish team at the Olympics. However, internationalism is a different concept in today's sport. I hate to pour cold water on the SNP's proposal for a Scottish Olympic team, but I would do the same to the proponents of team GB. We should consider how many athletes choose to join another country and compete under its colours. In the winter Olympics, umpteen alpine skiers originate from places other than the Alps. Plenty of swimmers and track and field athletes join the countries that best specialise in their sports because that allows them access to specialised coaching. We are moving into a new era. I appeal to both sides to stop the silly argy-bargy about team GB and team Scotland. If we want to have a team Scotland at the Olympics, we can have one. We could do what New Zealand and Trinidad do and specialise in our strongest sports. We could also remain part of team GB. At the end of the day, the elite athletes will follow their nose and follow the coaches, because sport is now a professional business.

10:04

Mr Andrew Arbuckle (Mid Scotland and Fife) (LD): For someone who has been steeped in sport for half a century, the past months have been wonderful, what with the Commonwealth games in Melbourne and the successes of our rugby team. The Commonwealth games gave me a fortnight of early-morning viewing. For impartial observers, the success of team Scotland was amazing. It surprised the nation and it definitely shocked the BBC commentary team.

For the competitors who stacked up the training hours, the coaches who set their routines and the management which planned every aspect from accommodation to pre-games competition, the results, the medals and—as the minister pointed out—the placings were a vindication of their plans and efforts. I should admit a family connection with the Scottish team—my sister was the swimming team manager.

The motion and amendments refer to the inspiration that the medal winners will give to the next generation. Back in 1958, I watched the then British Empire and Commonwealth games in Wales and was inspired to get involved in sport. I am perhaps an example in that although there is a need for any country to have an elite group of athletes who can provide that inspiration, there has also to be a much larger band of people who just enjoy their sports. As the minister pointed out, that alone would be a tremendous legacy from Melbourne.

The country benefits from experiencing top-class competition and I support fully all the current bids to bring international sport to Scotland. The classic example from a previous era is the 1970 Commonwealth games, which were held only a mile or so from here and at which the exploits of athletes such as Lachie Stewart, Rosemary Stirling and Ian Stewart inspired a generation.

As Donald Gorrie and Margo MacDonald mentioned, the only downbeat matter for me from the Melbourne games is that they highlighted that Scottish athletics has slipped off the pace a little. Admittedly, some of our top athletes see the European games in the autumn as their big target and it is difficult to peak twice in one year in some events.

Margo MacDonald: Will the member put on record his disagreement with Dave Collins, the performance director for UK Athletics, who said that athletes should concentrate only on the world championships and Olympic games and forget about the Commonwealth games?

Mr Arbuckle: It is up to every athlete to choose their aims and ambitions. I understand that individuals make their own decisions, even if they sometimes go against the interests of the country.

As far as I am concerned, the track and field events in Melbourne yielded little, but I do not take away one bit from those who competed, won medals and took places in the finals. However, too many track and field events were left uncovered. If we look at the all-time lists for Scottish athletics, we still see names such as Ming Campbell, Crawford Fairbrother and Alan Paterson with times and heights that were achieved up to and, in one case, more than half a century ago. That is a sad indictment of a sport in which we need a new flush of youngsters to post better marks.

More and better facilities are required, but as the minister pointed out, what is needed most of all if Scotland is to feature on the world scene is a correct mix of facilities, knowledge, enthusiasm and effort. Even if we build world-class facilities, our world-class athletes will migrate to clusters where the other aspects of honing their skills can be achieved.

10:08

Mr Ted Brocklebank (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I have never had a problem with being a proud Scot, a proud Briton and, for that matter, a proud European. I am also a proud Fifer and I can still recite the front five of that great St Andrews United team that won the Scottish junior cup in 1960 for the only time in the club's history. Therefore, today I am happy to rejoice in the recent success of the Scottish team at the Melbourne Commonwealth games, and I am delighted that our boys and girls won a record haul of medals.

Sport is important for so many reasons: health; national morale; international recognition; and inspiring future generations of potential couch potatoes. However, sport is also important in learning about oneself.

Sporting giant Australia is an interesting case in point. Australia, which swamped the recent Commonwealth games with the number of medals it won, was in a far less favourable position back in 1972. At the Munich Olympics of that year, Australia's top athletics placing was 13th in the men's marathon. However, Gough Whitlam's incoming Government vowed to get the beach bums off the beaches and began a dauntingly successful sports academy programme.

It was a long process. Four years later, at the 1976 Montreal Olympics, the Aussies won just one silver and four bronze medals. We should compare that with the jolly swagman's sackful that they picked up at the most recent Athens Olympics, at which Australia came fourth in the overall medals league table. Only the United States, Russia and China did better.

There are two points to observe. First, the

Olympics represent a far higher standard than the Commonwealth games. Secondly, by recruiting the right coaches and encouraging competition at the highest level, underperforming nations can in time improve their standing in the world's sporting arenas. I believe that that is beginning to happen in Scotland. I welcome the First Minister's forthcoming sports summit and some of the encouraging noises that we have heard from the minister today. However, we must redouble our efforts.

The fact that super Scots, such as Dick McTaggart, Allan Wells and, in more recent times, Shirley Robertson and Chris Hoy, won gold at the Olympics when representing the UK in no way diminished their Scottishness. They were lauded as great Scots who happened to represent Great Britain at the world's premier sporting event.

It is interesting to note that the Commonwealth games began their life as the Empire games back in 1930. They were invented by a young Canadian sports writer called Bobby Robinson, who urged Canada to subsidise teams to travel to Hamilton, Ontario, for the first games. Teams came from Australia, South Africa, New Zealand and several other countries and Lord Derby sponsored a British Isles team. Incidentally, the Australians won no races at those first Hamilton games. Since the numbers from the UK dwarfed those from all the Commonwealth countries, eventually it was decided that individual UK countries should be represented in their own right, which was absolutely right.

I turn briefly to the need for excellent coaches. It is a disappointing but not surprising legacy of our Melbourne success that many of our top coaches are now being wooed by other countries. Chris Martin, our American swimming coach, who has been referred to, is obviously a man in great demand, but I hope that he can be persuaded to stay with us. Anne Marie Harrison, the executive director of the Scottish Institute of Sport, is also likely to return to her native Melbourne when her contract expires this summer.

As Donald Gorrie, Margo MacDonald and others mentioned, there have been concerns about the uneven nature of our Melbourne successes. Although Scotland's swimmers swept all before them, the nation's track and field athletes contributed only two medals. Perhaps more disappointing was the fact that only three of the 18-strong squad managed personal bests. That is not a criticism of individual athletes; rather it recognises the importance of good coaching in getting top athletes to produce their best on the night.

Two years hence, at the 2008 Beijing Olympics, we will require highly competitive, well-funded athletes from all corners of the UK to represent

Great Britain. Many of them will doubtless come from Scotland and, if and when they win, we will applaud their success as super sporting Scots within what we hope will be a successful super Brits squad.

10:12

Patricia Ferguson: I was interested in Ted Brocklebank's speech. My only disappointment was that he did not mention Maryhill Harrier Duncan Wright, who won the marathon in the very first Empire games all those years ago. The Maryhill Harriers continue a proud tradition to this day.

I hope that our elite athletes' tremendous achievements will continue throughout the year and beyond as we look to put in place a sporting infrastructure that will deliver both sporting success and long-term participation. As Karen Gillon rightly said, the two things go together.

For the long-term good of our nation, we know that the more sporting activities people engage in when they are young, the more likely they are to follow through with at least one of them. That is important for our general health.

Before the debate closes, I repeat that we delivered 29 medallists from the Melbourne games; Scotland is the current holder of the Calcutta cup; the team that won a silver medal in curling at the paralympics in Turin were all Scots; and Andy Murray is one of the world's top 50 tennis players at just 18 years of age.

Our success in Melbourne was greater than had been forecast. Our estimated medal tally was 15, which was a genuine target assessed by the coaches and officials. We should be shouting from the rooftops about our success, as the Australians would have done had they been in our place at the games.

Sport in Scotland is not as limited as has been suggested in some quarters. We are putting the correct building blocks in place and will continue to do so, but it is unrealistic to expect us to achieve on all fronts immediately.

Donald Gorrie was right to mention that the Scottish Executive should persuade governing bodies to improve. We will do our bit, but there has to be a willingness from governing bodies to make that kind of change. It is interesting and challenging to note that the sports at which we did best in Melbourne, swimming and cycling, are among those whose governing bodies have made such changes, both in their governance and in the way in which they coach, employing full-time professional coaches. That is a lesson that other governing bodies will no doubt look to and wish to learn from.

I also endorse the valuable contribution made by sportscotland in delivering participation programmes such as the active schools programme, in developing sports partnerships and in supporting sports governing bodies and the Scottish Institute of Sport and its associated area structures. In the main, local authorities have been enthusiastic partners in active schools and several are championing new approaches to working with sportscotland, governing bodies and other councils through our sports partnerships. Karen Gillon mentioned PE. In 2003-04 there were nine recruits to the PE teacher training scheme, but in 2005-06 there have been 80, so I hope that we are moving in the right direction.

Our ambition should be to have the maximum number of Scots in any team. We want to see Scots involved in competitive sport and we want to see them dominating. I am enthused by our success in Melbourne, but at the same time I am slightly disappointed that there are still people who want to undermine such success, in sport and in other fields. If we are to be a more confident nation, we must cast off that cloak of cynicism and be ready to recognise and praise our athletes and allow them to bask in our success, rather than look for things to complain about. For a small nation, we are amazingly successful and we punch well above our weight in sporting terms. From a population of 5 million, we have literally hundreds of sporting heroes—not only the 196 medallists on the world stage since 2003 but other giants such as Colin Montgomerie, Paul Lawrie, Andy Murray, David Coulthard, Jason White and Jim Anderson.

We have much to be proud of. Let us move forward together to develop and support future generations of sporting stars and to ensure that Glasgow secures the Commonwealth games in 2014.

10:17

Brian Adam (Aberdeen North) (SNP): The purpose of the SNP's motion is to allow us to congratulate our successful athletes and to celebrate success in sport, and that end has been achieved. It is also perfectly reasonable for us to highlight what we might achieve in the future, although we have not quite got there. The Enterprise and Culture Committee suggested that we need an audit report on facilities right across Scotland and that we need it now, and that sentiment was echoed today by Karen Gillon and has been signed up to by all Labour members of the Enterprise and Culture Committee, three of whom I am delighted to see here at today's debate. I do not think that that is carping criticism; it is constructive criticism.

We need to make progress, because although we had successes at the Commonwealth games,

we did not do too well in track and field events. We must analyse why that was the case, why so few personal bests were achieved in that area and why we had no sprint relay teams to cheer, as we have had in the past. That may reflect the fact that, in those areas of sport, we have not seen the same energy and enthusiasm that have been evident in some other sporting fields.

We will return to the debate about the Olympics. I am disappointed by the poverty of ambition that the Conservatives continually express about giving our elite athletes the opportunity to participate in those games. As a number of members pointed out, as well as a significant haul of medals, we had a range of personal bests in the Commonwealth games, which I believe happened because athletes had the opportunity to participate in an international arena against the best in the world, if not in every field then certainly in many fields. That encouraged better performances. Therefore, the more Scots who can participate in international competition, the better our standing will be.

I accept that there may be some arguments about the transfer of sporting figures from country to country. I recognise that that happens, and it was particularly disappointing that Peter Nicol chose to represent England, not because he did not want to represent Scotland, but because he was not going to get the financial support that he had expected to get from sportscotland. It is almost like a transfer market, and I suppose that that is the downside of his sport becoming rather more professional than it has been in the past.

We need to encourage our elite athletes but, before we have elite athletes, we must have participants. We need to broaden the base of the pyramid, the pinnacle of which would be success at the Olympic games or the world cup for rugby, football or whatever other sport. Therefore, we must have proper facilities, particularly indoor facilities, throughout the country.

It is to the Executive's credit that it has started to address that need, and proposals for regional sports facilities throughout the country are certainly welcome. We may not yet have achieved the broad base that we need, but I welcome the minister's statement today, which confirmed that the sports facility that is proposed for the north-east in Aberdeen, as the result of a partnership between the University of Aberdeen and Aberdeen City Council, will start to deliver that. I was disappointed to hear that the city council has not so far taken the trouble to take up the First Minister's offer to write to ask for help for phase 2 of the plans and the proposed addition of a 50m pool. Although Aberdeen university and the city council have each committed £8 million to the project, we have not yet had final confirmation of

sportscotland's commitment beyond £5 million, and £7 million will certainly be required.

Patricia Ferguson: I will write to the member if I am incorrect about this, but my understanding is that some of the other partners have not committed the money, which is why sportscotland cannot put forward its money. The money is there and waiting, but certain criteria must be met when one is using public money. When that process is exhausted, the money will be in place.

Brian Adam: I will certainly take up the matter with the university and Aberdeen City Council. However, at the turn of the year, representatives of both came to me and told me that they had put their £8 million in place but sportscotland was not yet prepared to increase its offer from £5 million to £7 million, which is what is required to deliver the project. I recognise that £5 million has been put in place, but the further £2 million required to make the facilities available, without the swimming pool, is not yet in place.

Patricia Ferguson: Will Brian Adam take an intervention?

Brian Adam: I am happy for the minister to write to me about that, but I want to move on with my speech.

The development of facilities such as 50m pools must be encouraged. As my colleague Michael Matheson said, we have only four 50m pools in the whole of Scotland, and the minister herself told me in 2004 that only two of those pools have sufficient depth to be regarded as proper competition pools. We need such facilities not just in Aberdeen or, indeed, Glenrothes, where I did some of my early swimming in the Fife Institute of Physical and Recreational Education; we need them across the country, and that will require a step change in what we are doing. I recognise that the Executive is moving towards that, but commitment is required across the board. As a nation, we should be providing facilities in a unified way, although there will be debates about the detail of individual projects.

I commend the SNP motion. Neither of the amendments offers anything in addition, so I support the motion in the name of Michael Matheson.

Bridge Tolls

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Murray Tosh):

The next item of business is a debate on motion S2M-4197, in the name of Shona Robison, on bridge tolls.

10:24

Shona Robison (Dundee East) (SNP): Many MSPs across all parties wish to see tolls on the Tay bridge removed. Today is an opportunity for Parliament to make its voice heard on the issue. If all the MSPs across all parties who have said publicly that they support the removal of the tolls from the Tay bridge vote for the motion later today, the Executive will have no choice but to heed the will of the Parliament and to remove the tolls from the Tay at the earliest opportunity.

I will outline why we believe that the tolls should go now. It is unfair that tolls should remain on the Tay bridge when they have been removed from the Skye bridge at a cost of £27 million and will be removed from the Erskine bridge tomorrow at an annual cost of £4 million plus maintenance costs.

Kate Maclean (Dundee West) (Lab): What does Shona Robison mean by now? Can she outline her timescale?

Shona Robison: It took a month for the Executive to remove the Erskine tolls. That gives a clear timescale in which it could remove tolls from the Tay bridge—the process should take no longer than that.

It is not fair that the people of Tayside and Fife should be penalised by the tolls remaining in place. Scottish National Party members believe firmly that tolls should also be removed from the Forth bridge. We recognise that more members of the Parliament have to be persuaded of that case, but we hope that that will happen in due course. A vote today to remove tolls from the Tay would be a step in that direction and an important element of that campaign.

The arguments from the Minister for Transport and Telecommunications for retaining tolls on the Tay bridge are deeply flawed. The only consistent thing about them is their inconsistency. First, we are told that removing the tolls would increase congestion in Dundee. That is patently absurd, given that everyone knows that the congestion at peak times is caused by cars being tailed back from the toll booths. The removal of the tolls would allow a free flow of traffic, as seen by everyone on Tuesday when no tolls were in operation.

Then the Deputy First Minister tells us that the main reason for retaining the tolls is to do with the debt that still exists on the Tay bridge. Of course, there was debt on the Skye bridge, but the tolls

were scrapped, and there is no debt on the Forth bridge, yet the tolls remain.

The Minister for Transport and Telecommunications (Tavish Scott): Have you noticed the difference?

Shona Robison: That is very consistent, minister. There is no consistency or logic in the argument.

Tavish Scott: Have you noticed the difference?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Mr Scott, you must not maintain a constant harangue from a sedentary position.

Shona Robison: The situation is particularly galling as the original debt for building the bridge was paid off years ago. [*Interruption.*]

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I am sorry to interrupt, but we cannot have three members speaking simultaneously. I ask Mr Swinney and Mr Scott to respect the right of the person with the microphone to address the Parliament.

Shona Robison: We are told by the minister that the toll booths are to be moved from the Dundee end to the Fife end of the bridge at an estimated cost of £13 million, which is about the same amount as it would cost to scrap the tolls. Leaving aside the huge disruption that moving the toll booths will cause, the move will double the debt on the Tay bridge to about £26 million. That will make it difficult for the Tay Road Bridge Joint Board to meet its obligations to pay the debt off by 2016 and will burden the people of Tayside and Fife with tolls for decades to come.

“O what a tangled web we weave” is the phrase that comes to mind when we turn to the Executive’s amendment, which is a crude attempt to kick the issue into the long grass until after the election by having yet another review. What was the purpose of the tolls review if we are to have yet another review? A couple of weeks ago, the Minister for Transport and Telecommunications was asked whether the position on the Tay could be kept under review. He said:

“All that I can say is that we have had a lengthy process ... and ... the position is that the review has concluded.”— [*Official Report*, 1 March 2006; c 23602.]

What exactly did he mean? He stated that the decision had been made and would not be revisited, so we are waiting to hear what has changed in the past two weeks. The answer is that nothing has changed and we have a Lib Dem minister who will say anything at any time to anyone to get out of a mess of his own creation.

Let us be clear: we know the arguments, we have had the debate and we do not need further reviews; now is the time for a decision. Every decision in the Parliament cannot be made on the

basis of what is seen as being politically advantageous by either Labour or the Lib Dems at any given moment. That is no way to run the country. A promise of jam after the election next year is not on. That is exactly the sort of political shenanigans that gives politics in this country a bad name.

Tavish Scott: And you don't?

Shona Robison: Would the minister like to intervene?

Tavish Scott: No.

Shona Robison: Exactly. If MSPs believe that the tolls should go, as they say they do in public, they should not make people pay them for another year just because they want to play political games and make this an election issue. The people of Tayside and Fife—95 per cent of whom supported abolition of the tolls in a recent poll in *The Courier*—deserve better than that. They will not be conned by those who say one thing outside the Parliament and come in here and do the opposite.

It is not good enough for members who get up at party conferences and say that they are against bridge tolls to come to Parliament and vote against their abolition. It is not good enough for members to say that they want to make removal of bridge tolls an issue at the next election when they are not prepared to vote for it now. Members need to put their votes where their mouths are. If they do not do so, their position will be exposed to the people of Scotland as something that begins with an H and ends with a Y.

A vote for the motion will force the Executive to bring forward proposals to remove the tolls at the earliest opportunity. As I said, it took the Executive only one month to remove the tolls from the Erskine bridge. Therefore, it is clear that where there is a will there is a way. I urge MSPs from all parties to do the right thing now, rather than promise jam tomorrow, and vote for the removal of the Tay tolls today.

I move,

That the Parliament agrees that the tolls on the Tay bridge should be removed.

10:31

The Minister for Transport and Telecommunications (Tavish Scott): The SNP and the Tories have had two separate opportunities during the bridges review to call for the abolition of tolls over the Forth and the Tay. They did not take them.

Members: Ah.

Tavish Scott: That is a fact.

On 1 March, I announced the outcome of the tolled bridges review, which was a commitment in

our partnership agreement. On 2 July 2004, this Government wrote to all MSPs to seek their views and four responded. In phase 2, we published a consultation paper on 15 April 2005. That time three MSPs responded: Trish Godman, Des McNulty and Jackie Baillie.

Members: No Liberals.

Tavish Scott: It is noticeable that among the consultation respondents—

Members: There were no Liberals.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Order.

Tavish Scott: Can I be heard, since I was ticked off earlier?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Yes, but do not complain. You have the same protection as every other member. Please continue.

Tavish Scott: It is noticeable that among the consultation respondents, key players such as the Forth Estuary Transport Authority, the Tay Road Bridge Joint Board, Dundee City Council and Angus Council did not call for an end to tolls on any of the bridges.

In addition to the consultation, we analysed existing and potential traffic movements. We modelled average daily traffic levels, morning peaks, afternoon peaks and inter-peak traffic. The model takes into account future developments that have been identified, such as extensive new housing developments in Fife and planned transport projects such as the A8000 upgrade.

Bruce Crawford (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP): Will the minister give way?

Tavish Scott: No.

As I stated on 1 March and reiterate now, the principles established in the review provide the framework for our decisions. Each bridge has its own unique circumstances. Bridges have different traffic patterns, different financial issues and different levels of congestion. Therefore, a one-size-fits-all policy does not work.

Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): Will the minister give way?

Tavish Scott: No.

If a bridge has not yet been paid for, that is justification for retaining tolls, unless there are significant other factors. The Erskine and Forth bridges have been paid for, but the Tay bridge has not.

The Tay Road Bridge Joint Board has outstanding debts of £13.3 million, which include original capital costs. Therefore, the bridges review concluded that tolls should remain on the Tay. In Dundee City Council's response to the

consultation, it noted that the purpose of tolling is to

“ensure there is adequate funding to maintain the bridge and repay capital borrowing”.

Indeed, bridge tolls—

Shona Robison: Will the minister give way?

Tavish Scott: No. I will finish my points.

Bridge tolls play an important role in addressing congestion. It is necessary to use tolls to control traffic. The removal of tolls on the Erskine bridge will result in less congestion in and around Glasgow city centre. The Forth road bridge already suffers severe congestion problems at peak times. That congestion problem has been analysed not only by ourselves but by South East Scotland Transport Partnership and FETA. Traffic analysis shows that removing the tolls in 2011 would result in an increase of average daily traffic of 28 per cent, which is some 19,000 vehicles. Not only would that worsen the position on the bridge, it would exacerbate traffic levels on the wider road network.

Tolls at the Tay play a role in managing traffic, although the situation is not, of course, as severe as that on the Forth.

Mark Ballard (Lothians) (Green): Will the minister take an intervention?

Tricia Marwick (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP): Will the minister take an intervention?

Tavish Scott: Can I just finish these points?

Traffic modelling indicates that removing the tolls would increase traffic on the bridge and thus into Dundee. The analysis looked at morning peak, evening peak and off-peak travel, in both directions. The analysis, which is online and available to any member, forecasts that by 2011, without tolls, there would be an extra 10,000 cars and lorries every day.

I acknowledge that there is currently queuing at the toll plaza in the early evening peaks, but Dundee also has congestion in the morning peaks.

Shona Robison: Given that the minister has just reiterated exactly the same arguments as he made before and that he said that there has been no change in his position, what is the point in having another review, as the Executive amendment proposes?

Tavish Scott: I am going to deal with that now.

Dundee City Council did not call for the ending of tolls on the Tay in its submission and neither did the Tay Road Bridge Joint Board. In fact, the board said that it

“recognised the need to reduce future traffic growth, particularly increased traffic flows at peak periods”.

In the long term, this Government supports national road pricing across the United Kingdom, which would address congestion and other important issues, including environmental perspectives. In such a future, bridge tolls would not be required, but we are not there yet.

I recognise that a tolling regime has an economic impact.

Marilyn Livingstone (Kirkcaldy) (Lab): Will the minister take an intervention?

Tavish Scott: Can I just finish this point?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The minister is in his last minute.

Tavish Scott: It is appropriate to interrogate fully and comprehensively the economic impact. We claim to base policy on evidence and we must justify a change in policy on the basis of fact. We will take forward a full economic analysis of the impact that tolls and congestion have on local people, businesses and the wider Scottish economy. The Confederation of British Industry and other business organisations constantly point out the considerable cost of congestion to business and Scottish jobs. Therefore, I welcome the opportunity to look closely at the economic impact of pinchpoints on the strategic parts of our road network, on the one hand, and on the local road network, on the other hand. That will help us to define the extent of the problem. That is the right way forward, as our amendment says.

I move amendment S2M-4197.3, to leave out from “agrees” to end and insert:

“notes the responses, analysis and conclusions set out in the recent consultation and review of Scotland’s tolled bridges, including the Tay Road Bridge Joint Board’s response; notes that the bridges review met all of the Board’s requests, and recommends an examination of the economic, social and environmental impact and cost of retaining or removing tolls from the Tay and Forth bridges, on Fife and Dundee, the proposals for which will be reported on as soon as possible.”

10:38

Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): Oh, dear—if what we have just heard represents the quality of debate in the Parliament, we have a long way to go.

I welcome the opportunity that the Scottish National Party has afforded us this morning to discuss the future of tolls on the Tay bridge. I am pleased to support the SNP motion and to speak to the amendment in my name.

The retention of tolls on the Tay bridge is unjustified, given the removal of tolls from both the Skye bridge and the Erskine bridge. What we are seeing is no more than a political fix. The Liberal Democrats in the north agitated and had the tolls

removed from the Skye bridge. The Labour members in the west took umbrage at that and we saw the tolls removed from the Erskine bridge. However, with tolls remaining on the Tay and Forth road bridges, the people of Tayside and Fife are left out in the cold.

Try as he might to provide some logical rationale for his decision to retain the Tay bridge tolls, the Minister for Transport and Telecommunications has been unable to do so. In fact, he has been tying himself in knots trying to justify the decision, which has been more than a little entertaining. He has told us that tolls must be kept on the Tay bridge because there is still debt attached to it, yet the fact that there was plenty of debt attached to the Skye bridge did not seem to be a barrier to removing the tolls there. The minister said that tolls should be abolished on the Erskine bridge to cut congestion, but we know—Shona Robison referred to this—that the Tay bridge tolls cause congestion in Dundee city centre because of the existence of the toll booths on the north side of the bridge. Traffic at peak times queues back into the city centre and causes congestion. The minister's position is utterly inconsistent and is no more than a political fix to satisfy both Liberal Democrat and Labour camps, leaving the east of Scotland out in the cold.

The Executive amendment calls for a review of tolls on the Tay and Forth bridges, but we have just had such a review. What does that say about the competence of the minister and his department? Why were the issues not previously considered? Who is to carry out the proposed review and how much will it cost? Who will pay for it and when will we hear its determinations? Let us be in no doubt: there is no need for another review. If there were, it would be only because the minister had not been doing his job properly. This is no more than a shoddy attempt at the eleventh hour to save the minister's face and kick the issue into the long grass until after the 2007 election. Well, we are not so easily fooled and neither will the voters of Tayside and Fife be.

Our amendment deals with the toll plaza. As members will be aware, it has been proposed that, in order to reduce the congestion in Dundee city centre, the toll plaza should be relocated from the north end of the bridge to the south end. A substantial capital cost would be involved in such a relocation. Even if that went ahead, would we then not just see the congestion problems that currently affect Dundee city centre transferred to the road network in north-east Fife? Surely the sensible thing to do is to address the removal of tolls from the Tay bridge now and thus save the capital sum that would be involved in relocating the toll plaza and use it to help to reduce the debt. That would solve the minister's problem for him. Our amendment refers to that proposal.

I could say much more, but all that I will say is this. We have heard from Labour members over the past few weeks about their position on the Tay bridge tolls. I see from a report in that fine organ *The Courier* on 25 March that Labour's Kate Maclean, Marlyn Glen and Richard Baker have all urged Labour bosses to abolish the tolls on the Tay. I also note that, in a joint submission to Labour's Scottish policy forum, Scott Barrie, Helen Eadie, Marilyn Livingstone and Christine May have all called for an end to tolls on the Forth and Tay bridges. They did not say that we will need another review or that we need to wait for a year; they said that they wanted an end to the tolls. Well, they can vote for precisely that this afternoon.

It was not just Labour members who made such calls. Iain Smith, the Liberal Democrat member for North East Fife, and Andrew Arbuckle, the Liberal Democrat member for Mid Scotland and Fife—

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

Murdo Fraser: I am in my final minute.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The member is almost finished.

Murdo Fraser: Thank you, Presiding Officer.

Those Liberal Democrat members have said that the tolls should be removed. Iain Smith said on 1 March:

"I think that the case has now been made for those tolls to be removed."—[*Official Report*, 1 March 2006; c 23602.]

I am sure that, being decent men, they will do the decent thing today and vote for the motion.

I move amendment S2M-4197.1, to insert at end:

"and notes that in so doing the costs of relocating the toll plaza from the north end of the bridge to the south would be saved."

10:42

Shiona Baird (North East Scotland) (Green): I am grateful to the SNP for laying out its stall in advance of the debate by making it clear in *The Courier* this week that it wants the debate not only to be about the removal of tolls on the Tay bridge but to pave the way for the removal of tolls on the Forth bridge. I appreciate that that will pose a conundrum for members who favour the abolition of tolls on the one bridge but their retention on the other. However, on Monday, Nicola Sturgeon stated explicitly:

"I think we can win the Tay vote and then step up the campaign to end the tolls on the Forth."

We need to remain mindful in the debate that how we vote has implications for the Forth bridge as

well as for the Tay bridge. I ask the minister whether in the proposed review he will consider the impact on the Lothians as well as on Fife and Dundee. It is an important question and I would like an answer to it.

Alasdair Morgan (South of Scotland) (SNP): Will the member take an intervention?

Shiona Baird: No, I am sorry, but I have only four minutes.

The Scottish Green Party supports not so much the retention as the revision of tolls on both bridges. We have heard SNP members arguing that now that the west coast bridge tolls have been scrapped, those on the east coast should be scrapped on the basis of fairness and equity. We believe that the current toll regimes are unfair, which is why we propose that the way forward is through a smarter, fairer way of charging for bridge use. In addition to the existing exemptions, we advocate the removal of tolls on public transport vehicles and variable rates on the basis of the level of occupancy of vehicles, the type of vehicles and the time of day.

Christine May: Will the member take an intervention?

Shiona Baird: No, I have only four minutes, which is not nearly long enough.

In response to the Executive's previous review consultation document, the Tay Road Bridge Joint Board said that it would

"support the objective to reduce future traffic growth in line with the Scottish Executive's aim of ... encouraging modal shift from single occupancy vehicles to ... multiple occupancy vehicles".

The board also wanted to extend exemptions for emergency services to any other key publicly funded service and provide exemptions for registered public transport vehicles.

The board went on to call for a discount for multiple occupancy vehicles

"as part of a differential tolling structure to help reduce traffic growth particularly at peak periods",

and said that modal shift to buses and MOVs could be encouraged by

"providing if practical a dedicated lane to allow them to move through tolls quicker than single occupancy vehicles."

The board also suggested that

"graduated tolls for the heavier vehicles based on their gross carrying capacity could possibly be introduced."

We should all support such responsible measures. Tavish Scott obviously picked up on such matters in his statement to the Parliament, when he said:

"We have, therefore, decided that tolls should remain and that the board should be given more flexibility to deal with

transport issues in its vicinity."—[*Official Report*, 1 March 2006; c 23597.]

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You have one minute left.

Shiona Baird: Oh, no—it is most unfortunate that members do not have more time to speak in such a serious debate.

I must talk about how we should deal with the impact of the growth in traffic. In that context, I urge the Tay Road Bridge Joint Board to remain true to the forward thinking in its submission to the consultation on the tolled bridges review, which set out a considered and responsible approach to one of the most serious and uncomfortable challenges that we must all face up to if we care about the future of the planet. We need to get serious about traffic growth and congestion and we need to get serious about climate change. The abolition of tolls is just one more way of making motoring cheaper and increasing traffic levels and climate change emissions. The real iniquity and the true threat that we need to tackle is climate change, not the obligation to pay 80p to drive across a bridge.

I move amendment S2M-4197.2, to insert at end:

"for public transport in addition to the existing exemptions, that a scheme of 'smart tolls' should be introduced, which takes into account factors such as occupancy levels and peak hour traffic flows, and that the Tay Road Bridge Joint Board should be given more flexibility to use toll revenues to deal with transport issues in the vicinity."

10:46

Bristow Muldoon (Livingston) (Lab): Shiona Baird referred to the short time that we have for the debate, which is an important point. Long-term decisions about Scotland's transport infrastructure should not be reduced to a single-dimension issue—

Tricia Marwick: Will the member give way?

Bristow Muldoon: No, thank you.

Long-term decisions about Scotland's transport infrastructure should not be reduced to a short, soundbite debate on an SNP motion. We are talking about an area of policy that needs careful consideration of all the factors, such as the potential impact of decisions on the economy, congestion and the environment in general. However, the SNP, backed up by the Tories, is using the debate as an opportunity to indulge in a little pre-election opportunism. The single issue that unites those two parties is their naked political opportunism, which we witness today.

The minister announced the findings of the tolled bridges review on 1 March. The review was

extensive and considered a wide range of issues associated with the tolled bridges, including options for the bridges' future management. As the minister pointed out today, at the time of the review the Opposition parties, in particular the SNP, did not take the opportunity to advance the case that they are making today. Had they done so, the outcome of the review might have been different—who knows? The review considered the principles behind tolling as well as funding, traffic management and congestion. The review's outcome and the minister's decision are well known and were announced to the Parliament on 1 March.

Murdo Fraser: If the tolled bridges review was so important, why is there to be another review? *[Interruption.]*

Bristow Muldoon: I ask members to allow me to answer. *[Interruption.]*

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Order.

Bristow Muldoon: People are advancing arguments about the Forth and Tay road bridge tolls that were not made during the tolled bridges review. It is legitimate that the Parliament and the Executive should consider arguments that are being advanced by, for example, the Tay Road Bridge Joint Board. There is no reason why we should not revisit decisions.

Bruce Crawford: Will the member give way?

Bristow Muldoon: No, I have only four minutes in which to speak.

We must carefully consider a number of issues before we decide whether to retain tolls on the Forth and Tay road bridges and what form of tolls, if any, should be used. We must consider the future of the Forth bridge, which has serious structural problems, and the funding mechanisms that will be put in place to replace the bridge. The Tories' preferred option is a new, privately run tolled bridge, but I am sure that we will not hear much about that in speeches from the Tories in the debate.

We must also give careful consideration to the impact of the removal of tolls on demand management and congestion, as the minister said. Are the tolls an effective demand management tool? What would be the economic and environmental impact of removing the tolls? What is the impact of the congestion that is currently caused in Dundee city centre? There is a proposal to remove the toll plaza to the south end of the Tay bridge, but there might be a better solution to problems in the city centre.

I acknowledge the role that members who represent Fife and Tayside have played in making submissions to Labour's Scottish policy forum. The forum will not make a decision based on a

knee-jerk reaction, which is what the Parliament is being asked to do today. Labour's policy-making process makes decisions carefully on the basis of evidence.

The rational way forward is set out in the Executive motion. The arguments for and against tolls on the Tay and Forth road bridges should be considered and tested against their economic, environmental and social impacts. If the Parliament wants a reputation for informed and evidence-based decision making, it should support the Executive's position and reject the naked political opportunism of the nationalists.

10:51

Bruce Crawford (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP): I am delighted that the Scottish National Party chose to debate the removal of tolls from the Tay road bridge and to present the Parliament with an historic opportunity to begin the process of removing the toll tax from the east of Scotland. Of course, in lodging the motion, we took account of the arithmetic and the reality of how the votes might stack up at decision time. If we had included in the motion a call for the abolition of the tolls on the Forth road bridge, we all know that the motion would inevitably have been defeated because, unfortunately, the Tory party still supports the retention of tolls on that bridge.

Christine May: Will the member give way?

Bruce Crawford: If the member lets me get started, I will give way to her later.

If the Parliament votes today for the removal of tolls from the Tay road bridge—and a majority of members in the Parliament support that position—there is no doubt that the campaign for the removal of tolls from the Forth road bridge will be given the rocket fuel that it needs for success.

Scott Barrie (Dunfermline West) (Lab): If the SNP supports the removal of tolls from the Forth road bridge, why is it that only last month the SNP candidate in the Dunfermline West by-election said that he supported a £1 toll on that bridge?

Bruce Crawford: We have always made it quite plain that if tolls were removed from the Erskine bridge, tolls should be removed from bridges throughout Scotland in the interests of fairness and equity.

At least our position is consistent, unlike that of the minister, which is all over the place. How can it be argued on the one hand that the tolls should be removed from the Skye bridge at a cost of £27 million but, on the other, that tolls should be retained on the Tay road bridge? How are the two situations different? We do not need a review to tell us that that is inconsistent. How can it be argued with any credibility that it is right to remove

tolls from the Erskine bridge to help the economies of West Dunbartonshire and Renfrewshire but that it is not right to give the same opportunity to the people of Dundee and Fife? We do not need a review to tell us that that is inconsistent.

Not only is there a lack of a considered strategy, but I question whether the Minister for Transport and Telecommunications understands the effects of the Tay road bridge tolls on traffic flow in Dundee. In his statement to the Parliament, he said:

"There are congestion problems at peak times, and the Dundee City Council area is to be an air quality management area. Bridge traffic contributes to those problems, which would be worse without tolls."—[*Official Report*, 1 March 2006; c 23597.]

When I heard the minister say that, I could not believe my ears. Anyone with a semblance of knowledge of the situation in Dundee knows that congestion is caused by the tolls' very existence. We do not need another review to tell us that. If the tolls are removed, the problem will be removed.

Members who are concerned about overall emissions levels if tolls were to be removed should have a good look at the Executive's transport model for Scotland, which shows clearly that emissions increases would be mitigated by consequential reductions on the Friarton bridge and along the Kingsway in Dundee. We do not need another review to tell us that, either.

Bristow Muldoon says that no argument is made in the tolled bridges review for abolition of the tolls, but I suggest that he reads the review's findings because that argument is consistently and properly made.

The message for Labour and Liberal MSPs who have said that they want the burden of the toll tax to be removed from the people and businesses of Fife could not be clearer. Those MSPs cannot support the Executive's amendment, which would put the issue on the back burner.

The minister himself said earlier, in an aside, that this mess was not of his making. Is it the making of Jack McConnell, the First Minister? Is it the making of the back benchers of the Executive parties? By goodness, they have got themselves in some mess. They should join us today and help to create history by voting for the removal of the tolls on the Tay bridge, bringing irresistible pressure to bear on the Executive also to remove the Forth road bridge tolls. Those members have a chance to do that today. People outside the Parliament are listening, and they will not forgive them if they do not do the right thing.

10:55

Kate Maclean (Dundee West) (Lab): In response to Tavish Scott's remarks about people,

organisations and agencies not commenting on the removal of tolls during the review, I say that Dundee City Council, the Tay Road Bridge Joint Board, I and other MSPs have responded to public opinion. I would have thought that, as elected representatives, we are here to respond to public opinion. Public opinion, certainly in Dundee, has been massively in favour of removing the tolls from the Tay road bridge.

A number of reasons have been given for retaining the tolls. The point about congestion has been dealt with. Congestion in Dundee city centre would be eased if the tolls were removed. When I arrived back in Dundee at half past 5 on Tuesday, when the tolls were removed due to the strike action, the traffic was flowing more smoothly than usual for that time.

As has been stated, there is outstanding debt on the Skye bridge. My understanding is that, of the Tay road bridge's £13 million or more of debt, only a tiny amount relates to the initial construction cost and the rest of it is for repairs and maintenance, like the repairs and maintenance debt that arises from other roads on the trunk road network. People do not have to pay to get over the Kincardine, Kingston, Erskine, Skye or Friarton bridges. Why should they have to pay to get over the Tay road bridge? The River Tay at Dundee is a geographical barrier, but other geographical barriers do not give rise to tolls for people to get over them.

I have a problem with both the motion and the Executive amendment, although I am minded to support the motion. The problem that I have with the motion relates to the timescale. I have a difficulty with voting at 5 o'clock today in support of jobs going on the Tay road bridge or at the bridge board within a month. I do not think that that timescale is long enough.

Tricia Marwick: As Shona Robison said, the ministers can make an order to abolish the tolls on the Erskine bridge within a month. Similar issues to do with the bridge operators must be considered with respect to the Tay road bridge. If a month can be the timescale for the Erskine bridge, surely it can be the timescale for the Tay bridge.

Kate Maclean: Trish Godman spoke up on behalf of the people who work on the Erskine bridge, who have been caused a great deal of distress by the short timescale for the removal of tolls there. I have a problem with the timescale in the motion. I also have a problem with the Executive amendment, which has no real timescale. I would like the minister to address that in his summing-up speech. We need to consider the tolls on the Forth road bridge as well as on the Tay road bridge—although I am absolutely in favour of the abolition of tolls on the Tay bridge.

If the Executive amendment is passed, I would ask the other parties to support the amended motion, so that we do not walk away from the debate with the status quo. I do not think that that would be an option.

10:59

Mr Andrew Arbuckle (Mid Scotland and Fife) (LD): I welcome all those who are, for the first time, joining the campaign to remove the tolls on the Tay road bridge. Iain Smith and I have long campaigned for that. Although I want to see an end to tolls on the Tay bridge as soon as possible, I will not support the SNP motion. For me, it is essential that the removal of tolls be carried out as part of an overall plan, which should include decisions on who pays off the current debt of the Tay Road Bridge Joint Board; who takes on the major repair and maintenance contracts that have been signed; who puts in place agreements on the future safety and care of the bridge; and what the bridge's position with the regional transport partnerships will be in the future.

Shona Robison: Will the member give way?

Mr Arbuckle: Later. As Kate Maclean has said, the staff who are employed by the bridge board must have their employment rights recognised. My own road to toll removal, which is encompassed in the Executive's amendment, is well planned and businesslike. In comparison, the SNP motion is shallow. It is a knee-jerk reaction to the tolled bridges review. If toll removal is of such current importance to the SNP, why, only a few months ago, did SNP members on the bridge board allow its response to the consultation to go forward with a tacit acceptance of tolls, as well as an acceptance that there was congestion in Dundee? My Liberal Democrat colleague from Fife and I were the only members on the board even to raise the issue of the tolls in that response.

Shona Robison: Will the member give way on that point?

Mr Arbuckle: No. I will take points on that later. Why, if the tolls are important to the SNP today, has it made little comment on them during the previous 39 years of toll collection?

I have been asked why the Executive amendment recommends another examination of the matter. Apart from allowing a more thorough and professional look at the issues, it might allow the SNP and the Tories to put forward their views in a coherent, well-thought-out manner. The SNP motion is the equivalent of impulse buying: it is a purchase that is not even included in the Scottish Executive's planned expenditure. It is an impulse spend that is made without even looking at the price ticket. The motion has neither planning nor provenance.

Shona Robison: It is interesting that Mr Arbuckle mentioned his Lib Dem colleague on the Tay Road Bridge Joint Board. Would that perhaps be Margaret Taylor? She is quoted today as saying:

"Councillor Andrew Arbuckle"—

I take it that that is Andrew Arbuckle MSP—

"and myself welcome the unanimous support we are now getting from other members of the Tay Road Bridge Board since the publication of a review of the bridges at the beginning of March. If the motion for the removal of the tolls is passed, then this will, I hope, put great pressure on the Scottish Executive to abolish the tolls on both the Tay and Forth."

Will Mr Arbuckle distance himself from his colleague Margaret Taylor, who clearly thinks that he is on her side?

Mr Arbuckle: I am on the same side. I am in the same political party as Maggie Taylor. If Shona Robison cares to recollect what I said, it was at the November meeting of the bridge board when its SNP members sat quiet. Shona Robison is now talking about today, and that position is perfectly valid today.

As I was saying, the motion is an impulse spend, with no price ticket. I want traffic to flow freely over the bridge and I want those who use the bridge regularly to know that it is well maintained and safe. I can forgo the instant gratification that might come with the SNP motion and I support the Executive amendment.

11:03

Mr John Swinney (North Tayside) (SNP): Andrew Arbuckle opened his speech by saying that Iain Smith and he have long supported the removal of the tolls. They have not been very effective in delivering the removal of the tolls if that has been the quality of their support since the Liberal party became part of the Administration in 1999. If the removal of the tolls on the Tay is now being defined by Mr Arbuckle as an "impulse spend", what precisely is the abolition of tolls on the Erskine bridge, which his party and his minister have brought forward, if not an impulse spend? I do not remember that decision forming part of the budget commitments that were made by Mr Arbuckle's party at any previous election campaign. He should not insult the intelligence of members of the Parliament by suggesting that we cannot make amendments to the budget—Mr Arbuckle and I sit on the Parliament's Finance Committee—by democratic decision and debate.

I think that my colleague Shona Robison made this point earlier that although the minister has said that the review that led to the announcement of the abolition of tolls on the Erskine bridge has been concluded, today we are being paraded into

the Parliament to vote for another review of bridge tolls. If the issue was concluded just a few short weeks ago and if the minister was so confident and certain of the position that the Executive had arrived at, why on earth are we spending more public money on another review of issues that are supposedly settled? I simply do not follow the logic of that.

The Executive wants to continue with the tolls on the Tay bridge, despite the logic of the argument about congestion and air quality in Dundee—which Kate Maclean has stated fairly on many occasions—and proceed with the decision to relocate the toll booths to the south of the Tay. The Executive wants to waste more public money, which we could spend on abolishing the tolls on the Tay bridge, on constructing new toll booths on the south of the river. It then asks us to respect it for the way that it judiciously administers taxpayers' money in Scotland. It is a fantasy to believe that that approach will deliver value for money for the people of Scotland.

People elect us to the Parliament to take decisions. Bristow Muldoon thinks that we can take a decision only if we have spent years kicking the issue into touch and dragging our heels on it. That is the thought-through process in which he wants us to believe. He wants us to believe that the only way that Parliament can take a decision is by kicking the issue into the long grass, which is not what the public expect of us.

Christine May: Does John Swinney agree that the removal of the tolls on the Erskine bridge has changed the economic climate in Fife and that we need to consider the impact on both the Forth and Tay bridges, which is why we have lodged the amendment?

Mr Swinney: I accept that the removal of tolls on the Erskine bridge changes the debate. In fact, it makes the argument for there to be equity throughout Scotland. If there are to be no tolls on the Friarton, Skye, Erskine, Kingston, Kincardine and Tay bridges, there should be no tolls on the Forth bridge.

However, we do not need to drag our heels, take more time, string out a longer debate, waste more public money and run people up to the top of the hill just to call an election and say, "We'll deliver it after the election and we'll all be chums again." It is time to be bold and to take courageous decisions. I hope that members of all parties will live up to what they are saying to members of the public and institutions outside the Parliament and vote for the motion.

11:07

Helen Eadie (Dunfermline East) (Lab): I say to John Swinney that the people of Scotland elect us

to be fair and just. They do not elect us to have the hypocrisy that the SNP has shown this morning or to take a postcode approach to policy making. I am determined to see the removal of the tolls on both the Forth and Tay bridges, but the motion does not propose that combined approach. The SNP should vote for our amendment.

I know that the cost of the Forth road bridge was repaid in full by 1995, because I was vice-chair of the Forth Road Bridge Joint Board at the time. The reason why our amendment calls for a review is clear: the minister said that the analysis of the responses to the consultation shows clearly that only Trish Godman and Jackie Baillie responded. The SNP did not respond; nor did the rest of us. The only responses that were received were on the traffic impacts. Nobody submitted responses on the economic impact or the social impact. That is why we need to have a big, Scotland-wide debate.

I do not accept that the congestion charge should start and end with the Forth bridge. If we are to have a debate about congestion charging, it should be about congestion throughout Scotland. The Forth bridge should not be the pivotal point for congestion charging.

Bruce Crawford: Has the minister been kind enough to tell Helen Eadie exactly when the review that is referred to in the Executive amendment will take place, when it will be completed and when it will be reported on to Parliament? That would help us all to understand why Helen Eadie is in favour of the amendment.

Helen Eadie: The review will be conducted urgently. I will press the minister on that with every ounce of urgency in my body. If Bruce Crawford and his colleagues do not want to see the road rage that I witness when I approach the toll booths on the Forth bridge, I hope that they will pursue the matter with the same urgency.

Let us be fair about this. Let us not have the Skye bridge tolls and Erskine bridge tolls removed and then ask only for the Tay bridge tolls to be removed. Let us ask for all bridge tolls in Scotland to be removed. There is no doubt in my mind that TRANSform Scotland and others who have argued for the bridge tolls to be kept have received totally inaccurate information. We have repaid the Forth road bridge over and over again. Even if we set aside the arguments about repaying bridges, we should remember that on the Skye bridge, which carried tolls, there is £23 million of debt still to be paid and debt is outstanding on other bridges in Scotland. However, that is not the point. Our approach should be fair, just and equitable.

There is no doubt in my mind that congestion on the roads into Edinburgh is nothing to do with the

Forth bridge. It is not the bridge that is congested, but the A8000. I am delighted that the Executive has agreed funding for the A8000 and that work on the road is under way.

The Scottish Chambers of Commerce, Fife Chamber of Commerce, Dundee Chamber of Commerce—and, indeed, other chambers of commerce throughout Scotland—support the approach that this Labour-led Administration is taking. Drivers pay to enter Fife at the north and south of the county. It would be wrong for that to continue. Continued tolling will act as a disincentive to investment in Fife. I hope that every member will support the Executive amendment.

11:11

Iain Smith (North East Fife) (LD): I am afraid that the debate has not been very edifying.

Bruce Crawford: Iain Smith's speech will not change that.

Iain Smith: I am sure that it will not, because I have some fairly harsh things to say about the SNP. The motion is not serious, but is a cheap political stunt designed to gain publicity rather than to achieve its stated aim. If the SNP was serious about getting rid of tolls on the Tay road bridge, it would have contributed to the tolled bridges review and to the many debates that there have been on the matter, rather than just deciding to suddenly start supporting the abolition of bridge tolls, because doing that might benefit the party.

The motion does not say how the existing debt on the Tay bridge would be paid or how the advance programme of essential repairs would be funded. If the motion were to be agreed to, the burden would fall on the taxpayers of Fife and Tayside, given the way in which the Tay Road Bridge Joint Board is constructed. The motion would not get rid of a tax on people in Fife and Dundee, but would increase that burden. There would also be an impact on the Fife Council and Dundee City Council capital programmes and road repair programmes. The money has to come from somewhere. At the moment, it comes from the Tay Road Bridge Joint Board. The SNP motion does not deal with that issue.

Kate Maclean: Does Iain Smith accept that if tolls were removed from any bridge in Scotland, the bridges would be taken over as part of the trunk road network and would be funded in exactly the same way as the rest of that network?

Iain Smith: The SNP motion does not say that that will happen. At present, the Tay road bridge is the responsibility of the Tay Road Bridge Joint Board, which is a partnership between local authorities in the area and which has the liability for the bridge. The debt is spread across the

authorities that make up the board. If the motion were to be agreed to, those authorities would have the liability for the bridge. It is important that members bear that in mind when they vote this afternoon.

Bruce Crawford: When the minister last made a statement in Parliament, I wonder who said of the tolled bridge tolls:

"I think that the case has now been made for those tolls to be removed."—[*Official Report*, 1 March 2006; c 23602.]

Was it not Iain Smith MSP and is his position today therefore not incredible?

Iain Smith: I accept that the bridge tolls need to be removed, but that has to be done in a planned and sensible manner. Before the tolls are removed, we have to consider how the bridges will be funded. What we are seeing from the SNP is a political stunt that is designed merely to get publicity. The problem with the SNP is that it shows no consistency on such issues. I might have been convinced by the SNP's case had it previously supported the abolition of tolls, but the only consistent policy that the party has is jumping on the nearest bandwagon.

11:15

Mr Mark Ruskell (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green): I understand the historic distrust that people in Scotland have of tolls. It dates back to the turnpikes and goes through to the Skye bridge tolls debacle. That distrust is extended today because people do not see an alternative to private car usage. They do not see the investment going into public transport to give them that alternative.

People in north-east Fife are angry about the fact that they still do not have a railway station at St Andrews, Wormit or Leven. That investment must be made. Iain Smith's speech showed a bit of cheek, given that the Liberal Democrats have been promising those improvements in north-east Fife for years. Now, however, people are demanding them and asking why they should keep paying tolls when they do not have the public transport improvements that would give them alternatives.

The situation is unacceptable. Not only are we not giving people the transport choices, but we are charging public transport to cross the bridges. Given that, since 1980, the cost of public transport has risen, in real terms, by about 40 per cent while the cost of motoring has continued to plummet, why are we charging public transport to cross the Tay bridge?

The only area on which I agree with the SNP and the Tories in this debate is on one vital question: why do we need another review? We

have already had a review; it came up with some excellent solutions, which Shiona Baird shared with the chamber. We do not have time this morning properly to examine those solutions, as only half of the usual time for a debate has been allotted to the motion. However, the bridges review and the submission from the Tay bridge board talked about proposals such as smart tolls, variable tolls, exemptions for public transport, the use of different lanes for different purposes and attempts to find new ways to use the existing infrastructure. We have the solutions before us.

It is ridiculously simplistic to say, "Look what happened on Tuesday. Congestion was relieved." Hello? We had a strike on Tuesday. There was no school run on Tuesday. To me, that does not sound like robust traffic modelling, which is what we need in relation to these big, difficult decisions rather than soundbite politics. That is the point that was made by Bristow Muldoon.

I am disappointed by my colleagues in the SNP, because there is a lot on which our parties agree. On the day on which the Executive launches its Scottish climate change programme, the role of the SNP and the Scottish Green Party is to hold the Executive to account. I do not want to hear Bruce Crawford talking about putting rocket fuel up the campaign to abolish tolls on the Forth bridge. Not even the Tories, with the Cameron-esque Mr Fraser, are saying that they want to take tolls off the bridge. They are saying that that would be a disaster. They have faced reality in that regard and the SNP, too, needs to do that at some point.

I have a serious point for the economists. If, in the long term, we make our economy even more dependent on car usage and crippled by congestion, not only will we have failed to tackle climate change, but we will have created a Scotland that is unable to compete with other low-carbon economies in the world. We face a situation in which the cost of fuel is going to rise. We have to remain economically competitive, but we cannot do that if we make ourselves even more structurally dependent on road traffic. We must not end up with that scenario, because it will be bad for Scotland's economy. The Executive must show a strong backbone. We must reject both the status quo and populist political concessions. We must give people the transport choices that they deserve.

11:19

Scott Barrie (Dunfermline West) (Lab): I am pleased to close the debate on behalf of the parliamentary Labour Party and, in particular, on behalf of Labour in Fife.

Since tolling was removed from the Skye bridge and is imminently to be removed from the Erskine

bridge, it seems to most people in Fife—and I find it hard to disagree with them—that a basic unfairness is going on. The common perception is that it seems somehow to be okay to scrap the tolls on the west coast bridges but to retain them on our two east coast bridges.

Following the recent tolled bridges review, the reasons that were given for keeping the tolls on the Tay road bridge were that debt still exists and congestion is a severe problem in Dundee city centre. When Kate Maclean questioned the minister on 1 March and again today, she made significant points about what causes the congestion in Dundee city centre and pointed out that the tolls on the bridge exacerbate, rather than control, the situation.

Currently, we have three road bridges in and out of Fife. Soon, we will have four—I hope that within the next decade we will have five, but we can leave the arguments for a new crossing at Queensferry to one side for today. Two of the bridges are tolled and two of them will not be. Unilaterally removing tolls on the Tay today while doing nothing with regard to the Forth would leave one toll bridge in Scotland. That would be unfair on the constituents in Dunfermline West and on the people in west Fife and in wider areas in Scotland.

The current toll system does little with regard to the management of congestion, because the tolls are in the wrong place. People are tolled southbound on the Tay and northbound on the Forth. That does not ease traffic congestion in Dundee or Edinburgh. Indeed, the biggest sign of congestion on the Forth, as Helen Eadie said, is southbound traffic queuing to get on to the A8000—that is where the congestion is in east central Scotland. The biggest sign of congestion in Dundee is, of course, the backlog from the tolls into the city centre.

It is clear that tolling, in itself, does nothing to reduce congestion. Although I accept that there will not be the same volume of traffic on a strike day that there is on other days, it seems remarkable that, on a day when no tolls were being collected on either bridge, the traffic flow was much easier on both bridges.

From a Fife perspective and a wider Scotland perspective, I believe that the tolls on both bridges need to go. However, it is important that we consider the wider economic impact of such a move. I am talking not about giving motorists a saving on their transport costs, but about ensuring the economic viability of the east of Scotland.

Bruce Crawford: Scott Barrie knows that I accept entirely his argument that the tolls should go on both bridges. However, given that he is one of the Government's whips, I would like to find out

whether he knows what the timescale will be for completion of the examination. When will it come back to Parliament for final conclusion?

Scott Barrie: The amendment says that the proposals will be reported on “as soon as possible”. Helen Eadie, in answer to the same question, said that the need for a conclusion was urgent. I hope that the minister, who is aware of such views, will respond to that point in his closing speech.

Helen Eadie was quite right to acknowledge that members from Fife missed the boat—if I am not mixing my metaphors by using that expression—by not responding to the tolled bridges review. I was far too busy arguing for the need for a new bridge at Queensferry at the time, but I bitterly regret that I did not make a submission to the review. However, I welcome the opportunity to participate in a further examination at this point, especially as it will go further than the tolled bridges review did. The further examination will consider wider issues, such as whether the tolls are an impediment to social justice in Fife and the economic needs of Fife, which is what I believe them to be.

Murdo Fraser asked why I and my colleagues from Fife, Helen Eadie, Christine May and Marilyn Livingstone, had made a submission to the Scottish policy forum. We did so because that is the forum that will make the policy for the Labour manifesto for the next election and we want to ensure that we have a firm commitment in that manifesto. If we do not have that, that will be a severe impediment for my constituents. That is why I have taken the opportunity to participate in the policy-making process. I want to participate in that process in my party and in the Executive's further examination of the issue.

11:24

Mr David Davidson (North East Scotland) (Con): Here we go again. On one side of the argument, we have the Labour Party and, on the other, we have the Liberal Democrats. People have asked whether we have had a fair and thorough consultation—I can name those names, having noted them all down. Even within the Liberal Democrats, there is argument. One member of the party says that the consultation was unfair and did not really work and another says that it was excellent. What is the consistent position? We are told that Andrew Arbuckle has fought since 2004 to have the situation changed and Iain Smith makes comments about the case having been made. How long can the Liberal Democrats carry on trying to play it both ways?

Far too often—it has happened again today in the chamber—the answer that someone gives

depends on the audience that will hear it. Do members want to run local campaigns to get local votes or do they want to stand up in the Parliament and say, “There is an answer. This is what we should do”? It is time for members to make up their minds.

Iain Smith: Will the member give way?

Bristow Muldoon: Will the member give way?

Mr Davidson: I have not finished my point.

To be fair, a lot of members made good speeches, not least Kate Maclean, whose speech was balanced and fair. The minister said that tolls are a form of congestion charging and his comment was supported by other Labour members. He suggests that tolls have nothing to do with paying for the bridges and for their maintenance. It seems that it is all right to take the tolls off the Erskine bridge, which is mostly a local bridge. It is argued that that is not just a political fix, but the Tay bridge is also mostly a local bridge. Some 66 per cent of the traffic that it carries is local.

How was the decision about the Skye bridge made? We have never found out. It was an arbitrary decision by the Liberal Democrats and it was a political fix. We are accused of making political fixes, but they happen in the Liberal Democrat and Labour parties.

The Greens did not talk about the economy, although Mark Ruskell said that we should offer choice. They seek variable tolls, but that is not the same as fairness throughout Scotland.

Kate Maclean's main point was that we must respond to public opinion. We were sent here to represent the interests of our constituents. If we do that consistently and honestly on a case-by-case basis, we might get some clarity rather than the polarity that persists on an issue that is important for an awful lot of people.

I found Andrew Arbuckle's theme rather strange. It seemed to be, “Tolls should be removed, but only by us.” He said that clearly, and he said that the original review was not thorough enough.

The minister's amendment suggests that we need another review. That is an admission either that the first review was flawed or that it did not produce the answer that the minister wanted. However, he cannot have it both ways. Perhaps he will explain how the decision about the Skye bridge tolls was made and tell us the justification for that, given that there was a big debt. He wants to spend another load of money on moving the tolls to the south side of the Tay bridge, but if he simply said, “We will write off the debt,” there would be a nil cost. We are told that the Erskine bridge tolls were scrapped to ease congestion somewhere else, but when the matter was

discussed in the Parliament members from the area argued that that was not the reason. They said that the move was about fairness, local convenience and the local economy, and that the relief of congestion in Glasgow was simply a spin-off.

We need some consistency, rather than members telling one story in the newspapers and a different story in the Parliament. The SNP motion presents an opportunity for those who want to do the right thing to come together on a cross-party basis and show the people of Scotland that we are prepared to make fair, rational decisions rather than political fixes.

11:28

Tavish Scott: I begin by restating the three policy findings of the bridges review. I do not mind if MSPs disagree with them, but rigorous assessment is important and members must substantiate, in terms of more than just equity, why they think that the findings are wrong.

The first finding was that, where construction of a bridge has not been paid for, that remains a compelling reason to maintain tolls unless there are significant reasons for doing otherwise. The second finding was that, where construction costs have been met, maintenance of the bridge alone is not a compelling reason to keep tolls. The third finding was that it is justifiable and necessary to use tolls to address demand even where that was not the original purpose of the tolling regime. If members have difficulties with those three policy objectives, which we set out not just in phase 2 but in phase 1, they should come forward with them during the forthcoming exercise. However, they should do so on the basis of a rigorous assessment of the argument and not just to score political points.

Mark Ballard: Will the minister take an intervention?

Tavish Scott: I appreciate the points that members from all parties made about congestion. It is clear that most members disagree with the contention that we need to use demand management mechanisms to address congestion. A number of members said that we should not use demand management mechanisms—that is, tolling—on the Forth road bridge. If those members do not believe me about the modelling—it is clear that they do not—they should go and look at the evidence. If they have better evidence, they should produce it. However, they should not believe that, if we remove tolls from the Forth road bridge, everything will be better and there will be less congestion.

The point has to be addressed with evidence and with rigour. I accept that it is a live issue but,

regardless of their political perspective, members have an obligation as parliamentarians to produce evidence rather than just rhetoric. I encourage members to do that.

Mark Ballard: Will the minister take an intervention?

Shona Robison: Will the minister take an intervention?

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Trish Godman): The minister is not taking interventions. Sit down.

Tavish Scott: I want to deal with the points that were made in the debate. Ms Robison should make an argument that is based on fact rather than on rhetoric.

Murdo Fraser made three points from a particularly inconsistent position. The Tories appreciate and want tolling. That is their position. The difference between us and the Tories is that they want to use the private sector to implement tolling. That is shown in the Tories' record on the Skye bridge and bridges in England. There, tolls were set not by Government but by the private sector.

I am interested to hear that the Tories oppose an economic assessment. Murdo Fraser often stands up in the Parliament and says that we are not doing enough economic analysis of the Scottish economy.

Murdo Fraser: The Executive is wasting taxpayers' money.

Tavish Scott: Murdo Fraser says that we are wasting taxpayers' money, but what is the main argument of the Confederation of British Industry and other business organisations? They argue that we should tackle congestion and examine the pinchpoints in our strategic transport network. I think that investing in doing so represents a good investment in the country's future, but Murdo Fraser is against that. I hope that members will continue to point that out when we discuss the matter.

I cannot understand the SNP's position on the issue. Until Christmas, the SNP supported tolls. Andrew Arbuckle and a number of my Labour colleagues were right about that.

Shona Robison: Will the minister give way?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The minister is in his final minute.

Tavish Scott: SNP members—particularly Bruce Crawford—were in favour of tolls. I will finish with three quotations from SNP material:

"the SNP have made their position clear from the beginning - a pound's enough."

"The SNP is campaigning for a freeze in the level of tolls on the Forth road bridge at £1."

"The SNP says loud and clear £1 is enough."

I will not take any lessons about consistency from the SNP. Its position is utterly inconsistent.

11:32

Tricia Marwick (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP): What an interesting debate we have had. Labour and Liberal Democrat MSPs say in public that they oppose tolls, but when they have the opportunity to put their money where their mouth is in the Parliament, they bottle it.

The minister announced the result of the review of tolled bridges last month. He said that he favoured the retention of tolls on the Tay and Forth bridges because of debt and congestion, but in subsequent weeks those reasons changed according to what he thought he could get away with on any given day.

I pick up on the minister's point about the SNP's commitment to the abolition of tolling. When the Parliament debated the Erskine bridge tolls in 2001, the SNP lodged an amendment asking for the whole issue of bridge tolls to be reviewed, but every Labour and Liberal Democrat member voted against it.

Jackie Baillie (Dunbarton) (Lab): Will the member take an intervention?

Tricia Marwick: No.

The SNP introduced today's debate because of the lack of time to discuss the minister's statement last month. We now have a decision to review a review. The minister was well warned about what a decision to keep tolls on the Forth and Tay bridges but remove them from the Erskine bridge would mean to the people of Fife and Tayside, but he chose to ignore that. With the campaign by *The Courier*, he might now appreciate the anger that is felt in those areas.

The Executive's amendment promises to review the tolled bridges review, but in every word that the minister said today he showed that he is steadfast in his view that the original review was correct. There is no timescale for the review. Helen Eadie said that it is urgent and somebody else said that we need it immediately, but we did not hear those words from the minister. What a fudge! What cynicism! What opportunism! What folly, if ministers think that the people of Fife and Tayside will fall for what is being offered today. I will paraphrase the Executive's amendment. It says, "We, the Labour and Liberal parties, are the Government of Scotland. We have the power now to remove the Tay and Forth tolls, but we have decided not to do so. However, there is an election next year and in our manifestos, we will promise to

remove the tolls. If you vote for us, the Tay bridge tolls will be abolished."

The Labour and Liberal parties will not get away with that. They will have to explain to motorists on the Tay bridge why they will have to pay tolls for an additional year, then vote in the same Government that kept the tolls in the first place so that that new Government can abolish the tolls in a year's time. Just how stupid do the Labour and Liberal parties think that the people of Fife and Tayside are?

Helen Eadie: Will the member take an intervention?

Tricia Marwick: No, I will not. I will come to Helen Eadie in a minute.

I turn to those MSPs who have publicly supported the removal of tolls from the Tay and Forth bridges. Labour and Liberal members from north of the Forth will have to make a choice tonight at 5 o'clock. They can vote with the SNP to force ministers to remove the tolls in the next month or so, or they can vote to kick the issue beyond the next election. They know that their vote can make the difference.

Some Fife Labour MSPs claim that they are concerned about the lack of reference to the Forth bridge tolls in the SNP's motion. There was unanimous support in the Parliament for the removal of the tolls from the Erskine bridge. The SNP's motion is to remove the tolls from the Tay bridge and I expect and hope that Fife and Tayside members will give it similar support. If those members want the tolls to be removed from the Forth bridge, they must vote for the SNP's motion because they know that if the tolls are removed from the Tay bridge, they will go from the Forth bridge. That is what we want and that is what those members' constituents want.

One thing is sure: the SNP will vote to scrap the tolls on the Tay bridge. If we are defeated, the campaign will continue. An SNP Government will scrap the tolls on the Tay and Forth bridges next year.

We will accept the Conservative's amendment tonight. I understand precisely where the Green party is coming from, but we will not support its amendment. There is a debate to be had about climate change and congestion, but I say to the Greens with all sincerity that their policies cannot discriminate against the people of Fife and Tayside.

Kate Maclean: If the Executive amendment is successful, will the SNP support the status quo or the amended motion?

Tricia Marwick: The status quo is that there are tolls on the Tay and Forth road bridges. The minister proposes to have a review of a review. If

the Labour and Liberal members do not vote for our motion tonight, there will still be tolls on the Tay and Forth road bridges. Those members have to make that choice tonight.

We are determined that the people and businesses in Fife and Tayside will no longer be discriminated against. We will not accept a situation in which they alone in Scotland have to pay to use the only roads that are available to them, while people in every other part of Scotland can travel toll free over bridges and roads. The vote tonight is about fairness to Fife and Tayside.

11:39

Meeting suspended.

11:40

On resuming—

Question Time

SCOTTISH EXECUTIVE

General Questions

Community Dental Services

1. John Home Robertson (East Lothian) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive whether it plans to take further steps to provide community dental services in areas where dentists are not treating patients under the national health service. (S2O-9477)

The Deputy Minister for Health and Community Care (Lewis Macdonald): Yes. I recently announced £30 million in funding to NHS boards for new or substantially improved dental premises, most of which will support the community and salaried dental service. At the same time, we have put in place millions of pounds of new funding to encourage independent high-street dentists to remain with or to return to the NHS.

John Home Robertson: Regardless of what we might think of dentists who have turned away their NHS patients, will the minister redouble his efforts to restore access to NHS dental care where that has happened? In particular, will he pay tribute to the family dental care practice in Prestonpans that has taken on 1,000 extra NHS patients in the past six months and is operating with overstretched staff in seriously congested premises? The chairman of Lothian NHS Board will visit that practice on 24 April. Will the Executive assure us that it intends to invest in facilities and staff to support dentists who remain loyal to the NHS and committed to NHS patients?

Lewis Macdonald: Yes. I am delighted to be able to say that under the dental action plan, we will, for example, reimburse the annual rental value of premises of high-street dentists who remain with or return to the NHS. I pay tribute to those dentists—including those at the practice that was mentioned by Mr Home Robertson—who have renewed their commitment to delivering services to people as NHS patients on NHS terms. I hope that other dentists will follow that example in the near future; it points us in the direction of providing the kind of access and service that patients want.

Shona Robison (Dundee East) (SNP): Come 1 April, how will the Executive guarantee that people who are not registered with an NHS dentist will be

able to get the free dental check to which they are entitled?

Lewis Macdonald: I am delighted to be able to say that on 1 April, NHS dentists will no longer charge patients for dental checks. That is the fulfilment of a partnership agreement commitment that will be very widely welcomed indeed. The key to giving all patients across Scotland equal access to that opportunity lies with dentists who chose to deregister NHS patients making the decision to come back into the NHS and to begin again to deliver services to patients on an NHS basis. I hope that many dentists will make that decision. Should they do so, the concerns that Shona Robison has raised will be resolved.

Mrs Nanette Milne (North East Scotland) (Con): Given that only 50 per cent of the population are registered with an NHS dentist, and given the severe shortage of dentists in Grampian and other rural parts of Scotland, does the minister not realise that imported foreign dentists and a few salaried dentists will not achieve the Executive's ambition?

Lewis Macdonald: Since the announcement of the dental action plan, we have been very clear that the way to address access issues for NHS dentistry is to improve and strengthen the salaried service, and to incentivise high-street dentists to stay with or come back to the NHS, as I mentioned in my previous answers. That is critical, but an individual dentist who owns his premises and runs his own practice has a business decision to make. In recent months, we have sought to influence that business decision so that dentists find it easier to decide to deliver services to patients on the NHS. That is what we all want to happen.

Scottish Water (Privatisation)

2. Jim Mather (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Executive whether it will give a clear assurance that it will resist calls for the privatisation of Scottish Water. (S2O-9435)

The Deputy Minister for Environment and Rural Development (Rhona Brankin): I am happy to confirm that the Executive will resist all calls for Scottish Water to be privatised.

Jim Mather: Will the minister address the situation that fosters this concern, first by allowing Scottish Water's revenue to grow more slowly, thus diminishing its massive surpluses; secondly, by borrowing more prudently to spread costs over time; thirdly, by reducing public exasperation with development constraints; and fourthly, by removing the United Kingdom Treasury's perception that privatising Scottish Water is a valid option?

Rhona Brankin: I repeat that there have been no discussions at any level between the Executive

and the Treasury about privatising Scottish Water. In any case, it would be up to the Scottish Parliament to make such changes. There are no intentions to privatise the organisation and we will resist all calls to do so.

I also point out that the Scottish National Party's proposal to turn Scottish Water into a public service trust is irrelevant—after all, we are talking about a public-owned corporation that is succeeding in the public sector. As Mr Mather knows, average household charges for 2006-07 are lower in Scotland than those in England and Wales, and those less-than-inflation increases are supporting a capital programme of £2.15 billion over the next four years. That programme, which is one of the biggest ever in the UK water industry, is good for the Scottish economy, the environment and the consumer.

Neurosurgery Services (Aberdeen Royal Infirmary)

3. Mike Rumbles (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (LD): To ask the Scottish Executive whether it plans to downgrade neurosurgery services at Aberdeen royal infirmary as a result of the programme for action outlined in its publication, "Delivering for Health", at page 62, where it states: "Scotland should move from its current configuration of four neurosurgical centres towards a single centre for neurological intervention for adults and children". (S2O-9505)

The Deputy Minister for Health and Community Care (Lewis Macdonald): We plan to establish a managed clinical network for neurosurgery, and thereby to develop a single service for the whole of Scotland. The Aberdeen neurosurgery unit will play a very significant part in that network.

Mike Rumbles: The minister did not answer my simple question. Is he planning to downgrade the service in Aberdeen? Yes or no?

Lewis Macdonald: No proposition has been put forward to downgrade the service in Aberdeen. Instead, the clear proposition is to establish a managed clinical network for the whole of Scotland. I fully expect that all the existing neurosurgery units in Aberdeen, Dundee, Glasgow and Edinburgh will have a part to play in that single service.

Brian Adam (Aberdeen North) (SNP): The minister's response was similar to the one that his boss has given on several occasions. Perhaps he will answer my simple question. After the review is completed, will Aberdeen-based neurosurgeons perform neurosurgical procedures in Aberdeen? A yes or no answer to that would be very helpful.

Lewis Macdonald: As I said in response to the previous question, I fully expect that to be the

case. The process for making such judgments will be the responsibility of an implementation group that will be established shortly and which will consider all the options for establishing a single managed clinical network. I must re-emphasise that no decision has been made on the location of any particular service within the range of neurological services or on the boundary between the most specialised level of service and general neurosurgery. The implementation group will consider all those matters and, as "Delivering for Health" makes clear, decisions will be made in 2008.

Urban Regeneration Companies

4. Dr Sylvia Jackson (Stirling) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive what progress is being made in rolling out urban regeneration companies. (S2O-9478)

The Deputy Minister for Communities (Johann Lamont): There are currently five pathfinder urban regeneration companies in Scotland. After the Executive's consultation on URCs, Raploch, Craigmillar and Clydebank were designated in June 2004 and all are making good progress against the outcomes and objectives that are set out in their business plans. Two new pathfinder URCs were announced in north Ayrshire and Inverclyde as part of the launch of the Executive's regeneration policy statement entitled "People and Place".

Dr Jackson: Following the very successful launch by the Minister for Communities, Malcolm Chisholm, of Raploch Urban Regeneration Company Ltd, with its unique holistic approach to regeneration, will the Deputy Minister for Communities outline how that approach might be extended to other important regeneration activities such as those that are taking place in Culterhove and Cornton in the constituency of Stirling?

Johann Lamont: The key features of urban regeneration companies are their willingness to focus on geographical areas; to work with the public and private sectors and communities to identify challenges; and to work together towards solutions. That approach is relevant to any service. Of course, very significant funding follows the creation of an urban regeneration company, which ensures that all the money that goes into a community is used rationally with the community's commitment and involvement and to its benefit.

Vulnerable Children and Young People

5. Marlyn Glen (North East Scotland) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive what progress has been made in respect of vulnerable children and young people since the publication of the Executive's 2003 reports, "Young Runaways" and

"Sexual Exploitation through Prostitution". (S2O-9476)

The Deputy Minister for Education and Young People (Robert Brown): As part of the three-year child protection reform programme that was launched in 2003, we have introduced a number of measures to protect vulnerable children and young people, including those who have run away or are sexually exploited. Those measures include publishing the children's charter, introducing the framework for standards for all agencies, strengthening local child protection committees and introducing joint inspections of child protection services. Furthermore, the "Vulnerable Children and Young People" guidance pack was published in July 2003 to guide agencies on this issue.

Marlyn Glen: Has the Executive commissioned any research to gather statistical information on children and young people who are at risk or who are involved in sexual exploitation? How many local authorities have followed the guidelines in the reports and have adopted protocols for supporting those young people?

Robert Brown: Marlyn Glen has raised a number of important issues. The protocols to which she referred task local child protection committees with developing and monitoring local protocols on young runaways and children who have been sexually exploited through prostitution. I am not sure that we have information on the number of local authorities that are following the guidelines, but I will write to the member on that matter.

Joint inspections will also produce a lot of information about the broad range of child protection services in this area. An inspection is starting immediately in East Lothian, and a further eight will be instigated by the end of the year. I am happy to ask the inspectors to take on board the question whether local authorities have protocols and whether effective use is being made of them.

On research, the Executive provided funding to Barnardo's to undertake research into sexually exploited young people in secure accommodation, and a summary of its report was published last year. However, I am happy to meet the member to discuss her concerns and give her a bit more detail on these matters.

The Presiding Officer (Mr George Reid): Question 6 is withdrawn.

National Health Service (Funding)

7. Helen Eadie (Dunfermline East) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive on what basis decisions were made in respect of the 2006-07 distribution of funding to national health service boards and what impact such distribution is

designed to have on the overall performance of the NHS in respect of national targets and priorities. (S2O-9474)

The Deputy Minister for Health and Community Care (Lewis Macdonald): Funding for 2006-07 will be distributed according to the Arbutnott formula, which assesses each NHS board's relative funding need on the basis of population size and characteristics that influence the need for health care. It is for NHS boards to decide how best to utilise available funds to meet the health care needs of their resident populations, taking account of local and national priorities.

Helen Eadie: Does the minister agree that Carolyn Leckie of the Scottish Socialist Party was wrong to infer in a members' business debate that the solution to a financial problem in one part of Scotland was to shift resources from another NHS area, such as Fife? Such a solution would be singularly inapt, given that Fife is set to have the highest proportion of residents aged over 65 in Scotland. Resources should be distributed in a fair and just way.

Lewis Macdonald: I agree that resources should be distributed in a fair and just way and that it would make no sense whatever to make sudden adjustments to health board funding in a way that would interrupt or disrupt the delivery of health services. That process of ensuring fair and equitable distribution takes account of the health care needs to which Helen Eadie has referred and existing health care provision, and there must be a process of getting from one place to another as far as distribution is concerned. Carolyn Leckie would have some explaining to do if funds were taken away from boards in areas such as Fife and, particularly, greater Glasgow to address the issues that she raised in the debate.

Tobacco (Minimum Purchase Age)

8. Mr Duncan McNeil (Greenock and Inverclyde) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive when it expects the expert group, led by Dr Laurence Gruer OBE, to report its findings on the case for raising the minimum age at which tobacco can be purchased. (S2O-9488)

The Deputy Minister for Health and Community Care (Lewis Macdonald): I expect Dr Gruer to present the smoking prevention working group's findings to the ministerial working group on tobacco control at its next meeting in May 2006.

Mr McNeil: I thank the minister for that update. Does he agree that, if we are serious about reducing the number of smokers in Scotland, we cannot have the ludicrous anomaly whereby it is illegal for adults to smoke in the local pub, but it remains perfectly okay for 16-year-old children to

have a cigarette while waiting for the school bus? How soon after receiving the expert group's report will the minister make a final decision?

Lewis Macdonald: We will want to consider the report quickly and address the issues. However, I do not want to anticipate the report's content, which will cover several aspects. Duncan McNeil is right that, in the week in which the ban on smoking in public places has been introduced and has received a great deal of public support, we must pay attention to the health needs of younger people as well as those of the general population.

The Presiding Officer: Kenneth Macintosh is not present to ask question 9, so we move to question 10.

Glasgow Housing Association

10. Mr Frank McAveety (Glasgow Shettleston) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive whether investment in housing improvements by Glasgow Housing Association is following the timetable set out in its business plan. (S2O-9485)

The Deputy Minister for Communities (Johann Lamont): The timetable for housing improvement was set out in the stage 2 Glasgow housing transfer document, "Your Home Your Choice—Your Guide to Glasgow's Housing Transfer Proposal", which made the following investment commitments: for homes with a long-term life, central heating would be provided within four years of the transfer, external fabric improvements would be made within six years, and internal improvements would be made within 10.5 years. GHA is on track to deliver those investment commitments throughout its core stock and, in addition, has brought forward by five years the delivery of almost 16,000 kitchen and bathroom improvements as a direct response to tenants' wishes.

Mr McAveety: I welcome that response. I accept that progress has been made through the investment for tenants in Glasgow, which was denied them for years because of housing debt. However, my concern is about progress in the move to the second stage of the transfer. How much progress has been made behind the scenes to ensure that the commitments will be delivered? The experience of community-based organisations in my constituency is one of remarkable success in the past 25 years. I believe that those practices should be spread throughout the rest of Glasgow as quickly and as meaningfully as possible.

Johann Lamont: I welcome Frank McAveety's comments on GHA's positive role in transforming Glasgow's housing. It is worth mentioning in passing that, although some people suggest that Glasgow's housing faces more than just a challenge, the proposed spend on housing in

Glasgow for this year is £152 million. Money is available and GHA has the energy to ensure delivery. Glasgow has an important and proud record of community ownership and GHA understands how powerful a weapon it is to work with communities and tenants to control and determine the shape of their housing.

We have set up a ministerial group, which I chair and which involves a significant number of people from throughout Glasgow, to ensure that the challenges of managing the second stage of the transfer are worked through. The group underlines our commitment to the second stage; it is not a sign that there is a difficulty.

The Presiding Officer: As all questions have been taken, I suspend the meeting for two minutes, until 12 noon.

11:58

Meeting suspended.

12:00

On resuming—

First Minister's Question Time

Cabinet (Meetings)

1. Nicola Sturgeon (Glasgow) (SNP): To ask the First Minister what issues will be discussed at the next meeting of the Scottish Executive's Cabinet. (S2F-2209)

The First Minister (Mr Jack McConnell): The next meeting of the Cabinet will discuss issues of importance to Scotland.

Nicola Sturgeon: I can hardly wait.

I remind the First Minister that, in the chamber in September 2003, he said that under the law elderly people are entitled to free personal care immediately, from the day they are assessed as needing it. However, Executive guidance says that entitlement starts only when a local council is in a position to provide the care. Does the First Minister accept that there is enormous room for confusion between those two statements? For the avoidance of doubt, will he confirm today which is correct?

The First Minister: The Minister for Health and Community Care and the Deputy Minister for Health and Community Care have made the situation perfectly clear. When the assessment of need takes place, that is when care should start to be provided. There are different ways in which local authorities can provide care—we understand that. There is an absolute need for more consistency throughout Scotland, which is precisely why the health ministers have been discussing those matters with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities.

Nicola Sturgeon: I suggest to the First Minister that the situation is far from clear. Will he concede that, right now, many vulnerable elderly people are not getting the free personal care to which they are legally entitled? To illustrate the problem, I draw to the First Minister's attention a letter from Dundee City Council, which says that

"only so many free personal care allowances can be allocated per month."

It is making many elderly people wait 90 days before allocating free care. Is the First Minister aware that Dundee is not alone in rationing free personal care in that way? Half of all councils in Scotland are being forced to operate waiting lists. Does the First Minister agree with COSLA that the problem is not the legislation passed in the

Parliament but the confusion of the Executive guidance, which seems to permit those rationing arrangements, as well as a funding shortfall that gives councils no alternative but to put those arrangements in place? Will the First Minister take immediate action on both fronts to ensure that all elderly people get the care to which they are legally entitled?

The First Minister: Our position is clear. It has been stated in the chamber on many occasions that local authorities should assess appropriately the individuals in question. Having made an assessment and agreed that care is required, they should then deliver that care for free. That is a perfectly clear position, which should be understandable by every local authority in Scotland. It is because those issues in some local authorities have been drawn to the attention of ministers that discussions have been taking place between ministers and COSLA to ensure greater consistency throughout Scotland. However, the absolute policy objective of having that consistency should not be in any doubt.

Nicola Sturgeon: The problem is that the policy is not being implemented throughout the country. Again, I refer the First Minister to Dundee City Council. Free personal care allowances will now be paid only after an individual has been in care for 90 days. There will be no backdated payment to the date of admission. Will the First Minister accept the realities that councils are facing? Is he aware that, according to statistics published by the Executive only yesterday, the cost to councils of providing free personal care has gone up by £24 million, but the funding allocated for it by the Executive has gone up by only £4 million? Will the Executive accept that therein lies the problem? Does the First Minister agree that it is somewhat ironic that on the very day that he will reportedly hand out millions of pounds of taxpayers' money to Scottish Enterprise to compensate it for its own incompetence, he will not act with similar urgency to ensure that vulnerable old folk get the care that the Parliament said that they were legally entitled to get?

The First Minister: First, I am sure that it will interest businesses and individuals throughout Scotland to know that Ms Sturgeon would not support additional resources for Scottish Enterprise to enable it to meet the increased demand for its services this year—and I hope next year too. Secondly, Ms Sturgeon's attempts to excuse local authorities for not consistently implementing the policy on free personal care will be of interest to pensioners throughout Scotland. It is essential that the policy is consistently implemented and it is not good enough to misrepresent figures. If Ms Sturgeon had checked her facts, she would know that the figures on the cost of free personal care include the cost of the

services that were provided free in advance of the new policy's introduction throughout Scotland and, therefore, the figures that she quotes do not match up.

It is essential that the policy is implemented consistently and that those who are responsible for it, having negotiated and agreed the financial settlement, implement it properly. That is what we consistently seek, and it is not acceptable for Ms Sturgeon or anybody else to provide excuses or reasons for those responsible not to implement the policy properly.

Nicola Sturgeon: I am not offering excuses; I am saying that the buck stops with the First Minister and that he should do something about it. The problem is that the cost of free personal care is rising faster than the funding for it and many elderly people are falling through that gap.

I will talk solutions. I remind the First Minister that, when the Parliament introduced free personal care, the Westminster Government clawed back money that should have helped to pay for the policy. Is he aware that Lord Sutherland, the architect of free personal care, estimates that the amount that the Westminster Government retains now stands at £40 million per year? Does he agree with Lord Sutherland that the Executive should reopen, expose and pursue the issue to help to bridge the funding gap and ensure that elderly people get the care that the Parliament wants them to have?

The First Minister: Dear, oh dear, oh dear. We get to the heart of the matter again: if there is a problem in Scotland it must be somebody else's fault—we must blame London or Westminster. The fact that it is raining today is probably the fault of somebody in London and Ms Sturgeon would want to blame them too.

This Parliament is about Scotland taking responsibility, not giving it away; it is about Scotland having policies that suit Scots and that are consistently implementable here, although with some local discretion and judgment. We are proud of the policy of free personal and nursing care for older people in Scotland. We are proud that it has been fully financed in agreement with the local authorities and we are determined to ensure that they implement the policy consistently throughout Scotland. We are working towards that. We are not providing excuses or blaming somebody else somewhere else, but ensuring that we take Scotland forward.

Prime Minister (Meetings)

2. Miss Annabel Goldie (West of Scotland) (Con): To ask the First Minister when he will next meet the Prime Minister and what issues they will discuss. (S2F-2210)

The First Minister (Mr Jack McConnell): I have no immediate plans to meet the Prime Minister but, when I do, I will not blame him for the weather.

Miss Goldie: That is one of the few things for which the Prime Minister is not responsible.

The fact that nearly half of our councils have put elderly people on waiting lists for free personal care is an appalling indictment of the Executive. Elderly people are not interested in squabbles between the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities and the Executive and, to be frank, neither are their families. Having adopted the policy of free personal care, the Parliament has not only a moral but a legal responsibility to frail elderly people. The First Minister said in his response to Ms Sturgeon that assessment of need is when care should be provided, but I tell him that that is not happening. In many council areas throughout Scotland, there are elderly people with unmet needs who have been assessed and have been told to join a waiting list. They are not getting the help to which they and their families thought they were entitled.

The longer-term problems that are associated with the policy need to be addressed, but there is a current crisis. Does the First Minister accept that the Parliament's reputation is at stake and will he accept his responsibility to find an immediate solution to the current crisis?

The First Minister: That is precisely why the health ministers have been engaged in discussions with local authorities and their representatives on the subject. We want the policy to be implemented consistently throughout Scotland and it is clear that, when assessment takes place, the care should be provided. Local authorities should deliver that care, and that is why ministers have actively discussed with local authorities the need to deliver it locally.

Miss Goldie: Political leadership is all about priorities, and the Executive's actions speak louder than words. The First Minister has already issued two glowing tributes to free personal care today and said in his reply to Ms Sturgeon:

"We are proud of the policy of free personal and nursing care".

However, the policy is not being delivered. The testament and evidence for that are the frail, vulnerable, elderly people who are being looked after by carers who are unable to cope. The situation is utterly unacceptable, First Minister, and any response short of a solution is not on.

If funding is the key, the public are entitled to ask why money can be found for the enterprise agencies. If money can be found for those, surely to heaven there is a clamant demand that money

can be found to sort out the current crisis now.

The First Minister: The Deputy First Minister and Minister for Enterprise and Lifelong Learning will outline our plans for Scottish Enterprise in his statement to the Parliament this afternoon. It would be entirely inconsistent if our devolved Government, having said that economic growth is our top priority, failed to ensure that we can deliver the projects that are required to promote further growth throughout Scotland. However, there will be consistency in the Deputy First Minister's announcement this afternoon.

We know for a fact that 41,000 people currently receive free personal care services without charge at home, and a further 9,000 receive the appropriate services in care homes. We are proud of those services. We are proud of that policy because it was delivered by the Parliament and the devolved Government here in Scotland. At the same time, it is essential that the policy is delivered consistently throughout Scotland. We will continue to discuss with local authorities the consistent implementation of the policy. There is an urgency to the issue, but it is being tackled and I am sure that we will make some progress.

Miss Goldie: The point is that, as we speak, the Parliament is in public breach of trust with the people of Scotland and with our frail elderly people who were given a legal commitment by a statutory enactment of the Parliament.

If the First Minister is reluctant to use the money that has been set aside for Scottish Enterprise, I can suggest a couple of alternatives. The First Minister is due to get £87 million in consequential from last week's budget. He also has £100 million unallocated in the health budget for 2007-08. Instead of setting aside money for what we expect will be pre-election bribes, why will the First Minister not use at least some of that money right now to help the people who currently need it?

The First Minister: I do not agree that, having previously agreed with local authorities budgets that were based on proper estimates for the cost of the policy, we should now find some excuse for them to renege on the promises that they made in line with the policy that we set out in the Parliament. We will set out the policy consistently and demand a consistent implementation of it by local authorities. We will expect them to deliver the policy within the sums that they agreed with us for implementation. That is the right approach, rather than bailing people out and making excuses for the fact that they are not delivering the policy.

Secretary of State for Scotland (Meetings)

3. Robin Harper (Lothians) (Green): To ask the First Minister when he will next meet the Secretary of State for Scotland and what issues

they will discuss. (S2F-2223)

The First Minister (Mr Jack McConnell): I expect to meet the Secretary of State for Scotland tomorrow. We will discuss a range of matters of importance to Scotland.

Robin Harper: The Executive's new climate change programme that was published this morning is the best rhetoric yet. As the First Minister will be aware, Margaret Beckett admitted this week that the United Kingdom will fail to meet its 2010 climate change target. Page 11 of the Executive's new strategy shows that, even worse, Scotland already lags behind England in reducing greenhouse gases. Does the First Minister accept that we now have it in black and white—and on a red and blue graph—that England may be failing but Scotland is doing even worse?

The First Minister: In recent weeks and months in the chamber, I have occasionally praised the Green Party for honesty and principle. I hope to be able to do that often, but I cannot do so in respect of Robin Harper's question.

We have set out this morning a target for tackling climate change that will be far more ambitious in Scotland than elsewhere in the United Kingdom. We have done that after due consideration and we believe that the target is implementable and deliverable. The target has been welcomed this morning by WWF Scotland, RSPB Scotland and Friends of the Earth Scotland. I am happy to take their support for the new target that we have set and the actions that we have outlined as a genuine expression of opinion. Any attempt by Mr Harper to distort the situation demeans both him and his party.

Robin Harper: My first question referred to present performance—performance so far. We welcome the targets that the First Minister has set, but the Executive is building new motorways, promoting the trebling of air travel and even considering the removal of bridge tolls. Is it not the case that the Executive will fail to meet its targets because, despite the fact that the new strategy is called "Changing Our Ways", the Executive is not prepared to change its ways? In particular, will the First Minister bite the bullet and introduce measures to achieve a real reduction in the amount of traffic on our roads—yes or no?

The First Minister: In recent weeks and months, I have been pleased to be in a position to launch Scotland's first new branch railway for almost two decades. We look forward to the expansion of our railway services and network and of our other public transport services in the months and years ahead. That is a clear commitment by the Administration.

I have said before to Mr Harper that I believe that taking one air journey from a location in

Scotland to a location elsewhere in the world is better than taking two air journeys, via London, Amsterdam or another city. That is one reason why we support direct air routes, which have environmental as well as economic and social benefits. They are an integral part of our transport policies, which will make a contribution to ensuring that Scotland delivers on the target that we have set.

Asylum-seeker Children

4. Bill Butler (Glasgow Anniesland) (Lab): To ask the First Minister what progress has been made on an agreement between the Scottish Executive and the United Kingdom Government in respect of policies relating to the removal of the children of failed asylum-seeker families. (S2F-2215)

The First Minister (Mr Jack McConnell): We have reached agreement with the Home Office on a number of substantive issues to address the concerns that we have raised with it, including on early involvement of local services; independent inspection of services; enhanced disclosure checks on all immigration service staff who are involved in removals where children are present; new arrangements to handle complaints against immigration officers; and a review of the family removals process, including the timing of removals.

Bill Butler: I welcome the changes that the First Minister has outlined, which reflect the work of the Executive and the Parliament and, above all, the commitment of the pupils and staff of Drumchapel high school and the wider community. The measures that have been agreed are improvements to the present wholly unacceptable removal system. I inform members that the students and staff of Drumchapel high school, as well as the Scottish Refugee Council, view the measures as progress—so far. Will time spent by children of asylum-seeker families in Scotland, during which they have put down roots in local communities, form part of what Mr McNulty called at a press conference on Monday

"the continuing dialogue with the Scottish Executive on these very serious matters"?

The First Minister: I, too, welcome the progress that has been made and am grateful to the officials and ministers who have been involved in taking the matter forward. At the same time, I believe that we need to continue our dialogue with the Home Office and the immigration service. I praise the pupils, in particular, and the staff of Drumchapel high school and other schools in Glasgow, who raised these issues with us, and assure them of our continuing interest. There is a particular issue in relation to youngsters who have been in Scotland for some years and who, through no fault

of their own, have to leave the country because their parents have not managed to secure refugee status. For them to return home without the qualifications towards which they have worked would be very unfortunate. The dialogue that we will continue to have with the Home Office will include discussion of that issue, although we understand from the Home Office that it is prepared to take such circumstances into account in the decisions that are made about both status and timing.

Ms Sandra White (Glasgow) (SNP): I congratulate the Glasgow Campaign to Welcome Refugees and the Glasgow girls and other schoolkids who pushed this issue forward. As the First Minister is aware, the devil is in the detail. I await the precise details of the proposals that the Executive has agreed with Mr McNulty. Is the First Minister aware of the national asylum support service contract with Glasgow City Council? Basically, the service has been privatised, which threatens the provision of specialist language teachers for asylum-seeker children at schools in Glasgow. Will the First Minister assure us that there will be no loss of those valuable assets to Glasgow and to the children of asylum seekers?

The First Minister: The contract is primarily between the Home Office and Glasgow City Council, and that is right and proper. It is also the case that we provide additional assistance in Glasgow for integration and teaching programmes in the local community. My understanding is that that amount of money is increasing rather than decreasing.

Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green): It is good to see improvements and to hear the First Minister committing himself to on-going dialogue. However, other areas of devolved policy are impacted by United Kingdom asylum policy, including health, public services and our economy. Will the First Minister ensure that the on-going dialogue also involves a challenge to the UK's policy of denying asylum seekers the right to work, which has a profound impact on their mental health, as well as damaging our economy and costing our public services money?

The First Minister: The objective should be not to have people waiting for decisions over such a long period that the inability to work has the impact on them that Patrick Harvie describes. Therefore, the most important priority is to have a speedier decision-making process—a good, transparent decision-making process—that is effective for the families involved as well as for Britain as a whole. That should be the priority, rather than elongating the process by making other changes.

McKie Reports (Publication)

5. Alasdair Morgan (South of Scotland)

(SNP): To ask the First Minister whether the Scottish Executive will review the decision not to publish the reports it commissioned in relation to its defence of the action against it by Shirley McKie. (S2F-2216)

The First Minister (Mr Jack McConnell): Both parties to a litigation should be free to seek expert advice to prepare their case and are under no obligation to disclose that advice before, during or after proceedings.

The Executive will continue to respect the normal principles relating to legal confidentiality in connection with civil litigation or criminal prosecution, and within that context ministers will be as helpful as we can be to the parliamentary inquiry.

Alasdair Morgan: Lord McCluskey said at the weekend that there was absolutely no rule that prevented the Executive from disclosing those reports. Why is the Executive not prepared to release them voluntarily? Given that even the Blair Government eventually released the Attorney General's advice on the war in Iraq—after saying for years that it could not possibly do that—would it not be better for the Executive's reputation to go now for openness rather than concealment?

The First Minister: Such decisions should not be made lightly. Case law such as *Johnstone v the National Coal Board* 1968 sets out the basic principle that reports prepared by one side in litigation are not recoverable by the other. Further case law—*Hunter v Douglas, Reyburn & Company Limited* 1993—states that that privilege does not cease on conclusion of the case. Therefore, case law supports our legal approach.

At the same time, we are determined to assist the parliamentary inquiry. In the light of requests that have been received from the Justice 1 Committee, ministers will look at how we can be as helpful as we possibly can and provide the maximum amount of information that we can to the parliamentary inquiry to allow MSPs to do their business properly.

Pauline McNeill (Glasgow Kelvin) (Lab): I welcome the First Minister's reply to Alasdair Morgan that he will do everything in his power to co-operate with the Justice 1 Committee inquiry. I hope that the First Minister agrees that by working together we can contribute to restoring confidence in the Scottish fingerprint service. Does he agree that that should be the primary aim of the inquiry?

Does the First Minister welcome today's announcement that three international experts have agreed to scrutinise and advise on the implementation of the action plan, including Bruce Grant, head of the Metropolitan police counter-terrorism unit, and Arie Zeelenberg, a senior fingerprint officer in the Dutch national police

force, who has been particularly critical of the Scottish fingerprint service?

Does the First Minister also agree that at least some of these actions can contribute to restoring faith in our fingerprint service, so that in future the general public can have confidence in our system, we can be benchmarked against other countries' fingerprint services and we will be proud of what we have done?

The First Minister: I have made the point in the chamber before that it is interesting and at times worrying that members on the Opposition benches have been more concerned about revisiting legal cases that have been properly heard in our courts than in the future of the fingerprint service, the reports that have delivered improvements in the service and whether those reports have been implemented effectively. That the Justice 1 Committee is looking at the matter is a good move and I hope that in its scrutiny it will help us to secure the public confidence that there should be in the service in the years to come.

I also welcome Lord Hodge's judgment. He said this morning that the Scottish ministers have acted reasonably in defending the case and that it is reasonable for ministers to take the view that the misidentification was not malicious and was in good faith. Those are issues that have properly been heard in court. That is the right place for them to be heard, but the future of the fingerprint service and the credibility of the justice system are issues that should concern this Parliament. I hope that the parliamentary inquiry will help to secure the evidence on which we can build confidence in future.

Mike Pringle (Edinburgh South) (LD): Lord Hodge found specifically that it was reasonable, on the basis of the conflicting expert opinion about the identification of the disputed print, for ministers to settle the case on the basis of there having been no malice on the part of the Scottish Criminal Record Office fingerprint officers. Will the First Minister comment on where that leaves the Justice 1 Committee in its deliberations? Does he think that that will help us?

The First Minister: I have tried hard since the beginning of the most recent debate on the issue not to interfere with the work of the Justice 1 Committee and to ensure that we co-operate with committee members as fully as possible; we will do so throughout the inquiry. It is for the Justice 1 Committee to reflect on Lord Hodge's judgment this morning, but the committee should take account of the fact that he said, having weighed up all the evidence, that ministers have acted reasonably in pursuing the case and that there was a case to be heard in court, although the matter has now been settled outwith court in the interests of all concerned. At the same time, I

hope that the committee will join me and others in securing a way forward that ensures that all those who work in our justice service can have confidence in one another, as well as the public having confidence in them.

Margaret Mitchell (Central Scotland) (Con): Does the First Minister agree that it would be bizarre for the Minister for Justice to continue to refuse to release the Mackay report or any other final reports of commissions relating to the McKie case and the Scottish fingerprint service, if the Justice 1 Committee calls for the authors of those reports to give evidence as part of its SCRO inquiry?

The First Minister: Most of the time, I admire and respect the way in which Margaret Mitchell pursues issues relating to crime. I have heard her speak on criminal justice issues in the past with some passion, and I respect that. However, I do not think that she does her case any good by asking the Minister for Justice to release a report to which that minister has never had access. The Mackay report was commissioned by the Lord Advocate as part of the judgments in the Crown Office about a prosecution, and it would be entirely wrong for ministers to see a copy of that report, to have any access to it or to make any decisions relating to it. That report should remain private, as part of the work of the prosecution service. I hope that Margaret Mitchell will withdraw her suggestion and allow us to move on.

Local Government Pension Scheme (Rule of 85)

6. Carolyn Leckie (Central Scotland) (SSP): To ask the First Minister whether the Scottish Executive still intends to abolish the rule of 85 in the local government pension scheme. (S2F-2227)

The First Minister (Mr Jack McConnell): Our legal advice remains that the European Community equal treatment framework directive 2000/78/EC has rendered the rule of 85 in local government pensions discriminatory in terms of age. We will continue to seek a solution that offers a balance between meeting our legal obligations and providing protection for local government workers.

Carolyn Leckie: I thank the First Minister for that reply, but I am disappointed by it. Is he aware of the statement by the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Trade and Industry that the European employment directive provides for different treatment on the ground of age, which actually supports the legal opinions published by Unison and by the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities and contradicts the Executive's unpublished legal advice? Will the First Minister accept that the unions and COSLA could easily settle the dispute today if the Executive

acknowledged what everyone else knows—that it has got it wrong—and does he accept that any further disruption is the Executive's responsibility if it does not acknowledge that? The First Minister said in an earlier answer to Nicola Sturgeon that the Parliament wants to accept responsibility, not give it away. Will he accept responsibility for resolving the dispute and tell us what his proposals are for achieving that?

The First Minister: First, there is an obligation and a responsibility on this Parliament and on the devolved Government to implement our legal obligations. We intend to continue to do that. Even if some parties in the Parliament would prefer us to break the law, we will not do that. We will implement our legal obligations.

We have said clearly that if the trade unions are successful in their current legal action against the interpretation of the framework we will immediately work towards the new interpretation, but we do not expect that action to be successful.

There is no need whatsoever for the current industrial action. Last Thursday the Minister for Finance and Public Service Reform, Tom McCabe, made a perfectly reasonable proposal to the trade unions in Scotland. He said that we were willing to discuss transitional arrangements for existing members of staff.

The directive does not come into force until October. That is some time away, so there is plenty of time for discussion and no need for disruption to be caused to members of the public. In particular, there is no need for disruption—as is currently planned—of the meat hygiene service. I call on the unions to withdraw the call out of meat hygiene inspectors next week, which could result in the loss of up to a thousand jobs in the meat processing services in Scotland. That would be an unjustifiable outcome of a dispute that is nowhere near its conclusion and on which further discussion is required.

Mr John Swinney (North Tayside) (SNP): Is the Executive seeking a derogation from the European Union regulations to allow the continuation of the rule of 85?

The First Minister: The Executive and ministers have sought clarification from the European Commission on the statements that were made by a spokesperson on its behalf earlier this year. The clarification that we have received is that the spokesperson was speaking out of context.

We have yet again sought clarification of our legal opinion. We remain firm in our position that the legal opinion that we have is accurate. We are therefore determined to implement our legal obligations, subject to the current court case.

We have said that in Scotland we are prepared to have distinctive discussions with the unions. The position is that the pension scheme in Scotland is currently in a different position from that south of the border. We believe that there is scope for further discussion of the matter in Scotland. We believe that the unions in Scotland should sit round the table with their employers in COSLA and with ourselves to try to negotiate a settlement. There is no reason for industrial action in Scotland at this time. The solution to that is not a derogation, but dialogue. It is time for that dialogue to start properly.

12:32

Meeting suspended until 14:15.

14:15

On resuming—

Question Time

SCOTTISH EXECUTIVE

Enterprise, Lifelong Learning and Transport

Highlands and Islands Enterprise (Reorganisation)

1. Eleanor Scott (Highlands and Islands) (Green): To ask the Scottish Executive what discussions it has had with Highlands and Islands Enterprise in respect of its proposals for the reorganisation of its local enterprise companies. (S2O-9465)

The Deputy Minister for Enterprise and Lifelong Learning (Allan Wilson): We have held several discussions with Highlands and Islands Enterprise on its reorganisation proposals. HIE received widespread support for its reorganisation and I was content for it to proceed to implementation. The proposals were announced to all staff on 2 March 2006.

Eleanor Scott: The minister will be aware that one of HIE's proposals is to create one large local enterprise company that includes Inverness and the inner Moray firth area, including Easter Ross and Nairn—in other words, the densely populated part of the enterprise network's area. Despite what the minister says about widespread support for the proposals, he must be aware of the concern that they are causing, not just because of the break-up of valued LECs such as Ross and Cromarty Enterprise. Does he agree that the imbalance in the enterprise network that will be created is undesirable and that the inevitable effect will be that the Inverness city region that is served by the large LEC will get all the attention, while the economically vulnerable areas with small LECs—which is where HIE should target its efforts—will be disadvantaged?

Allan Wilson: No, I do not agree. We should acknowledge that HIE has transformed the economy of the Highlands—an area that used to be characterised by depopulation and decline, but which is now synonymous with growth, prosperity and a high quality of life.

There were persuasive arguments in favour of the new inner Moray firth arrangements. Inverness acts as a strong economic driver for the area, which will be taken into account in the new LEC boundaries. I understand the concerns of some in the Ross and Cromarty area, but HIE assures me that opportunities and needs in the area will

continue to receive the same attention as previously. That is good news for the Ross and Cromarty area and for the Highlands more generally.

Rob Gibson (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): During the Environment and Rural Development Committee's inquiry into accessible rural areas, we heard from people in Lanarkshire who were extremely concerned about a Glasgow city region, so one imagines that people in Easter Ross feel the same about an Inverness city region. Trickle-down economics do not work. How will the minister measure job creation and improvement in the Easter Ross economy under the new large LEC?

Allan Wilson: There is no suggestion that trickle-down economics are being applied in the Highlands or anywhere else in Scotland. The purpose of an economic development agency is to develop the economy. I repeat that HIE has been astonishingly successful in so doing. The measurement of economic agencies' performance is difficult. We had a debate on the issue last week and we are considering several ways of monitoring and measuring the effectiveness of HIE and, of course, Scottish Enterprise.

Cycling

2. Mike Pringle (Edinburgh South) (LD): To ask the Scottish Executive how it is promoting cycling as a means of travelling to work. (S2O-9500)

The Minister for Transport and Telecommunications (Tavish Scott): We will continue to core fund Cycling Scotland to promote cycling as a healthy, sustainable and environmentally friendly mode of transport. We will maintain cycling, walking and safer streets funding to local authorities. Earlier this month, we published guidance on regional transport strategies. The guiding principles include the provision and promotion of sustainable transport choices and the facilitation of access to jobs.

Mike Pringle: I am sure that the minister is aware of the article in that illustrious newspaper the *Sunday Herald* in which he was condemned for a

“scandalous’ 30% cut in funding for cycle lanes and other facilities”.

Will he comment on that quotation, which I very much hope is not true? Will he set the record straight?

Tavish Scott: I am grateful to Mr Pringle for his helpful question. He is right—we attach considerable importance to investments in cycling. I am pleased to say that between 2005 and 2006, local authority funding has risen from £8.65 million

to £9.9 million. In addition, our funding for Cycling Scotland is around £400,000 in the current financial year. Sustrans funding for the national cycle network, to which Mr Pringle has paid particular attention and on which he has written me many letters, has risen from £1.5 million in 2002-03 to £2 million in the current financial year. I was surprised by the piece that he mentions, particularly as I received a letter from the chief executive of Sustrans that entirely refuted the arguments.

Enterprise Economy

3. Mr Ted Brocklebank (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): To ask the Scottish Executive what new steps it is taking to create an enterprise economy. (S2O-9446)

The Deputy Minister for Enterprise and Lifelong Learning (Allan Wilson): We have clear strategies that set out the path we will follow in achieving a high-skill, high-wage economy and which provide clear direction for the enterprise networks and others to deliver against. In line with the strategies, we are investing in business support, focusing on sectors that will bring Scotland competitive advantage; investing in transport and broadband infrastructure; investing in health, education and skills; and taking steps to reduce business rates and reform the planning system, to name but some of the steps that we are taking to create an enterprise economy.

Mr Brocklebank: We shall all be agog in about half an hour when we hear from the Deputy First Minister how bailing out Scotland's floundering enterprise agency will benefit our enterprise economy. Does the minister accept the view of the Enterprise and Culture Committee that the top echelon of Scottish Enterprise should appear before the committee as a matter of urgency on 18 April to explain why Scottish Enterprise went over budget? That means that those witnesses would appear before ministers signed off next year's budget rather than after 18 April to avoid the heat, as alleged in *The Herald* today.

Allan Wilson: I do not accept Mr Brocklebank's—

Alasdair Morgan (South of Scotland) (SNP): Premise.

Allan Wilson: Premise. Scottish Enterprise is well respected internationally for the work it has done, is doing and will continue to do to promote Scotland's economy internationally and to grow it domestically. As Mr Brocklebank correctly points out, my boss, the Deputy First Minister, will be making a statement on Scottish Enterprise immediately following questions on justice issues. It would be wrong of me to pre-empt what Nicol Stephen might say.

Jim Mather (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): The reality is that a third of working people in Scotland earn less than £6.50 an hour, which makes a mockery of the minister's words. I am sure that he understands why I am totally sceptical that he can turn the situation round without economic powers. What will he do in the meantime to benchmark even the current micropowers against what is available in other countries and herald a new era of perpetual improvement in economic development?

Allan Wilson: On benchmarking, I do not accept any of Mr Mather's suggestions for how we should grow Scotland's economy. Independence would not make one iota of difference to that aim; in fact, it would detract severely from our economic prospects. That fact has been recognised by the Scottish people for generations and it will be recognised for generations to come.

The question of how we monitor Scottish Enterprise's performance was raised by Audit Scotland. It is difficult to make an international comparison. Programmes are evaluated to assess their contribution to progress on a range of measures and their overall impact on the economy. The Auditor General made some recommendations for improving the way in which evaluation is carried out, and we are acting on them.

Glasgow Crossrail (Commonwealth Games 2014)

4. Paul Martin (Glasgow Springburn) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive whether it will support the Glasgow crossrail project as a major component of the Glasgow bid for the 2014 Commonwealth games. (S2O-9483)

The Minister for Transport and Telecommunications (Tavish Scott): We are committed to improving public transport in Glasgow in line with the bid for the Commonwealth games. The national transport strategy and the strategic projects review will consider projects that improve public transport in Glasgow, including the rail network.

Paul Martin: I know that the minister has recently been acquainted with the details of the crossrail project, which will serve not just Glasgow but other parts of Scotland. Does he agree that there is a powerful case for the crossrail project in relation to the Commonwealth games bid? Will he ensure that the appropriate officials from his department are allocated to ensure that the Commonwealth games bid and the transport network that is to service it are given the appropriate resources?

Tavish Scott: I am grateful to Paul Martin for raising this issue, and I am grateful to his

colleague, Bill Butler, for chairing last night's meeting of the cross-party group on Glasgow crossrail. I attended the meeting and was interested to hear the proposals and how they are developing. The case is compelling, and there are strong strategic and local arguments. As Mr Martin knows, the project will have to proceed through an appropriate process involving the strategic projects review. However, I give him the undertaking that I will continue to look closely at the project and see what we can do to bring it to fruition.

Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green): Does the minister agree that, given the national benefits that could flow from the crossrail project; the large number of people in Glasgow and the surrounding areas who do not have access to a car and who are, therefore, dependent on public transport; and the relatively low cost of the scheme in comparison with other infrastructure projects that the Executive is supporting, games or no games, the crossrail project stands on its own merits?

Tavish Scott: I accept that the project stands on its own merits. It is not just a local project for Glasgow: it has potentially significant advantages for our strategic rail network, not least because of the potential for the new Glasgow airport rail link—on which I know Mr Harvie is particularly keen—to connect to the rest of the Scottish rail network. That appears to be one reason why it is an important project to consider further.

Ms Sandra White (Glasgow) (SNP): I am pleased with the minister's positive responses. He mentioned the strategic projects review 2007. Can he tell us whether the Executive will commit to the crossrail project in that review?

Tavish Scott: No, I cannot tell Sandra White that we will commit to a project—whatever it might be—in the strategic projects review. That would defeat the purpose of having the review. We will take it through its normal course, which I am sure Sandra White agrees is the right approach for any Government to take. The proposals that are being made and the development of the ideas behind the project are important, and we need to make further progress on them.

Station Improvements (Edinburgh)

5. Sarah Boyack (Edinburgh Central) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive what timescale is envisaged for major improvement works to Waverley and Haymarket railway stations. (S2O-9470)

The Minister for Transport and Telecommunications (Tavish Scott): Construction for the Waverley station infrastructure works project was on site in January and will be complete, on time and within budget, in

December 2007. The City of Edinburgh Council is conducting a feasibility study to examine the wider options for development at Haymarket station. That study is due to be complete in spring 2007.

In the meantime, Transport Scotland, First ScotRail and Network Rail are establishing which additional facilities should be delivered at Haymarket during 2006 and are considering the alleviation of platform overcrowding, the improvement of waiting facilities and the provision of improved surfaces for visually impaired passengers.

Sarah Boyack: I welcome the fact that progress is being made on both stations. Will the minister use his influence to ensure that Transport Scotland does some work on the Waverley project so that Waverley station can be considered in the strategic transport projects review next year? Does he share my frustration that last year marked 20 years since the first plan was drawn up to make Haymarket accessible? Now that we have given the green light to trams, there seems to be no obstacle to our getting on and making sure that the transport interchange—which was in First ScotRail's franchise plans—is delivered. Can we get the blockage removed and see the improvements being made to our two major stations on the ground of their national and strategic importance?

Tavish Scott: I accept the drive that Sarah Boyack brings to the issue. I am happy to assure her that I will discuss with Malcolm Reid, the chief executive of Transport Scotland, how best to take forward the transport improvements at Waverley station, and I assure her that I will look constantly and consistently at how we can best achieve that. I share her frustration about Haymarket railway station. We have an opportunity to provide a shining example of a good transport interchange in Edinburgh between trams, heavy rail and the bus services that connect at Haymarket. Haymarket appears to be an important transport interchange not only for Edinburgh but, strategically, for Scotland, because there is potential for many people to use it. I will do what I can to push the matter that she raises.

Alasdair Morgan (South of Scotland) (SNP): The minister will know that traffic from Fife and the north-east of Scotland is affected by capacity constraints on the line from Inverkeithing and across the Forth rail bridge to Edinburgh. Those constraints are just as important as the constraints that are caused by platform capacity problems at Haymarket and Waverley. Is it intended to improve the signalling at Inverkeithing to allow more trains to cross the bridge and take advantage of increased capacity at Waverley?

Tavish Scott: When the Stirling-Alloa-Kincardine line opens, freight services that

currently take space from passenger services will be removed from the Forth rail bridge, which will bring improvements. I would be happy to share the details with Parliament.

I will look into Alasdair Morgan's point on signalling. I cannot answer his question here and now, but I will be happy to write to him.

Forth Estuary Transport Authority (Meetings)

6. Christine May (Central Fife) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive when it last met the Forth Estuary Transport Authority. (S2O-9484)

The Minister for Transport and Telecommunications (Tavish Scott): I last met members and officers of FETA on 2 November 2005. Officials from my department hold regular discussions with the authority.

Christine May: The minister will be glad to know that my supplementary question is not on tolls.

Given the increasingly polarised views of FETA members, will the minister consider whether FETA remains the most appropriate vehicle to manage and operate what is arguably Scotland's most important, and certainly most complex, transport corridor?

Tavish Scott: Christine May raises an important and serious question about how we can ensure that we deliver important regional and strategic networks and links. As she knows, the bridges review—dare I mention it—concluded that FETA was the most appropriate body to maintain the existing Forth road bridge. However, ministers have an open mind about the longer term, when we will have to consider whether we need a second crossing. If one is needed, we will have to consider the most appropriate body to manage it.

Tricia Marwick (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP): The minister will be aware that Labour and Scottish National Party councillors from Fife voted to ask him to rescind the Forth Road Bridge (Toll Period) Extension Order 1997, but they were defeated by the Liberal Democrat councillor from Fife and, of course, the Labour councillors from Lothian. The minister has rejected FETA's £4 toll proposal, so how does he propose to fund transport infrastructure? In particular, what plans does he have to fund the rebuilding of the A8000?

Tavish Scott: The A8000 project is under way, as is obvious to anyone who passes the area—and I am sure that Tricia Marwick is one of them. We will continue our discussions with the FETA board on the funding arrangements.

I am glad that Tricia Marwick pointed out that my colleagues are consistent, unlike her own.

Scottish Community and Householder Renewables Initiative

7. Mr Mark Ruskell (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green): To ask the Scottish Executive whether it is aware of micro-renewable energy businesses facing closure as a result of a delay in announcing the continuation of funding for the Scottish community and householder renewables initiative. (S2O-9463)

The Deputy Minister for Enterprise and Lifelong Learning (Allan Wilson): The volume of applications to the Scottish community and householder renewables initiative has increased substantially. Additional funding of £6.85 million has already been made available. The success of the scheme, combined with record levels of funding, should lead to an upturn in business for micro-renewables companies.

Mr Ruskell: A small micro-renewables business in my region is considering redundancies this week. It cannot be sure of orders for its product because of the uncertainty that the Executive has created over the funding of the SCHRI. The minister will know that providing grants for initial orders of micro-renewables devices will allow the industry to establish itself and allow prices to come down, further increasing orders. Will he reassure us that the SCHRI will be reinstated as a matter of urgency, to create long-term certainty for the micro-renewables market instead of uncertainty?

Allan Wilson: I have just given that assurance. Since its introduction, the SCHRI has been astonishingly successful and has led to an increase in the number of installers—there were 14 in 2003 and there are now around 40. Our recent announcement that we will honour existing commitments in the system, and the Chancellor of the Exchequer's commitment to put a further £50 million into micro-renewable generation, augur well for the industry and bear out what I have said publicly, which is that the focus should be on greater community business use and other social use of such devices. That is proof positive, if it were needed, that great minds think alike.

Justice and Law Officers

Legal Services (Rural Access)

1. Mr Jim Wallace (Orkney) (LD): To ask the Scottish Executive what steps it is taking to improve access to legal services in rural communities. (S2O-9503)

The Deputy Minister for Justice (Hugh Henry): We are concerned to ensure an adequate supply of high-quality legal and other advice services across the country. That underlies our proposals in the "Advice for All" consultation and our other initiatives on access to justice. We are

now considering how best to take those matters forward.

Mr Wallace: I thank the minister for that answer and for the replies that I received from him and from the chief executive of the Scottish Legal Aid Board in response to my representations about the difficulty that Women's Aid clients experience in accessing legal aid. They are some of the most constructive and positive replies that I have received in a long time.

One of the points that was made was that use of legal aid solicitors who are not in the immediate vicinity of their clients—people who live on islands, for example, often use solicitors on the Scottish mainland—would be facilitated if steps were taken to improve the use of information technology in the submission of certain court-related documents, and if we were to make greater use of videoconferencing. Given that there is a sheriff who works in both Orkney and Shetland, the use of videoconferencing would often be helpful. Will the minister give active consideration to how that can be progressed?

Hugh Henry: The examples that Jim Wallace cites are good ones. What is happening in Shetland, where good use is made of e-mail, telephone communication and videoconferencing, is highly instructive. If the use of such technology can be shown to work, I think that it should be applied more widely throughout rural Scotland. Understandably, there will be circumstances in which it will not be appropriate to use such methods, but given that they have been shown to work in Shetland, I see no reason why they could not be applied elsewhere. We will consider the matter carefully; we hope to encourage the adoption of new technology whenever that is possible.

Scottish Cup Semi-final (Public Order)

2. David McLetchie (Edinburgh Pentlands) (Con): To ask the Scottish Executive whether it has any concerns about the public order implications of the decision of the Scottish Football Association to stage the semi-final of the Tennent's Scottish cup between Heart of Midlothian FC and Hibernian FC at Hampden Park on Sunday 2 April 2006 at 12.15 pm. (S2O-9451)

The Presiding Officer (Mr George Reid): We have skipped a supplementary. We will come to question 2 after Maureen Macmillan has followed up on question 1.

Maureen Macmillan (Highlands and Islands) (Lab): Thank you, Presiding Officer. I was temporarily in despair.

Hugh Henry's answer about the use of videoconferencing and information technology was interesting. Is he aware that a similar problem is

being experienced at rural courts in the Highlands, for example at Portree sheriff court? Solicitors from places such as Inverness, Dingwall and Fort William are not refunded for the time it takes them to get to such remote courts. Until the use of video links is rolled out, will the minister prevail on the Scottish Legal Aid Board to consider funding solicitors who travel to present cases in Portree sheriff court and other rural courts in the Highlands?

Hugh Henry: Maureen Macmillan has written to me about that issue. I will reply to her shortly.

Along with SLAB, we need to reflect on a number of aspects of the matter. We must consider not only the availability of solicitors, but what other options might be provided, including publicly funded solicitors. In addition, certain parts of the rules may need to be examined and perhaps changed. There is no doubt that justice cannot be delivered if parts of Scotland are neglected, so we must demonstrate flexibility and imagination to ensure that everyone has proper access to justice.

The Presiding Officer: We now come to question 2. Are you content to take the question as read, minister?

The Minister for Justice (Cathy Jamieson): Yes.

In response to Mr McLetchie's question, I say that the decision to stage the match at Hampden was one for the SFA to take following consultation of the clubs, police and other relevant parties. As a football fan myself, I know that the vast majority of people who attend events such as the semi-final do so to enjoy themselves. If everyone heeds the advice of the police and stewards, Scottish football will be the winner.

David McLetchie: I do not know about Scottish football being the winner; I hope that it is Hearts football team. Does the minister agree that the SFA's decision to stage the match at Hampden instead of Murrayfield betrays a total disregard for the interests of some 50,000 supporters, especially given the considerable inconvenience and expense to which they will be put? Indeed, the decision is all the more galling when we have a magnificent neutral venue in Edinburgh in which to stage the match. Does she further agree that policing costs will be higher as a result of the decision? Will she advise the SFA that it should pay proper regard to the interests of fans and to the costs to the public purse in future decisions on the dates, timings and venues of such games?

Cathy Jamieson: I may at times wish that my responsibilities extended to the Scottish Football Association. I am afraid that they do not—indeed, it would not be appropriate for them to do so. Of course, it is important that account be taken of

football supporters. I am sure that the fans will have an enjoyable time on the west coast and that things will go well on the day. A number of issues have been looked at already to ensure the safety of supporters and to make it a good day for everyone.

As an interested neutral—I would not, of course, take any side in the matter—I say that Hearts last won the cup in 1998, which is the year after Kilmarnock won it, but that Hibs last won it in 1902. I would make no prediction of the result on that basis, however.

Margo MacDonald (Lothians) (Ind): I well remember that cup win, Presiding Officer. *[Laughter.]* I expect it to be repeated with gusto.

I am concerned about the number of people who will have to queue for tickets; not the assured tickets at Waverley station, but those that will be distributed on a first-come-first-served basis. The estimated number of such tickets is 1,500, but the special trains can carry only 1,700. Can the minister do anything, even at this late stage, to alleviate the considerable possibility for tension?

Cathy Jamieson: As I indicated in my previous answer, the match commander has been in touch with supporters organisations and the various police forces—Lothian and Borders police, British Transport police and Strathclyde police. I understand that the intention of the police is to ensure that the message gets across to fans that, if they do not have a ticket to get on one of the trains, they should not turn up at Waverley station. The police are asking those people to look for alternative methods of getting to the match.

Closed-circuit Television (Wick and Thurso)

3. Mr Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): To ask the Scottish Executive what additional funding will be made available to install more CCTV cameras in Wick and Thurso. (S2O-9502)

The Deputy Minister for Justice (Hugh Henry): Thurso benefited from investment in CCTV in 2002. A number of local authority areas are now utilising quality of life, community safety partnership award programme or antisocial behaviour funding for CCTV. Highland Council has said that £133,000 of quality of life funding in 2006-07 will be spent on CCTV developments. The decisions on where that funding will be allocated are for the council to take.

Mr Stone: If I tell the minister that the cost of installing four basic CCTV cameras in Wick was £60,000, he will appreciate that Highland Council's allocation of money will not go far. I will continue to use Wick as an example. The town is expanding; it is turning the corner economically with the construction of new stores, including Homebase.

However, the CCTV coverage of the town is not matching its expansion. The police tell me that they would find it useful if additional cameras were installed. Bearing in mind the comparatively small size of Highland Council's budget, will the minister ask his officials to examine the issue with a view to helping the council to install more cameras by, for example, giving some money towards that?

Hugh Henry: As I said, a number of budget headings can be used to access funding for the deployment of CCTV cameras. When we come to allocate the funds across Scotland, we do so under agreed criteria. We try to look as objectively as we can at the needs of areas across the country. Many communities in Scotland would make similar pleas to the one that Jamie Stone makes. The funding has already been substantial, and I hope that Highland Council will be able to consider whether some of the other funding headings that I mentioned would give the council the opportunity to make further funding available. We have already seen the effectiveness of such funding in many communities, but it would be wrong of me to suggest that there is additional money available for either Wick or Thurso that might somehow be made available without that happening at the expense of other communities.

Legal Profession and Legal Aid (Scotland) Bill

4. Mr John Swinney (North Tayside) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Executive whether it believes that the proposals in the Legal Profession and Legal Aid (Scotland) Bill address the issues raised by contributors to the Executive consultation, "Reforming Complaints Handling, Building Consumer Confidence". (S2O-9458)

The Deputy Minister for Justice (Hugh Henry): The strong message from the 500 responses to our consultation was that a greater degree of independence was needed in arrangements for handling complaints about lawyers. For that reason, the bill seeks to create a Scottish legal complaints commission, which will be independent of the legal profession. We therefore believe that our bill does indeed address the issues that people raised in response to our consultation.

Mr Swinney: I congratulate the Executive on the publication of a very good bill, which addresses some important issues. In order to make the bill an excellent bill, will the minister give consideration to one of the issues that were mentioned in the feedback from the consultation exercise, which is that the perpetuation of the distinction between categories of complaints against solicitors—service complaints and conduct complaints—might not be addressed effectively by the bill and might lead to further confusion of the type that the bill tries to address?

Hugh Henry: We listened carefully to representations from various quarters, including the legal profession. Although conduct complaints would remain with the legal professional bodies, the commission would have oversight and would be empowered to enforce its recommendations in relation to the professional bodies' casework decisions. Of course, the bill still has to be considered by Parliament, so that it will be a matter for parliamentary determination. I await with interest the exchanges that I will have with the lead committee and with others who choose to participate. I think that we have struck the right balance, but there is much still to be decided as the bill develops.

Low Moss Prison

5. Pauline McNeill (Glasgow Kelvin) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive whether it remains committed to the public sector bid for a new prison at Low Moss; what progress has been made, and what timescales are envisaged. (S2O-9489)

The Minister for Justice (Cathy Jamieson): We remain fully committed to allowing the bridging the gap public sector team to bid for the proposed new prison at Low Moss. Timescales are linked to the resolution of outstanding site-planning issues.

Pauline McNeill: Does the minister share my concern at the delay in progress on a new prison in the west of Scotland, which is crucial for eradicating overcrowding and slopping out from prisons? Will she further assure me that the Executive will remain committed to a public sector bid, whether at Low Moss or elsewhere, and will she assure Parliament that a way will be found to ensure that we are informed of any progress or delay, so that we can continue to modernise the prisons estate?

Cathy Jamieson: Members will be aware of my specific interest in ensuring that we modernise the prisons estate, which will involve building new prisons, where appropriate, in addition to the significant work and expenditure that have already been put into our existing prisons estate. I wish that I could give Pauline McNeill further information at this time, but I remind members that East Dunbartonshire Council rejected the planning application on 30 August 2005. A process is under way at the moment and I cannot, unfortunately, give any more assurances on timescales. Nevertheless, I can make a commitment to keep Parliament updated as appropriate.

Drug and Alcohol Action Teams (Good Practice)

6. Dr Elaine Murray (Dumfries) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive how good practice in tackling substance misuse is shared between drug and alcohol action teams across Scotland. (S2O-9494)

The Deputy Minister for Justice (Hugh Henry): We provide funding to the Drug Action Team Association and the Scottish Association of Alcohol Action Teams to share good practice among alcohol and drug action teams through seminars, newsletters and regular meetings. We are also setting up a national forum on drug-related deaths and have published several good-practice guides to help ADATs learn from one another about successful approaches to tackling substance misuse.

Dr Murray: I thank the minister for his reply; I am interested to hear what the Executive is doing. I noticed that recently published statistics show considerable differences in waiting times for drug treatments and rehabilitation in ADATs, but there was also a caveat that it was not appropriate to make too-rigid comparisons. Given that there are increased concerns about the appropriateness of methadone treatment for some addicts, how can we ensure that developments in drug treatments—in particular novel drug treatments, one of which is now being trialled by a patient in Dumfries and Galloway—are made available throughout Scotland so that any addict for whom the treatment is appropriate can receive it in his or her own area?

Hugh Henry: There are three issues. First, any treatment needs to be clinically proven and medically approved. Secondly, we want to ensure that a range of interventions are available throughout the country. We want pilots to be developed that explore different methods of treatment, because we do not believe that offering one treatment is the best way forward. Thirdly, we must recognise that any decision must be made by the professionals, the medical authorities and the patient, who cannot be dictated to by politicians. If a treatment is safe, available and appropriate, I hope that it can be applied.

Margaret Mitchell (Central Scotland) (Con): Will the minister acknowledge the excellent work that is undertaken by Lighthouse, a Kilmarnock-based charity that supports the families of drug addicts, and the work of the South Lanarkshire council on alcohol, based in Blantyre, which supports alcohol abusers and their families? Can he confirm that those voluntary organisations will continue to have Scottish Executive support?

Hugh Henry: I am not familiar with the project in Blantyre, but I met representatives of the Lighthouse project at the invitation of Margaret Jamieson and I listened carefully to what they said. I recognise the work that is being done in the area.

Of course, such local organisations are not directly funded by the Scottish Executive—we make our funding available through intermediary agencies. I think that funding decisions on local

projects are best made by those who are familiar with local circumstances. We have continued to increase the amount of money that is available for such projects and we recognise the value of the voluntary sector, but it would be wrong for me to dictate what local provision should look like.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a pause at 2.55 to let members who are outside in and, thereby, to ensure a peaceful changeover.

Victims of Crime (Information and Support)

7. Susan Deacon (Edinburgh East and Musselburgh) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive what steps it is taking to improve the information and support provided to victims of crime, particularly regarding decisions about the prosecution and release of those accused of committing the crimes. (S2O-9473)

The Solicitor General for Scotland (Mrs Elish Angiolini): The service that is provided by victim information and advice, which is part of the Crown Office and Procurator Fiscal Service, ensures that victims in serious cases and all vulnerable witnesses are kept informed and are advised about the progress of their cases.

Eligible victims and next of kin are advised about the victim notification scheme, whereby under section 16 of the Criminal Justice (Scotland) Act 2003 victims are entitled to information about prisoner-release dates in cases in which an offender has been imprisoned for four years or more.

Susan Deacon: I thank the Solicitor General for Scotland for her full and informative answer. I place on record my recognition of the great improvements that have taken place in this area. However, does the Solicitor General agree that it is important to seek continually to improve existing arrangements and to learn from the experience of individuals? Will she agree to meet me to examine the recent experiences of several of my constituents and to examine whether lessons can be learned that could improve the experience of victims of crime in the future?

The Solicitor General for Scotland: The short answer is yes—I would be delighted to meet any member of Parliament to discuss victim issues. My colleague Cathy Jamieson would also be interested because there are shared interests. The prosecution service deals with a significant section of victims, but the cases of many victims of crime will not come close to it, so there are wider issues than those that are dealt with by the Lord Advocate's and my department.

Rightly, victims' expectations increase year on year. The provision of services now compared to what I experienced as a young prosecutor is like the difference between night and day, but we can

clearly be ambitious for much more in terms of the services that we provide for victims. We are a learning organisation that wishes to improve the services that we currently provide.

The Presiding Officer: That is the end of questions. I will allow a pause of one to two minutes for members to come into the chamber, or to go out, as the case may be.

Scottish Enterprise

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Trish Godman): The next item of business is a statement by Nicol Stephen on Scottish Enterprise. The minister will take questions at the end of his statement. There should therefore be no interventions.

14:56

The Deputy First Minister and Minister for Enterprise and Lifelong Learning (Nicol Stephen): My reasons for making this statement today are to inform members of the action that I have asked to be taken to ensure that Scottish Enterprise, its business units and local companies are in a position to start the new financial year with some confidence and clarity, and to report the action being taken to build further the strengths that Scottish Enterprise brings to Scotland's international reputation, business, skills and infrastructure.

It is important that this debate is constructive. Scottish Enterprise is well thought of across the world and has been a model for other development agencies. Through Scottish Development International, it promotes Scotland abroad. In recent weeks, Scotland has won further awards for the strength of our international outlook and our potential for the future—that is an important backdrop. Scottish Enterprise invests and will continue to invest over £500 million per year in Scotland's economic future.

I want to update members on the plans, initiated by the chair and chief executive of Scottish Enterprise, to review the structure of the organisation. Their aim is to ensure that it is best suited to deliver our priority of economic growth. Scottish Enterprise has proposed focusing more of its activity on key industry sectors, which are those that have the greatest potential to impact on Scotland's economy. High-growth companies outside those sectors will continue to get the support that they need to make a difference to our economy. Information, advice and support will remain available to all companies in all parts of Scotland. There has been strong support for this industry-led approach from the chambers of commerce, the Confederation of British Industry and other business organisations and I have asked Scottish Enterprise to go ahead with implementation. This is the way to a stronger Scottish economy and it merits our support.

Scottish Enterprise will retain its key priorities of growing business, global connections, learning and skills. They will deliver our ministerial goals of economic growth, social inclusion and regeneration. The ability to link learning and skills

and business support is a strength that others admire. Support for training, for those in work, for the young and for the unemployed will continue to be strongly supported by Scottish Enterprise.

Four years ago, we gave responsibility for Careers Scotland to the enterprise networks and that has worked well in the Highlands and Islands. In the Scottish Enterprise area, Careers Scotland has achieved a great deal, but I believe that the present arrangements have not delivered the organisation's full potential. As a result, we have concluded that Careers Scotland should move out of Scottish Enterprise. We will examine options for a new structure with all stakeholders, including Careers Scotland staff, users of Careers Scotland's services, the education and training community, local authorities, trade unions and others.

When considering options, we will work with the grain of the Duffner review and its recommendations for an all-age national guidance service, but with stronger links to our secondary schools as a clear objective. We hope to complete that exercise in the autumn and the expectation is that Careers Scotland will move from Scottish Enterprise at the beginning of the financial year 2007-08.

In going forward, Scottish Enterprise must have a national, a regional and a local dimension. Our economic plans recognise cities as the drivers of wider metropolitan regions and the complementary roles of cities and their surrounding areas. They also recognise the opportunities and needs of our rural areas. Those important priorities are part of Scottish Enterprise's future plans. National and—for the first time—regional planning will sharpen the focus on strategic projects that can make the biggest difference to Scotland's economy. The new approach will also reduce the risk of duplication, thereby saving valuable resources at a local level.

There must also be a local dimension, to take advantage of local opportunities to improve the economic well-being of communities, which means that there must be a role for local decision making and opportunities for innovative partnerships and local priorities. I have therefore asked Scottish Enterprise to retain local decision making in Scotland's local enterprise companies. Many business leaders give considerable time and expertise to the boards of local enterprise companies and all 12 LECs will remain.

I acknowledge that members have been particularly concerned about local responsiveness at a time when difficult decisions are being taken about priorities for spending. I will therefore take a few minutes to discuss Scottish Enterprise's financial position. As has been well publicised, Scottish Enterprise has had financial difficulties

this year, which in part come from a deliberate strategy to encourage new project proposals in each local enterprise area and in part come from the identification of a growing number of projects of national significance.

Scottish Enterprise took steps to prioritise, but a projected overspend of £30 million remains. To avoid the most difficult choices, we agreed that additional resource could be drawn forward into the current financial year. I should explain that that does not require an increase in cash grant in aid. Government accounting now properly requires that public bodies take account of non-cash costs such as depreciation and the cost of capital. The additional non-cash resource that is being made available by the Executive will cover those costs and allow some access to cash reserves held by Scottish Enterprise.

Scottish Enterprise has considered its budget for 2006-07. The options that face Scottish Enterprise have been difficult, but I have had a number of constructive meetings with Sir John Ward and Jack Perry. While detailed discussions continue, I have agreed that Scottish Enterprise will make interim budget allocations to business units and LECs that are sufficient to allow operations to continue at expected levels over the coming weeks. That will allow time for Scottish Enterprise to agree with the Executive its full-year allocations by the end of April. Those allocations will, in particular, protect funding of the business gateway. Business gateway contractors should therefore plan with confidence for the year ahead.

I have taken additional steps that will allow us all to be satisfied that the systems of financial management in Scottish Enterprise are robust. I commissioned external advisers KPMG to confirm the projected resource spend figure for 2005-06. If that work confirms the need for further examination of financial systems, such an examination will be undertaken. The approach has been welcomed by the chairman and chief executive of Scottish Enterprise.

Scottish Enterprise has called for a report by its internal audit team, which will shortly be available to the board and to the Scottish Executive Enterprise, Transport and Lifelong Learning Department. Scottish Enterprise will put in place an action plan to deal with every recommendation. The reports will be available to Audit Scotland, which is the external auditor of Scottish Enterprise. That approach will provide ministers with the assurances and information that we require in allocating funding to Scottish Enterprise.

I am not prepared to speculate on the findings of that work, but I assure members that I will report back on any actions that I consider need to be taken as a result of the findings. I will also ensure that all reports prepared for Scottish Enterprise or

the Executive are made public. Audit Scotland will, of course, make its findings available in the normal way.

Discussions need to continue to the end of April, but I have used this statement to indicate action to ensure that Scottish Enterprise will issue budget information this week that will allow operations to continue at expected levels; action to protect the business gateway; agreement that Scottish Enterprise will focus on key industry sectors with new regional planning; agreement that Careers Scotland will move out of Scottish Enterprise; and agreement that there will continue to be local decision making within Scottish Enterprise. Above all, ministers and Scottish Enterprise are determined to take steps that meet our ambitions for the Scottish economy—an enterprising, growing economy in all parts of Scotland.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The minister will now take questions on issues raised in his statement. I will allow around 20 minutes for that, before we move on to the next item of business.

Jim Mather (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): I hear the call for confidence, clarity and constructiveness. We are always there for that. Along with Linda McDowell, I spent today at a Rolls-Royce briefing, playing what I think was a constructive role. The most constructive roles lie in the delivery of micro-measures.

In essence, we always come to this issue looking at the impossibility of the task that is asked of the Scottish Executive. The Scottish Executive and Scottish Enterprise have the same incomplete nervous system whereby, no matter how well they do, the tax revenues always go elsewhere.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Could we have a question, please?

Jim Mather: In addition, emigrants make the labour participation and unemployment figures look much healthier. My questions are these. Given what we have got, what are the measures that we will now adopt in moving forward? How much will the consultancy fees that are accruing to KPMG be? Is the £30 million overspend gross or net of other remedial steps? How much sits in Scottish Enterprise's reserves for future contingencies?

Nicol Stephen: Those are big, important issues for Scotland's economic future, and I hope that everyone agrees that the measures that are being announced today are also important. It is interesting that Jim Mather suggests that he is always constructive in this respect. The Scottish National Party has consistently talked about cutting Scottish Enterprise, although it has not gone into the detail. Indeed, the SNP's last manifesto suggested that it would replace local enterprise companies in the Scottish Enterprise

area with about half the number of regional offices. That would have a significant impact on local decision making.

These will be a difficult few weeks for Scottish Enterprise, but it is very important that local decision making is left in place and that local enterprise companies and their boards are fully involved at this stage in setting priorities.

As far as measures for the way forward are concerned—perhaps Jim Mather was referring to the recent report into Scottish Enterprise—as I have made clear, it is vital to achieve good value for money for every public pound that is spent on the enterprise networks. I am absolutely committed and determined to ensure that, through the process of review that we are instigating today, we achieve exactly that. This is all about reinforcing and improving the enterprise networks and securing a better future for the Scottish economy. That is the approach that is taken by the Executive. Judging from Jim Mather's question, the approach taken by the SNP reveals a different attitude, which is not appropriate in the current circumstances.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Christine May, to be followed by Jamie Stone.

Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. It has always been the convention in the Parliament that, after a ministerial statement is given, the Opposition spokespeople get the opportunity to ask questions first of all.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You shall be the next to be called, Mr Fraser.

Murdo Fraser: Thank you, Presiding Officer.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: First, I call Christine May, to be followed by Jamie Stone.

Christine May (Central Fife) (Lab): Does the minister appreciate the deep concern that there has been among national, as well as local, enterprise bodies and those individuals who are involved in enterprise, particularly those who have spent many years building up initiatives, block by block, which are now at the level of national projects?

Does the minister appreciate the great fear that there has been—which I hope he can now allay—among training providers? Is he aware that the Scottish Training Federation is concerned that, without the measures that he has announced today, the guarantee group would be the only skillseekers to get training, and that that opportunity would later be widened only to limited numbers of 19 to 24-year-olds and people in the 25-plus group?

Does the minister appreciate how important training is to the economic regeneration of many of our post-industrial areas? Can he guarantee that the funding for those schemes will be met in full?

Nicol Stephen: I appreciate how important training and skills are for the future of Scotland's economy. In the current environment—with the commitments of the SNP and the Conservatives to cut Scottish Enterprise—it is interesting that people are rallying to protect the important services that Scottish Enterprise funds and delivers. That underscores and emphasises just how important much of its work is to the future of Scotland's economy.

Our message in relation to all Scottish Enterprise's services is that we intend business to continue as expected. Our commitments to existing training providers will remain in place.

There are a lot of detailed issues to resolve, most of which are matters for Scottish Enterprise. I will not be able to give detailed commitments in every area today. However, I can say that the Scottish Executive and its officials, along with KPMG, will be wholly engaged in this exercise, which will receive the highest priority. We intend to be supportive and to come to a good solution, not just for Scottish Enterprise but for Scotland's economy, skills and future training.

Mr Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): Let us recognise the good news when we hear it. The announcement that the business gateway is to be protected is most welcome, because, as we all know, there was considerable concern about what was going to happen on that front. Will the minister ensure that this news is disseminated to all the parties that have been concerned? Can he assure me that there will be protection for the business gateway for today and for the future? That is a fundamental and crucial message.

Nicol Stephen: I thank Jamie Stone for his support. He is correct that significant changes to the business gateway could have been made as part of the difficult decisions that Scottish Enterprise was making. A number of MSPs have contacted me to emphasise how concerned they were at the scale of rumoured local cuts.

I give Jamie Stone the absolute assurance that Scottish Enterprise is protecting the business gateway, that the gateway contracts will continue and that the gateway will continue at its present level. That is good not just for MSPs, local enterprise companies and gateway contractors, but for new businesses and small businesses, which depend heavily on the services the gateway provides—that is why, in the past 24 hours, I have received representations from a range of business organisations, including the chambers of

commerce and the Federation of Small Businesses in Scotland. They made exactly the points that Jamie Stone and others have made about the importance of the gateway and the quality of its work. I hope to improve on those services in the future, not to cut them.

Murdo Fraser: I am grateful to the minister for his statement, and for the advance copy of it. We have had weeks of press speculation, leaks and concerns being expressed to members. Eventually, the minister has given us an update—not before time, I have to say. I have four quick questions for him. First, how will the £30 million overspend in the current year's budget impact on the budget for the next financial year?

Secondly, the minister has given us an assurance that the business gateway funding will be protected. What guarantees can he give us about funding for other key projects, such as the new business growth fund, the intermediary technology institutes and R and D Plus?

Thirdly, there is no mention in the statement of redundancies. We have heard speculation about redundancy levels in Scottish Enterprise of 100, 130 and 200 jobs. How many jobs are going to go? Is that a result of the overspend?

Finally, is not this a missed opportunity to take a long, hard look at Scottish Enterprise to see whether it is fulfilling its objectives with its £0.5 billion budget of taxpayers' money? Surely the minister should seize the chance to turn Scottish Enterprise into a leaner, more focused and more effective organisation.

Nicol Stephen: We see Murdo Fraser wearing his David Cameron tie. He is suggesting that if we just slash Scottish Enterprise, everything will come right.

The Tory manifesto for the 2003 election said:

"We will retain Scottish Enterprise and Highlands and Islands Enterprise, but reduce their budgets and focus their energies on delivering advice and training services to all businesses in Scotland."

The Tories support cuts in Scottish Enterprise, but it is interesting to see that their manifesto places on advice to small businesses a priority that is similar to the one that I have announced today. I hope that Murdo Fraser will welcome the protection of the business gateway.

The impact of the £30 million overspend on next year is exactly why I have asked KPMG to consider the situation. We want to get the organisation on a stable footing for the future. These are issues that will be carefully considered in the coming weeks.

Mr Fraser asks about funding for other key projects. I share the priorities on his list. It is good to see Mr Fraser and other MSPs—regardless of

whether they might believe that Scottish Enterprise should be scrapped or have its budget slashed—supporting individual projects that are being carried out by Scottish Enterprise. I question the logic of seeking to undermine the organisation and imposing cuts on it while seeking to be seen as the champion of the projects that that organisation delivers. However, I will not dwell on that point.

It is not only the business gateway that I want to be preserved. For example, local priority setting and decision making are important and should be preserved. However, difficult issues lie ahead. As part of its organisation review, Scottish Enterprise has identified the need to improve the skill set of its staff and has identified the opportunity to reduce staff numbers overall. However, those plans, including the scale of reduction, have not been finalised. In all those plans, the driver will be business effectiveness. Proposals are not related to the financial situation.

I think that I have answered fully Murdo Fraser's point about there being a missed opportunity to cut the organisation. This organisation deserves support and stability. That is important not only for the organisation, but for Scotland's future.

Shiona Baird (North East Scotland) (Green): Sustainable development is one of the core principles of the Scottish Executive, yet it was conspicuous by its absence in the minister's statement.

Does the minister agree that, to build a genuinely sustainable Scotland, a core function of Scottish Enterprise must be to develop not only economically but socially and environmentally sustainable businesses? In other words, will the Scottish Executive and Scottish Enterprise change their ways?

Nicol Stephen: It is ironic that that question is asked on the day that Ross Finnie has launched the climate change initiative, which has sustainable development at its heart.

I believe that sustainable development issues and the opportunity to develop renewables and create green jobs in Scotland are at the heart of the work of Scottish Enterprise and form a key element of the work of the intermediary technology institutes. Shiona Baird is wrong on this issue. Sustainable development is vital to the future not only of our communities but of our economy. This Executive and Scottish Enterprise treat those issues as ones of the highest importance.

Marilyn Livingstone (Kirkcaldy) (Lab): The minister referred to local decision making. Does that involve control over budgets, as is current practice? What community planning role will Scottish Enterprise play at a local level,

particularly in local economic development, skills and training and regeneration?

Nicol Stephen: In the exercise of their responsibilities and in the use of their budgets, local enterprise companies have always had to have regard to national Scottish Enterprise priorities. That is appropriate. I announced today that there will be a new level of planning—regional planning—which will help to avoid some of the duplication of effort that can take place among neighbouring LECs and encourage greater co-operation and partnership between LECs at the regional level.

However, in my statement, I was anxious to emphasise the importance of the local boards and the hours of unpaid effort that businesspeople put into local enterprise companies. It is appropriate for those boards to have devolved decision-making and budget responsibilities but, as has always been the case in Scottish Enterprise, they should have them within the context of national and, now, regional planning. Budgeting and decision making will continue in Scottish Enterprise. There will be opportunities for local input on all the issues to which Marilyn Livingstone refers. We should thank the businesspeople who get involved in local enterprise companies and encourage them to maintain their commitment for the future.

Alex Neil (Central Scotland) (SNP): I welcome one or two of the proposals in the minister's statement. In particular, I welcome the reorganisation of Careers Scotland outwith Scottish Enterprise. I advised Wendy Alexander that she was making a mistake when she took Careers Scotland into Scottish Enterprise.

I draw the minister's attention to the reply that I received from the First Minister on 19 January, when I asked him about the emerging budget crisis at Scottish Enterprise. He said:

"We should ensure that Scottish Enterprise knows its budget and that it implements its decisions within that budget. That is what we expect Scottish Enterprise to do. That is its responsibility, and it is properly audited for that purpose. I expect Scottish Enterprise to meet its budget targets."—[*Official Report*, 19 January 2006; c 22555.]

None of those objectives has been achieved. The minister says that £30 million will be rejigged on the balance sheet from next year into this year. What are the implications of that for core services next year? We have not been told the answer. The only service that the minister has said will be saved is the business gateway. What about all the other services, including the ones that Murdo Fraser mentioned?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Is there a question, Mr Neil?

Alex Neil: Is it not time that ministers dealt with the crisis and sorted it out once and for all? We are about to go into a new financial year. Is it not the case that, far from knowing the budget, ministers do not have a clue what the budget will be?

Nicol Stephen: I welcome Alex Neil's support for the movement of Careers Scotland. He talks about core services that require to be preserved and protected, but they are the same services that he calls on us to cut when he asks for a reduction in the Scottish Enterprise budget. He is on the record as being highly critical of Scottish Enterprise. If we are looking for the person who talks down Scottish Enterprise the longest, the hardest and the loudest, it is Alex Neil.

The simple answer is that we expect Scottish Enterprise and all the other organisations for which the Executive is responsible to keep within their budgets. That has not happened in this case, and we are taking action. Today I announced firm, clear and strong action that is appropriate in the circumstances and we intend to deliver on that.

Derek Brownlee (South of Scotland) (Con): Will the minister clarify when he first became aware of the projected overspend at Scottish Enterprise? In relation to his response to Marilyn Livingstone, will he clarify whether the LECs will have access to budgetary powers but will have fewer resources than they have at present? Finally, will he tell us by how much Scottish Enterprise has increased Scotland's output and economic growth since the Executive took office?

Nicol Stephen: The seriousness of the situation at Scottish Enterprise became apparent only recently. Since then, we have been working hard with Scottish Enterprise to resolve the situation and to put in place the measures that I am announcing today.

The budget position for the local enterprise companies and other parts of the organisation will be made clear by the end of April. A great deal of hard work requires to be done in the next few weeks to ensure that the right decisions are made, that the key core services that Derek Brownlee, Marilyn Livingstone and Alex Neil mentioned are preserved, and that an appropriate level of decision making is retained. I believe that that is important for our local enterprise companies and their future.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Margaret Jamieson, to be followed by Margaret Curran. Sorry, I mean Frances Curran.

Margaret Jamieson (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (Lab): Can the minister reassure us that Scottish Enterprise will continue to take account of all Scottish Executive policies, including

local regeneration, while continuing to deliver on ministerial objectives?

Nicol Stephen: Yes I can. That is why I specifically referred to ministerial priorities in my statement—not only economic priorities, but social inclusion, closing the opportunity gap and regeneration. The recent launch of the regeneration statement by the First Minister, with me as Minister for Enterprise and Lifelong Learning and Malcolm Chisholm as Minister for Communities, emphasises the importance that we attach to the key regeneration projects around Scotland. It is another example of the very important contribution that Scottish Enterprise makes to all aspects of our economy in the widest sense. Many of our communities benefit from Scottish Enterprise initiatives and, although difficult decisions will still have to be made, I want to ensure that the strength of the organisation continues to be reflected in all parts of Scotland.

Frances Curran (West of Scotland) (SSP): Given that we have had a number of critical auditor's reports on Scottish Enterprise—one in 2003 and the current one—that highlight a complete lack of financial control, I am questioning the wisdom of throwing £0.5 billion at this quango. The minister does not know how many jobs it has created, and neither do we. I welcome the announcement about Careers Scotland being removed from Scottish Enterprise's remit. Is not the real issue that instead of an internal restructuring, we need to start to transfer those responsibilities—learning, skills, education, apprenticeships and regeneration—and the £0.5 billion that goes with them, back into the hands of publicly accountable local authorities? So far, the exercise has been a failure.

Nicol Stephen: I think that Margaret Curran—*[Interruption.]* I am sorry; I will start that again.

Frances Curran is simply wrong about those issues. It would be quite inappropriate to lose the opportunity of business involvement not only in the Scottish Enterprise national board but in the local enterprise companies. One of the great strengths of Scottish Enterprise is that there is very strong business support for its work.

There are different models of delivery to be seen in different countries around the world, but there is one absolute certainty: the Scottish Enterprise model and approach are admired and have been followed by many others. We need to build on Scottish Enterprise's strengths and continue to work with the organisation to get through these next few difficult weeks, to ensure that we stabilise the organisation and have a very successful future. That is the best way to strengthen the Scottish economy and I will work hard at it over the coming days and weeks.

Mr John Swinney (North Tayside) (SNP): I have a question about the relationship between the Executive and agencies such as Scottish Enterprise. When Scottish Water produced a business plan that was not to the satisfaction of ministers, the chairman of Scottish Water was removed. Now, Scottish Enterprise is delivering performance that is not to the satisfaction of ministers, but it is getting a £30 million handout from next year's financial settlement. How is that a consistent arrangement for the management of agencies that deliver Scottish Executive policy? How can the public be confident that the approach is subject to effective accountability and performance measures and that it can deliver value for money for taxpayers?

Nicol Stephen: We are determined to ensure effective delivery and performance; that is why I have announced the measures that we are taking today. We are not taking any of this lightly in any sense. We are taking the financial difficulties of Scottish Enterprise very seriously, which is why we have appointed outside advisers to consider the situation and to report back to the minister. We are giving strong support to the organisation's overall strategy, and to Sir John Ward and Jack Perry because we believe that their view of the future is the right view.

With the exception of the indication that I have given today about local enterprise companies and the continuing need for local decision making, the Executive is giving strong support to the proposals for Careers Scotland, the new approach to metroregional planning and the other measures that John Ward and Jack Perry have proposed.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That ends questions to the minister.

Curriculum Review

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Trish Godman): The next item of business is a debate on the curriculum review.

15:31

The Minister for Education and Young People (Peter Peacock): I am delighted to open this brief debate on curriculum reform, which follows the publication earlier this week of a progress report by the programme board for the curriculum review. The report is another important milestone on the road to the radical reform of our curriculum, which is, by any standards, a very major undertaking.

We need to remind ourselves why curriculum reform is so important. As the national debate on education in 2002 and the recent Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Education report indicated, the people of Scotland feel that there is much to commend in our education system. Indeed, the HMIE report confirmed that they are right to think so.

That said, I have consistently made it clear that it would be a major mistake to allow that strength to become complacency. Although the system is strong, it faces challenges from without and from within. For example, because of the demands of modern-day work, our young people must be more creative and enterprising; must be able to work and plan flexibly, solve problems and work collaboratively; and must have competence in core skills. Global competition means that our young people will have to compete for jobs as never before.

However, as we know, too many pupils, particularly boys in early secondary school, are disengaging from learning either because the pace of learning is not fast, exciting or engaging enough for them or because they feel that the learning is not relevant to their needs and aspirations. Too many children are leaving school to join what is called the not in employment, education or training—NEET—group. Moreover, we know that the vocational options in our system have not been available or respected enough in the past.

It was for those reasons that the curriculum review group was established in 2003. In November 2004, I welcomed its report “A Curriculum for Excellence”, which sets out the values, purposes and principles on which our future education system should be based.

“A Curriculum for Excellence” has caught the imagination of everyone who has engaged with its vision and central purpose. Succinctly and clearly, it articulates the four capacities that we are trying to create in young people—to be successful

learners, confident individuals, responsible citizens and effective contributors. Those represent the most powerful ideas that we have engaged with for a very long time at the centre of education.

The curriculum review is central to taking forward the wider reform agenda set out in our document “Ambitious, Excellent Schools”. The reforms will be a major liberator of the system and the teaching profession by opening the way to more personalisation and significantly more choice for pupils in what they learn and teachers in what they teach. Although I will continue to set clear national expectations about the framework and standards that Scotland needs, that framework will open up far more choice, flexibility and space for teachers, schools and pupils to operate within.

Thousands of teachers have engaged in dialogue and discussion about reform and I want that work to continue. Their efforts have already significantly influenced events and have helped to shape the findings of the curriculum review programme board's report. I am encouraged by the progress report, which is an important document that sets out real possibilities for change.

Mr Adam Ingram (South of Scotland) (SNP): The minister said that he set up the curriculum review in 2003. However, we received the latest progress report only this week and the indications are that we will not get detailed guidance until 2007. Is he concerned that it will take four years for the review to bear fruit?

Peter Peacock: I am not concerned about that, because we are talking about a radical and fundamental change to the heart of our education system, which is a colossal system that involves many thousands of people with ownership of different ideas and approaches. We need to take people with us and build consensus about the direction of travel, which is exactly what we seek to do.

The programme board's report continues to signal our approach, which is based on change that is owned and implemented by the profession, not instructed from the centre by Government. The report confirms that the whole school community has responsibility for developing the four capacities and that “A Curriculum for Excellence” offers a way of unifying the curriculum by embedding citizenship, sustainability, health and well-being, enterprise and creativity—which are often seen as add-ons—into the curriculum framework. The notion that everything that is done in school is part of the curriculum can help to provide more legitimate choices for pupils and proper recognition of wider achievement, not just attainment, in our schools.

I am pleased that the report suggests a way to simplify and prioritise learning. The report concludes that, by removing duplication within and throughout curriculum areas and by getting smarter at defining outcomes, more time and space can be found in the curriculum, which will enable greater depth and enjoyment and better—not just more—learning for children and young people. The board proposes that we should build an expectation that learning will be organised through subjects, interdisciplinary projects and studies and opportunities for personal achievement. However, subjects will inevitably always be part of how we structure learning—history teachers please note. I fully expect that, in future, we will have the current range of subjects in schools, although the contribution that subjects make to schools' purposes needs to adapt with the changing times and challenges.

Schools and teachers' jobs are, at root, about helping to create the responsible citizens, effective contributors, successful learners and confident individuals that we seek. In that context, subjects are about not only the subject but developing those capacities through the medium of the subject, a message that is of particular importance for secondary schools. Of course, that must be done in a way that does not restrict society's ability to develop young people who will become experts in all the fields of endeavour in which our society needs high-level expertise. Achieving that will continue to depend on high-quality subject teaching in schools.

I am pleased that the programme board report has a strong theme of progression from age three through to 18. I placed emphasis on secondary 1 to S3 in my response to the original curriculum review group's work. The focus on S1 to S3 as a stage that requires attention was deliberate. If we get that part of the three-to-18 continuum right, we will have made a major contribution to addressing some of the most significant challenges that we face. However, if the emphasis on S1 to S3 made us consider that stage in isolation, we would have fallen into a trap. The challenge is to maintain smooth and continuous progression from early secondary into the senior stages by building on a strong foundation of skills and knowledge. I will ask the programme board to pay particular attention to that as dialogue and planning progress.

Another programme board proposal that I find extremely interesting is the idea of defining progression based on experiences and outcomes. The idea is to use "I have" statements for experiences and "I can" statements for outcomes. The programme board also proposes the introduction of a new achievement framework to support teachers in planning progression in early learning that is broad, enriching and challenging.

The board proposes fewer but more widely spaced levels than we have in the present five-to-14 curriculum. The current levels have been criticised for having perverse effects on learning and teaching and for adding to teacher and pupil workload without adding value.

I agree that the framework for progression needs to be simplified. I will consider carefully the proposals on levels, although my initial view is that a system of three levels in primary has much to commend it. The levels that the programme board propose are intended to support teachers' professional judgments in planning and structuring learning and progression. They will also help with reporting progress to parents. However, I share the view that the levels do not exist to provide a basis for testing at specific stages, such as at the end of primary 1.

The programme board also proposes a new approach to how the curriculum is organised. I have made no secret of my desire for greater choice and opportunity for pupils. Therefore, I am pleased that the programme board proposes a move away from the current modal structure to a new approach that better addresses young people's needs and interests. I am attracted to the board's direction of travel on that. However, some may feel that the board has not gone far enough in describing how subjects could be grouped in the new structure. I am sure that the board will want to hear more views on that as work progresses.

Overall, the board's approach could help to deliver changes to the existing structures to allow a broader basis of learning with more scope for flexibility and choice. Those changes will result in a curriculum that: provides greater motivation, challenge and opportunity for learners; is more unified and provides smoother pathways for progression; and is more flexible, with more freedom for teachers and lecturers to exercise their professional skills. I welcome the board's work and ideas and I will respond fully once I have had an opportunity to digest the full implications.

I have always been conscious that the process of curriculum reform would raise fundamental and challenging questions about assessment and qualifications. I am also acutely conscious of just how influential—many would say far too influential—our qualifications system has been in determining what is taught in our schools. Therefore, I intend to consider what the implications are for our qualifications system and I hope to outline the direction of travel on that before the summer.

I look forward to the contributions from Parliament today, which in due course will help us to make decisions on these important matters.

15:40

Fiona Hyslop (Lothians) (SNP): The Scottish National Party is pleased to have the opportunity to debate progress on the curriculum review. We called for such a review and are supportive of its aim of trying to return the capacity of teachers to use their professionalism to drive forward learning and teaching. Our job today is to assess progress and we will do so in a constructive way that will raise criticism and concern where necessary but which will provide support, encouragement and ideas for progress in equal measure.

There is much that is good in Scottish education, but it is essential that we drive forward continuous improvement, to challenge a system in which some pupils perform well but the performance of a significant minority is flat-lining. The bulk of children are doing fine, in a world in which, increasingly, fine or okay will not be enough. Talents, skill, ingenuity, creativity and ability to learn will be the test of a nation in which productivity of labour may have been the test in the past.

The curriculum review could be a real catalyst for continuous change and improvement in Scottish education. It could help to liberate teachers truly to use their professionalism to engage and stimulate children in learning. It could help to lay the foundations for a serious lifelong learning agenda, which, in a fast-moving world, will shift the emphasis from what is learned to how it is learned. But will it? I am concerned that the date for implementation has slipped by a year, but I am more concerned that Scotland should get the curriculum right. It may have taken almost 10 years for Labour in power to get to this stage, but the direction is right. Educationists have known that this is the right course of action for some time and the concern is whether there is enough energy and drive from the minister to propel it forward.

The Government must ensure that the net effect is change for pupils, not just for policy or that stimulates the Executive policy makers and generates deep and meaningful debate in the numerous workshops and presentations but does not touch those who matter: the children of Scotland. My biggest worry is how the review will be implemented, embraced, resourced and supported and what the Executive, in its leadership role, is doing to remove the barriers to progress. Too few teachers have seen, heard or read about the review to give me much confidence that it is being delivered properly.

The American educator Larry Cuban talks of educational change as a "hurricane at sea"—huge waves on the surface and unruffled calm on the sea bed. An intrusive, quick-fix implementation of curriculum reform would be just that: lots of

surface activity, but little change where it matters, which is in the classroom. There are huge waves of thinking in the curriculum review, but they may not reach the sea bed. I fear genuinely, from feedback I have had, that the curriculum review is operating like a closed, exclusive, secret club. That feedback is from people who are involved in the curriculum review—particularly from the science section—who were not quite sure what it was about. That might be part of the evolutionary approach, but we should read the signals and take action. I have been pleased to see reference to developing informed attitudes to science, as science is not just for scientists; it is essential for modern citizens, with ethical challenges ahead for people and government.

There are concerns that the Executive may not be brave enough to ride the waves and to push for a curriculum for a modern Scotland that embraces, for example, the perspective of Professor Tom Devine on how Scotland could develop a positive internationalist sense of self by having its history as a spine through the curriculum. The science perspective is challenging and interesting, and begs the question of what is taught and when. Languages should be taught sooner and longer, but not necessarily at the same intensity at each stage. We must excite and stimulate interest in science early but specialise later.

If the minister is seeking political direction from the Parliament, the SNP will step up to the plate and offer some direction, critically but constructively. The curriculum review is right to encourage a cultural change in education, empowering teachers to grab the initiative, be creative and be trusted for their professionalism. The review addresses the key areas of reducing content; making connections through interdisciplinary teaching; and lowering summative assessment and engagement through innovative pedagogy—all good things. It is right to be evolutionary, but revolutionary thinking and drive are needed to deliver properly. The cultural shift has both professional and political buy-in, but a systemic problem needs to be addressed that I am pleased the minister mentioned in the latter part of his speech.

The push of the curriculum review is in danger of being held back by the pull of a strong alliance of forces in the shape of quality assurance and assessment. HMIE and the Scottish Qualifications Authority may be pulling in a different direction, in a tug-of-war with Scottish education and the curriculum review, as the minister acknowledges. The job is to harness those forces and to get them to work in the same direction. We have a systemic problem in that we send our children to school for longer than societies in most other European countries, yet we trail on the time that is used to teach languages, physical education and Scottish

history. What are children doing in all the extra time? They sit tests, tests and more tests. The bureaucracy is distorting the system and is starting to become the driver in education, rather than the responder.

This week, the chief executive of the English Qualifications and Curriculum Authority said that he wants to reduce exams by a third and admitted to assessment overload. We have long argued that we must take the bureaucracy out of education. We have had promises, but little has been delivered, and that is the real challenge. The exam-only system was replaced with a system that introduced continuous assessment for a good reason. However, all that has happened is that we have got an overloaded exam system plus continuous assessment, which is punishing innovation and creativity. That is what we must relieve. Exams must serve the curriculum; the curriculum must not serve the exams. We need teaching for lifelong learning, not teaching for a short-term test. Education in Scotland is still a world of constant assessment, and we need to address that.

A certain eight-year-old who is working towards his level C asked me if the levels went up to level Z. A child of eight thinks that the world of school will, one day, be gone for eternity, but the idea that there is an alphabet of levels to go through brings a different perspective. I applaud the move to have fewer levels, but I think that only one is being removed. As the minister will know, in Finland the inputs of the system rather than the outcomes from the children are tested. The Finns looked askance at us when we asked what they did on testing in primary schools. However, with so many pupils staying on, having one system for S4 and S6 makes sense.

So, where do we go and what are the final messages for the minister? Let us address the issue of assessment and quality assurance. We must not let HMIE become an inhibitor of progress—I do not think that it wants to be, but there is a perception that it will be. The Conservatives may want head teachers to be leaders in budgets; we want them to be teachers in learning. The minister has powers over funding that he must use wisely to harness all the forces of education in one direction and to remove the barriers to progress as well as the inherent contradictions.

I ask the minister to remember the words of “Scots, wha hae”, which he and I sang, sadly, recently. They are words of bravery and it is time for bravery and leadership in education.

15:48

Lord James Douglas-Hamilton (Lothians)
(Con): I congratulate Fiona Hyslop on her

constructive speech, which contained many valuable points. I also welcome “A Curriculum for Excellence” and the Executive’s open engagement with Parliament in seeking the views of members while the consultation on the review is on-going and before the Executive’s response. The curriculum is of fundamental importance to Scotland’s education, so cross-party co-operation is highly appropriate and desirable. A review of the curriculum is essential and the efforts of the curriculum review group are to be highly commended.

Many teachers say that they are unable to tailor their lessons to pupils’ needs and interests to the extent that they wish because the frequency and nature of assessments cause them to focus on the next assessment or exam. Concerns have been expressed that the curriculum is too cluttered and that there is too much duplication between years and subjects. The establishment of a cohesive structure that will address the progression of children’s learning from three to 18 is an extremely valuable—indeed, invaluable—exercise.

Much in the curriculum review offers new and refreshing perspectives on teaching and learning methodology and on the nature and progression of school subjects. Of significant interest is the review’s focus on encouraging teachers to engage with four areas that will expand the capacities of children—so that they can be successful learners, confident individuals, responsible citizens and effective contributors to society. Teachers are encouraged to develop their own ways of relating those four areas to their own subjects.

Other interesting ideas, which are still out for consultation, are the introduction of fewer and broader levels in the five-to-14 curriculum—which Fiona Hyslop mentioned; alternative ways of assessing and recording achievement; and greater flexibility to tailor lessons to the needs and interests of pupils.

However, some of the proposals in the curriculum review are more concerning. First, the review says:

“curriculum areas and subjects will be refreshed and re-focused”.

That could have implications for the teaching of subjects such as history and the sciences, whose status as standalone subjects could be threatened. We must ensure that there are enough teachers to meet the demand for such subjects and for foreign languages. I mention the latter because the demand for qualified young people with foreign language skills is likely to increase in the years to come.

We have a duty to parents to find a balance between flexibility and accountability. Most parents will seek assurances that their children have

access to the knowledge and skills that will stand them in good stead for later life. Many parents will hope that refocusing curriculum areas will not blur the lines between subjects and bring about a diminution of rigour and standards.

Secondly, the curriculum review proposes that

“Expectations will be described in terms of experiences as well as broad, significant outcomes.”

Although we would welcome any move to give teachers greater autonomy to get on with the job in hand and to allow them to plan for greater depth, enrichment and consolidation of learning, it is also important that parents have meaningful reports on their children’s academic progress—just as it is important that children have experience of formal assessment before they sit external exams. We urge the review group to ensure an appropriate balance in the curriculum between testing and space for other learning.

Finally, we have long argued that head teachers and teachers should have more autonomy over school budgets and the school ethos. If teachers and schools are more able to respond to local need, that will be a significant factor in addressing problems of disengagement. At the Education Committee, a witness from Her Majesty’s Inspectorate of Education commented:

“In the past three years, about one in 12 of the secondary schools that we have inspected has had wide-ranging issues of ethos, discipline and behaviour that involved more than just one or two departments.”

He continued:

“It is clear that a small minority of primary schools have serious problems of disaffection and demotivation.”—*[Official Report, Education Committee, 8 June 2005; c 2495-96.]*

Consideration of the curriculum is an extremely valuable exercise and I expect that many fruitful ideas will arise from it. However, we must guard against imposing too much paperwork on teachers. Intolerable pressure should not be inflicted on teachers as a result of too much paperwork and every effort should be made to ensure that they are not put under severe stress.

I look forward to hearing the Executive’s response to the review. I urge the minister and his deputy to take into account the concerns that will be raised in the debate. The review cannot by itself cure all the ills of the education system, but it is certainly a step in the right direction. We warmly welcome it.

15:54

Iain Smith (North East Fife) (LD): I welcome this afternoon’s debate on the curriculum review, and I welcome the document published this week by the review group.

The biggest advantage in our curriculum review is that we have put teachers at the heart of it. Although the overall direction has been given by the Scottish Executive, it is the teaching profession that is taking forward “A Curriculum for Excellence”. It is important that we do not have a situation in which the minister determines what kind of teaching of reading every pupil should get in every primary school throughout the nation, as happens in some other parts of the United Kingdom.

“A Curriculum for Excellence: Progress and Proposals” is an excellent progress report that sets ambitious timetables. If we can achieve all that the report intends to achieve and have it implemented by August 2008, we will be doing extremely well and future generations will benefit.

I welcome the opportunity to speak because our party has been calling for the implementation of a number of the measures that the report contains for some considerable time. At the most recent election, our five headline proposals on education were to recruit 3,000 extra teachers to reduce class sizes; to abolish the current system of national tests for five to 14-year-olds to give teachers more time to teach and children more time to learn; to smooth the move from nursery to primary school by providing a full-time transition year for children aged five; to build and renovate hundreds of schools; and to give pupils the chance to develop vocational skills. Those key ambitions for education are all being delivered by the Executive.

The curriculum review programme board’s proposals can create genuine opportunities for improved, relevant and enjoyable learning that will motivate young people in their education and better prepare them for life after school. The results of the Education Committee’s inquiry into pupil motivation, which we hope to publish shortly, show that it is important that pupils feel that their education is relevant. In the past, that has often not been the case. It is important that we make the subjects in the curriculum seem important to young people’s lives if we want them to remember the lessons of how to learn throughout their lives, rather than just until they pass their next exam.

At school, I enjoyed doing hard sums and things such as quadratic equations and calculus, but by the time I had sat the exam and come back for the next school year seven weeks later, I had to start learning how to do them all over again because I had forgotten what I had learned. That was because the subject was abstract and was not relevant to anything in particular. We must ensure that when we teach pupils how to learn, the subjects of their studies are relevant to their lives. That is why I welcome the overall approach to progression through learning, which the progress report refers to as

“the child’s journey through the curriculum”,

and the changes that have been suggested.

The inquiries that the Education Committee has done into pupil motivation and early years education have revealed the importance of the transition stages in education, such as the transition between early years education and primary school. The transition between primary and secondary school is even more important because that is when so many of our children seem to go backwards in their educational achievements.

The progress report addresses that issue by considering the whole curriculum as a continuum that covers children from the age of three to the age of 18 rather than splitting it up into a pre-school curriculum, a primary curriculum and a secondary curriculum. Its aim is to build on the best practices of one stage before the next stage is moved into. Achieving that goal is vital if we are to make significant progress in our education system.

I would go further than the report in proposing that primary 1 should start at the age of six rather than the age of five. The next stage of the curriculum review should consider when formal primary 1 education should start. At the moment, I think that it starts too early and that the education system should incorporate another year in which the nursery education approach is maintained. However, that is an issue for consideration in future manifestos.

In politics, one should never use one’s best lines when committees are meeting in private session. Fiona Hyslop nicked one of my better lines about qualifications. I said that the purpose of the exam system should be to reflect the curriculum and that the purpose of the curriculum should not be to reflect the exam system. That is important. We must ensure that we use the exam system to assess properly what pupils have achieved through their learning in the curriculum. If the curriculum is designed correctly, assessment will provide proper guidance to future employers on pupils’ achievements in the education system.

The approach that the progress report suggests is the right way forward. It examines how assessment can reflect what children achieve through the education that they receive. More specifically, it considers the education needs of the S4 to S6 group of pupils and what they require from the more formal examination system.

All in all, this is an excellent progress report, although a lot more needs to be done. A lot of drive is needed. I am sure that the ministers will continue to deliver and that Scotland’s education system will benefit from the delivery of the measures in this document over the next two years.

16:00

Dr Sylvia Jackson (Stirling) (Lab): First, I declare an interest as a former teacher and teacher trainer and as a member of the Educational Institute of Scotland.

It is important to remember that the Standards in Scotland’s Schools etc Act 2000 established that education should be

“directed to the development of the personality, talents and mental and physical abilities of the child or young person to their fullest potential”.

We should never lose sight of that.

The five national priorities are also important: achievement and attainment; a framework for learning; inclusion and equality; values and citizenship; and learning for life. As we know, in 2002, the Scottish Executive held a national debate on education. The minister opened his speech by saying that many in the national debate had said that they wanted to keep a substantial amount of what was in the curriculum. No one in the debate argued for a more prescriptive national system. People said that they wanted the system to retain its flexibility; its breadth and depth; the quality of the support materials that help teachers to deliver; and the comprehensive principle.

However, some compelling arguments were also made for change, one of which related to the issue of boys failing, which members have mentioned. Other issues included the need to reduce overcrowding in the curriculum and the need to make learning more enjoyable, as too many pupils are switching off. People also mentioned the need for better connections between the various stages of the three-to-18 curriculum—Iain Smith spoke a bit about that—and the need for a better balance between academic and vocational subjects. That last point has been made in many debates and all of us are aware of the need for more vocational education. People also spoke about the need to ensure that assessment and certification support learning—Fiona Hyslop raised a number of points in that regard—and that more choice should be made available so that the needs of individual young people can be met.

It was against that backdrop that ministers established the curriculum review group in November 2003, the result of whose work was “A Curriculum for Excellence”. That document is important because it examines the values, purpose and principles of schools that are key to the process of national reform. Discussion on those issues led to a general agreement that we need to do something about the curriculum. It was agreed that reform was needed to make learning more active, challenging and enjoyable. There are good reasons to embark on change and the progress report is a welcome start in that regard.

The curriculum review programme board's report on the three-to-18 curriculum is a key element in taking forward the agenda for change. Among other things, the report confirms that the whole school has a responsibility for the development of the capabilities that we look for in our young people. The report also confirmed the importance of strong leadership and ambition. A lot of early work was done by Dr Pamela Munn on school ethos.

"A Curriculum for Excellence" offers a way to unify the curriculum by embedding such activities as citizenship, health and well-being, enterprise and creativity into the framework. Iain Smith spoke about the importance of relevance in the curriculum. He may have seen the recent television programme in which, against a background of rising debt, it was suggested that more financial management should be included in the curriculum. Frank McAveety will speak on sport and the important work that is going on in some schools in that regard, including in schools in my constituency. "A Curriculum for Excellence" is the vehicle for increasing coherence both in and across the curriculum.

I will turn to issues of concern to the EIS. Obviously, the issue of support for teachers is at the forefront of the EIS agenda. Things are moving forward at the moment in that regard as a result of discussions between the Scottish Executive, local authorities and the EIS. The EIS welcomes most of the Executive's proposals. In particular, it welcomes the Executive's clear statement of the values that are fundamental to education. The EIS welcomes the Executive's commitment to comprehensive education and its recognition of the strengths of Scottish education and of the role that teachers play in taking decisions on the curriculum at all levels. The EIS also welcomes the Executive's acknowledgement that achievement is more than about attainment and its recognition of the importance of assessment.

There is also a clear timetable for development and implementation. At the heart of the document, however, is the agreement that was established in "A Teaching Profession for the 21st Century" about the reprofessionalisation of teachers and teaching. The minister reconfirmed that that is what he is trying to do, in order to take teachers with us as we go through the process.

The EIS has long argued for the ending of the gathering of five-to-14 results in formats that can readily be turned into league tables, and the clear commitment by ministers to doing that is particularly welcome. I welcome the challenge of those changes in the context of on-going negotiation with the EIS, local authorities and others.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Murray Tosh):

As I regularly switch off Sylvia Jackson's microphone, I have let her finish her speech this time, but I remind other members that we are on four-minute speeches this afternoon, not six-minute speeches. However, I think that I have time to give everyone speaking in the open debate five minutes.

16:06

Mr Stewart Maxwell (West of Scotland) (SNP):

Like Sylvia Jackson, I should start with a declaration of interest, not as a former teacher but as an ex-pupil and, perhaps more relevantly, as the father of an eight-year-old who is currently going through the system. Although I take great pleasure in the successes that my daughter enjoys, I am also concerned about some of the pressures that our children are under in the current structure.

Like all the members who have spoken so far, I welcomed the review. It is incredibly important that we never let the system lapse or leave it to be ignored. The system must move on and evolve at all stages and must be kept relevant and up to date. That is particularly important, because children have to be taught how to learn. They should not be made simply to remember dates and a series of pieces of information; they must have skills for the future, particularly in the world that we face today and in the knowledge economy that children now grow up in. The world of work that they will enter is much more dependent on their ability to learn, to change, to evolve and to develop, and they must have the skills to do that.

I am generally pleased with the thrust of the review so far, which has much to commend it, but there are some concerns. The minister touched on a couple of those in his opening speech. There are some phrases that I furrowed my brow about. For example, there are references to "curriculum areas" rather than to subjects; "curriculum areas" sounds fine and there must be a cross-cutting approach in many areas, but some teachers and parents are worried about the loss or possible downgrading of certain subjects. I was also struck by the phrase

"Substantial simplification and prioritisation of the curriculum".

If that means what I think it means, that is good, but I hope that it does not mean lesson downgrading. I am sure that it does not and that the minister will ensure that that is not the case.

As I said, there is a great deal of concern about what is happening in certain areas. The fear is that that will result in certain subjects being lost. I know that other members will mention their own favourite subjects—I heard Sylvia Jackson say

that Frank McAveety will talk about physical education. I certainly want to put in a plea for the social sciences, because it is extremely important that the social sciences—geography, economics, modern studies and particularly history—are kept in the curriculum. I have an honours degree in social sciences and have no doubt that those subjects provide a broad grounding in a range of areas to do with society and the approach that we take in our modern, western society.

I make a general plea for social sciences, but I want to talk about history in particular. There has been a great deal of concern and worry, as the minister said in his opening remarks, that history might be removed and spread among other subjects and not be taught as a separate core subject. If we do not know what our history is, we are lost, as individuals and as a country. We have to know where we came from in order to understand our place in the world and where we are going in the future. I see Peter Peacock nodding at that; I am sure that he understands the importance of that subject.

Teaching history, particularly Scottish history, is vital if we are to understand our place in the world. It allows us to put Scotland in its context, in the past, present and future. It would be better if we taught more social science and more history rather than less. When I was at school the amount of history—in particular Scottish history—that I was taught was almost zero, if it was not zero. I was not taught about the Celts, Wallace, Bruce or the wars of independence. I was not even taught about the declaration of Arbroath. There was nothing in the curriculum about Scotland's ancient trading and economic links with other parts of Europe or its cultural links. There was nothing about the Darien experiment or even the act of union. That was a failing in the history that I was taught. I had to learn about those subjects as an adult. I think that the teaching of Scottish history has improved over the years and I hope that that improvement continues. I do not want there to be a step back.

An agreement seems to be emerging—I hope that it is—that there is too much testing in our schools. My daughter has just gone through testing as a seven-year-old. It was a frightening experience for her and her classmates. I watched as they worked themselves up to high doh about what was about to happen. They were told that the tests were important and that it was essential that they did well. Weeks were spent in the classroom preparing them for the tests and they were given what I can only call past papers to do at home. Those seven-year-olds were extremely worried about the test. It seemed to me that the worry factor was what they got from the experience—they gained nothing of relevance to their education. Teachers in our schools should be

given the freedom to teach, to use their judgment and to alert parents when there is a problem. We should deal with the matter in that way rather than through fixed testing.

16:11

Bill Butler (Glasgow Anniesland) (Lab): I welcome the opportunity to participate in the debate on the curriculum review, which was set in train by the Executive in November 2003. As members know, the result of all the endeavour was “A Curriculum for Excellence”, which identified the values on which we believe the curriculum should be based, the purpose of the three-to-18 school curriculum and the results that we wish young people to achieve, and the principles that educators will use to carry forward the curriculum.

I believe that the continuing discussion based on “A Curriculum for Excellence” will engender the debate that is necessary for the development of learning and teaching in this century. We must acknowledge that, although the present curriculum has strengths, too many young people in Scotland still do not achieve all that they are capable of.

The Government's document “Ambitious, Excellent Schools—Our Agenda for Action”, which was published in October 2004, acknowledges that

“the performance of the lowest attaining 20% of pupils in S4 has remained flat in recent years”.

Fiona Hyslop referred to that point. The document continues:

“and around 15% of 16-19 year olds are not in education, employment or training.”

That is unacceptable. We also know that many—but not all—boys are underperforming. That deficiency must be remedied. Major challenges remain with regard to weaknesses in leadership in a small percentage of schools. That cannot be allowed to continue. The completion of all that we can do to refashion the curriculum to enable all our young people to compete and reach the highest possible level of attainment in an increasingly complex world must be treated as a matter of some urgency.

In the short time that is available to me, I do not want to concentrate on the purely academic or cognitive domain, important though that is—although I agree that we should not be obsessed with testing. I will focus on another aspect of the curriculum rather than on specific subject areas. I will home in on the totality of experiences that are planned for young people throughout their education. At all stages from three to 18 the curriculum will include learning through the ethos and life of a school as a community, and through interdisciplinary projects and opportunities for personal achievement, for example in debating.

As a former teacher of some experience, I know that the school as a community and the particular ethos that is fostered are essential prerequisites for successful learning. As Lord James Douglas-Hamilton said, the wider life of the school and such things as community events and school projects help to make pupils successful learners, confident individuals, responsible citizens and effective contributors. The affective domain is just as important in turning out the successful, rounded individuals that we wish all our young people to become.

I will mention two examples of that vital aspect of the curriculum from my own constituency. Just over a year ago, I had the pleasure of welcoming Jordanhill primary school pupil council to the Parliament. The pupils engaged me in a question-and-answer session, which was direct, businesslike and very much to the point. They took part in a natural, professional fashion, which many adults—including many members—would do well to emulate. I believe that that is the result of a curriculum that is based on a flexible learning environment that focuses on the individual development of confidence and various high-level skills and on the inculcation of the need to work together as a team to achieve certain objectives. I believe that the approach that is exemplified by that pupil council is being copied throughout Scotland—I hope that it is.

At the other end of my constituency is Drumchapel high school. Members might be aware of the work that the staff there have undertaken to develop an atmosphere that positively encourages the development of responsible citizens and effective contributors among indigenous students, students who are refugees and students seeking refugee status. However, that has not been the work of only the past 18 months.

I first visited Drumchapel high school soon after my election in 2000 and I have been back to the school on a number of occasions. What struck me on that first encounter—it has been reinforced ever since—was the way in which, through various interdisciplinary projects and opportunities for personal achievement, indigenous Scots and our new Scots worked together, each group influencing the other in positive ways. It was so apparent that it was almost tangible. That type of result, as well as academic success, which is necessary, is what I want a modernised curriculum to deliver. It should be a curriculum that helps to develop our young people and enable them to stay the course.

16:16

Robin Harper (Lothians) (Green): I, too, welcome the opportunity to contribute to this open

debate on the curriculum review. The ethos behind “A Curriculum for Excellence” reflects much of my and my party’s educational thinking and it is a welcome development. I have greatly enjoyed watching its progress. However, we are still a long way from where we would like to be in the development of the curriculum. I think that the minister would agree with me on that.

Robert Brown was present with me at an excellent debate last night on the contribution of the Duke of Edinburgh’s award scheme. In that context, I want to return to the issue of outdoor education because I have something new to say on it. The curriculum for excellence review talks about

“confident individuals, responsible citizens and effective contributors”.

The Duke of Edinburgh’s award scheme is licensed to operate in half of Scotland’s schools—perhaps one day it will be licensed to operate in all schools—and the work that it does with 20,000 young people in the country contributes towards creating successful learners. In a sense, outdoor education’s contribution covers all four of the main thrusts of “A Curriculum for Excellence”, which is about what we want to enable our young people to become.

However, there is concern about what can happen to outdoor education in schools and the situation needs to be addressed urgently. In Scotland’s schools, there are only two or three full-time outdoor education teachers—in fact, there may be only one left because I know that one has been reallocated from a school in West Lothian. The outdoor education teachers whom we used to have are steadily growing old and leaving the profession. When it comes to discussing outdoor education in the groups that the minister is setting up, there will be few people who can add anything to the discussion because the expertise is gradually disappearing.

However, there is residual and growing expertise in voluntary organisations, which the Executive has supported. I am concerned, though, because if we really wanted to begin to develop outdoor education, the Executive would need a 10 or 20-year plan to train teachers in order to restore outdoor education in schools to its original pre-eminence. There are courses on the shelf at Moray House school of education—and perhaps elsewhere in Scotland—waiting to be delivered, but there is no money to support the students who would dearly love to take such courses.

The Duke of Edinburgh’s Award has informed me that the training grant for voluntary organisations has just been withdrawn, which will make it difficult for the scheme to train its own volunteers.

What will happen? Outdoor education can make a huge contribution to helping the 20 per cent of young people who, often for reasons of low self-esteem, do not perform well in our education system—Bill Butler mentioned such young people. Outdoor education can help at-risk children and children who are at risk of exclusion, as well as young people who truant or offend. We heard plenty of evidence of that in last night's members' business debate, which was attended by some members who are here.

I was glad to see that the place of art, music and technical studies is well recognised in the curriculum review programme board's paper. However, the document makes no mention of outdoor education or sustainable development, including international sustainable development. I would have liked such matters to be included, because much thinking is going on in the Executive about them. Indeed, the Executive supports a sustainable development group. I did not track down mention of sustainable development—

Peter Peacock: It is there.

Robin Harper: I will be delighted if the minister can tell me that it is mentioned.

Outdoor education can play an important part in the development of our children. In Norway, all primary schools have a duty to give every child one day a week out of school. We are nowhere near having such an approach; let us look forward to introducing it in future.

16:21

Brian Adam (Aberdeen North) (SNP): I would like people in Scotland, especially young people, to regard scientists as heroes and not villains.

Members: Special pleading, again.

Brian Adam: Absolutely. There is an awful lot of cynicism about science. Hardly a few weeks go by without our being told that a wonder drug has been discovered that will not be available for five years or that scientists have cooked up something in their laboratories that is disastrous and will kill us all. That is not the reality of science.

In appendix 2 of the curriculum review programme board's paper, under the heading, "Science Rationale", it says:

"Science is part of our heritage and part of our everyday lives at work, at leisure or in the home."

We need to convey that in an enthusiastic way, to encourage youngsters to engage in science, engineering and a variety of technological opportunities that will help them to have fulfilling lives and will help us, too, by helping to grow our economy. We have a proud science heritage: we

have a disproportionate number of Nobel laureates and we have had and still have wonderful scientists. However, I am not sure that our scientists are regarded as heroes. We must hold up scientists as positive, not negative, role models.

Appendix 2 continues:

"Everyone needs to have the capacity to engage as confident individuals and effective communicators in informed debate".

We do not always have that capacity in relation to science. Many controversies have arisen recently. For example, we heard about the risks associated with BSE and we were told that variant CJD could be a rampant problem, but the reality has been different. There might eventually be a problem, but it is interesting that recent figures show that as the BSE problem has decreased, so has the vCJD problem. I do not in any way minimise the problem that has hit individuals and families. However, the science around the issue was poorly explained, dramatised and blown up out of all proportion. We need to educate ourselves and particularly young people to understand risk and statistics, so that we can make a genuine assessment of the risks.

The risks that are associated with eating beef on the bone were very small, yet we ended up with an inappropriate policy based on what was, to my mind, misplaced science. We ended up having a big debate, which did not help. The same sort of thing could well be said about the risks that are associated with avian flu. Perhaps some of us who have argued against genetically modified crops should consider how we have dealt with the GMO debate. The same could apply to nuclear power.

Science is not always absolute, but we can give people a measurement of the risk or probability of something happening and allow them to make the judgment themselves.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You have one minute left.

Brian Adam: If we can educate our children to understand that better than some of the present adult generation, we will do society as a whole a big favour.

The review document contains a reference to unhelpful repetition across the curriculum, and I am sure that, in itself, that is true. However, one of the most successful educational techniques that I have come across involves people being told something three times. I do not accept that that is unhelpful repetition. First, we tell people what we are going to tell them; secondly, we tell them; thirdly, we tell them what we have told them. The repetition means that the lesson sticks. If we can do that in a dramatic way, so that people can engage, we are much more likely to be successful. The word "repetition" might itself be unhelpful in

the document, although I am sure that it was not meant in that way.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Please come to a close.

Brian Adam: The reinforcement of ideas is actually good.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You really need to close, Mr Adam.

Brian Adam: Yes.

Some of those people who are regarded, and need to be regarded—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Mr Adam, your time has expired. I must ask you to close.

Brian Adam: Right, Presiding Officer.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That was an heroic attempt.

16:27

Mr Frank McAveety (Glasgow Shettleston) (Lab): Your face was like thunder just then, Presiding Officer. I hope that I can make a positive contribution over the next few minutes to cheer you up, at least a little bit—although perhaps my time will go down now.

I do not believe that there was ever a golden age, when teachers were happy—and I speak as a former teacher. There is a range of teachers in my immediately family and I have never had a conversation with them in my life, either when I was young or since becoming an adult, that did not end in the conclusion that those who make the decisions do not really understand teachers and the wish that, if only those people would get out of the teachers' road, teaching would be a wonderful thing. It was even said that schools would be great places if there were no pupils in them, although that was among the more extreme contributions.

There has been a pretty consistent view in the debate that we are moving in the right direction as far as curriculum design is concerned. In a sense, we will probably never arrive at a final destination because the goalposts are constantly moving. However, we should try to develop a curriculum that reflects where people are today, while being influenced by their past—for those who care about the development of history in schools. As a former teacher of history, I recognise the concerns about the subject losing emphasis in the curriculum.

By their nature, teachers are fairly sceptical. They have an incredible streak of dark pessimism, which is a reasonably good mind frame to have when operating in some schools in Scotland. One of the successes that our curriculum design should build on is the success that Scotland has made of the comprehensive school system—although I

acknowledge that there have been passionate debates on that point. The system has been an incredible success if we consider the range of individuals who are involved in it, from all different social backgrounds.

What we have not yet cracked is the big problem that probably resulted in the changes in exams in the early 60s and the introduction of what was then called the O-grade. That was done not because the youngsters at the very bottom were not doing so well, but mainly because those people who thought that they were not doing so badly did not get a higher leaving certificate. We therefore invented the O-grade to ensure that their parents were not so disappointed at the end of four or five years' education. We have never addressed the issue of those who, according to the latest terminology, are now euphemistically called NEETS—the phalanx of NEETS, if I may choose a collective noun for those who are not in education, employment or training. In essence, we want to find a structure in the curriculum that addresses their needs.

The curriculum review's development of the idea that everything is continuous from the ages of three to 18 is very welcome. It will not be easy to implement, but we should all put our shoulder to the wheel when it comes to that commitment.

We need to get away from the sterile debate that emerged in the 1960s with the real demand of the development of comprehensive education, when it was thought that vocational education was not always suitable. I think that vocational education still has a role to play. Evidence from the secondary schools that serve the community that I represent shows that there is no doubt that the vocational focus has assisted a number of academic and non-academic individuals.

The third big issue on which the curriculum review touches is that it is important to consider not just how we get knowledge, through the repetition of information for example—important though that is—but how we negotiate that knowledge, which is the real test. Brian Adam mentioned repetition. I am fond of quoting a poem by Alexander Scott called, "Scotch Education", which consists of two lines:

"A telt ye
A telt ye."

I am a Glaswegian, so my third repetition would be, "Ah'm no tellin ye again."

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

Mr McAveety: Stewart Stevenson likes to say, "A telt ye."

Stewart Stevenson: On the subject of repetition, the Royal Air Force trains its pilots by a

method called “see one, do one, teach one”, whereby the instructor shows the pilot how to do something, the pilot shows that they can do it and then the pilot teaches the instructor how to do it.

Mr McAveety: Sylvia Jackson said that I would want to talk about sport. As members can see from my svelte figure, I have been a success in that over the years. The critical issue is how we use sport and extra-curricular activities to enhance the curriculum.

I will finish with a wonderful story from Jimmy McGregor, who taught in Petershill junior school in the wonderfully named Auchentoshan Terrace in Springburn in the 1950s. He took a group of young scallywags from Petershill to Drymen for the day, because he wanted them to understand communion with nature. Little Johnny and his pals were looking at a wonderful bird—a blackbird, I should say—that was perched on a post. Jimmy asked little Johnny what he was thinking, hoping that his reply would be about the communion between the creature, the land and the seasons. Johnny’s reply was, “I’m thinking, Mr McGregor, that if I had a boulder in my haun right noo, I could knock its heid aff frae here.” That shows the gulf between reality and experience. I hope that we can do more through the curriculum review.

16:32

Margo MacDonald (Lothians) (Ind): The minister’s report card to date would be that he works well and shows promise. As Frank McAveety said, there is still a gap between the intentions and the objectives that Peter Peacock has set out, which are being amplified through the curriculum review.

I am old enough to remember a lot of fashions in education, some of which were positively destructive in that they destroyed the morale of teachers, which I will come to later. I applaud fully the approach of grouping subjects. I have been nipping the minister’s ear about grouping physical education, home economics and health education and to think of them as a group of subjects that are taught holistically.

I will stray into the territory of Robin Harper and others and say that history could be taught along with philosophy and perhaps economics. I would like philosophy to be introduced into the curriculum, given that we are talking about growing the whole child into the rounded, developed adult. The message is group them, but do not merge them. There is a big difference. If the minister indicates that he is not going to merge history with other subjects, which is the example on everyone’s lips, I will be a happy MSP.

The nub of the matter is teacher training, which Robin Harper quite rightly mentioned. The teacher

training colleges have courses that are not being introduced, tested or exploited. That should be happening at the same time that the curriculum review is being undertaken. A successful curriculum must be delivered by well-trained, confident teachers.

I believe that we need specialists, because a teacher who knows that they are on top of their subject is a confident teacher and a confident teacher is more likely to be able to deal with the biggest problem in the profession at the moment, which is the poor discipline that is evident in far too many classrooms and takes up far too much teaching time. I make a plea for specialists to be held on to, because they are usually inspired by their specialism and can, in turn, inspire pupils. If pupils are inspired by their teacher, all the indications are that they are less likely to kick up a ruckus in the classroom.

I make two pleas. One is for subjects not to be merged and the other is for the issue of teacher training to be examined at the same time as the curriculum is being examined. We must hold on to the best possible specialisms and specialist teachers. If we take appropriate action, we might not lose as many.

16:36

Dr Elaine Murray (Dumfries) (Lab): I am pleased to sum up for the Labour Party in this debate and to welcome the proposals that were published in the curriculum review progress report on Monday.

The group was set up to identify the purposes of education and the principles of the design of the three-to-18 curriculum to ensure that Scottish education would be fit for the challenges of the 21st century. As I think that we have said in the chamber before, in the past, assessment and education was about failure, because the vast majority of people failed and only a small number of people would pass and get the sort of qualifications that would enable them to do well in life. Now, however, we aspire to a system in which all learners are successful learners. That is important in terms of enabling each individual to reach their full potential in all the ways to which Sylvia Jackson referred in relation to the 2000 act. However, it is also important in the production of a skilled workforce that is able to drive forward the knowledge economy, which we debated last week.

The report is still a work in progress and more detailed work will follow. However, there are a lot of interesting ideas in it. It suggests that the curriculum should be designed to develop the four capacities that Lord James Douglas-Hamilton commented on, but it is also intended to develop important skills such as numeracy and literacy. It

takes the approach of having a single-curriculum framework throughout all the ages of school, from the age of three to the age of 18. As the minister and Iain Smith said, it tries to iron out the problems of transition. Iain Smith suggested that the teaching techniques that are used in nursery schools, such as active learning, could be extended into primary schools.

The report recognises that learning is delivered through several paths in school. Bill Butler pointed out that the ethos of the school is one of those paths. Others are the curriculum areas and subjects, interdisciplinary projects and personal development—a lot of outdoor education would come under that heading.

The report recognises that children learn in different ways and at different rates. Like the minister, I was interested in the different ways of describing progression and I am aware of the fact that educational experiences can be lateral as well as vertical. I do not know whether that is what Brian Adam was driving at when he talked about repetition, but it is possible to have enhancing understanding experiences, which are about not taking the pupil to a higher level but deepening the pupil's understanding of concepts at the level that they have reached.

The report suggests that there should be eight curriculum groupings in order to develop skills across a range of contexts. It is important to think of those as groupings and not mergers, because subject groupings will remain within those groupings. As I am a former scientist, like Brian Adam, I would like to see scientists regarded as heroes—actually, I would also like politicians to be regarded as heroes, but that could happen only in a parallel universe.

I was interested in the detailed exploration of the science curriculum in appendix 2 of the report. I wish that I had read it before last week's debate on the knowledge economy, because it reflected some of the points that I tried to make in that debate about the ways in which science education is delivered in the curriculum. The report suggests that the science curriculum up to and including secondary 3 would be based on the development of scientific skills, using three main groupings: the living world; the material world; and the physical world. That would replace the traditional science subjects and would involve pupils using real-life contexts for scientific study and engaging in thematic and interdisciplinary work to avoid the repetition that is not about enhancement but which occurs as a result of the same things coming up in different subjects.

It is important to encourage informed debate on current issues that face us all. Brian Adam touched on that. As Fiona Hyslop said, we all need to be scientifically literate, not just those of us who want to go on to be scientists.

If anybody has concerns about that approach, I reassure them that a similar approach was taken by the Open University in its structure of science foundation course, which I taught for a year. In that new course, we moved away from teaching physics, chemistry, biology and earth science to cover a variety of different contexts. To allay the fears of those who are worried about the diminution of subjects, I point out that, at the end of the course, students could decide to study chemistry, physics or whatever. However, the concepts and skills were introduced in a cross-disciplinary way that encouraged reflective learning.

Like the minister, I am interested in the review group's suggestions about learner-focused outcomes in which learners can recognise and describe what they have learned. That means not only that they can recognise the development of their essential transferable skills, but that they know what they have learned. That encourages self-esteem and is linked to motivation, so the focus on learner-focused outcomes is an interesting development.

16:40

Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con):

The debate has been interesting and informative. I am a little disappointed to see the Minister for Education and Young People here. That is not in any way a reflection on his speech, which was excellent. I just thought that he might be joining the exodus to Moray—like so many other members—as the former Labour candidate for that constituency. It is clear that, on this occasion, he decided that discretion is the better part of valour. However, when he is opening his mail in the next few weeks, he had better be careful that no packets of white feathers fall out.

I should declare an interest in that my wife is going through teacher training. The minister will be pleased to hear that she is a success in the Executive's campaign to recruit people to the profession.

The curriculum review is timely. Teachers often complain that there is a lack of flexibility, that they cannot tailor their lessons to pupils' needs and that the curriculum is too cluttered. The Conservatives certainly favour choice and flexibility at local level; we would dislike a top-down approach whereby the Executive sought to dictate to schools what subjects they should teach. We favour a localised approach. The buzzword of our party—and now, I believe, the buzzword of the Liberal Democrats—is "localism". Everybody seems to be talking about it.

The Deputy Minister for Education and Young People (Robert Brown): As with many Liberal Democrat ideas.

Murdo Fraser: I will ignore that sedentary intervention.

We should recognise that there is a balance to be struck between flexibility and accountability. Most parents want assurances that their children are learning core subjects such as maths, English, science and history in a formal manner that will stand them in good stead in later life. However, we recognise that, within that, schools should have flexibility.

There is an issue about the crowded curriculum. In many debates in Parliament in the past few years, members have asked for more time for particular subjects. In debates on the arts, members say, "We must have more arts in schools." In debates on music, members say, "We must have more music in schools." In debates on sport, members say, "We must have more sport in schools." The following week, the same members are standing up asking the minister what he is going to do about the crowded curriculum. We need to take a joined-up approach. There is only so much that can be done within the school day, so we need balance. The key is to allow local decision making so that head teachers and schools can work out the best balance for themselves. Obviously, they should take account of the legitimate desires of ministers and politicians to encourage more sport, for example, so that youngsters are more active and so that we can deal with the problems of obesity and lack of exercise.

Fiona Hyslop: What is the member's response to the teacher census, which shows that only 117 primary school teachers in Scotland specialise in physical education? The number has reduced by 40 since the previous census.

Murdo Fraser: Fiona Hyslop makes a good point and I share her concern. If we are to encourage more youngsters to take up physical sport, we need people who can teach them. We will do that only if we have more PE teachers, especially in primary schools.

Stewart Maxwell, Margo MacDonald and others mentioned the teaching of history in schools. As a student of Scottish history, I think that we should make sure that youngsters have access to history, particularly Scottish and British history. That does not mean that every school must teach history in a particular way. In this, too, we should encourage schools to develop their own approaches. We should not have a set national curriculum and I do not agree with those who say that ministers should decide centrally how schools should order their curricula.

Brian Adam spoke passionately about science. We need to have science taught in our schools—that is in the interests of our economy. We know

that there is concern about the lack of science and engineering graduates and that the needs of our economy are not necessarily being met. Perhaps too many of our youngsters are doing arts courses in our universities. The way to deal with that is not to set quotas but to engender in young people an interest in science. I endorse many of Brian Adam's comments about that.

Lord James Douglas-Hamilton referred to foreign languages with reference to the economic needs of our country. Surely it makes sense to teach foreign languages. I do not mean just French; when I was at school everyone was taught French and, if they were lucky, some were taught German or Italian. Other than English of course, the languages of modern commerce are Spanish and Mandarin. Perhaps we should think about being a bit more adventurous in our teaching.

We believe that schools need more autonomy. We believe in devolving more power to head teachers, teachers and school boards, and we believe that giving schools more control over their curriculum will drive up standards in education.

16:45

Mr Adam Ingram (South of Scotland) (SNP): I intend to be a little more critical than most members in this afternoon's debate have been about the Executive's progress in achieving curriculum reform.

Graham Donaldson, her majesty's senior chief inspector of education, writing in the HMIE report called "Improving Scottish Education", highlights fundamental issues that have to be addressed by the curriculum review programme board and its working groups. The first point is that

"Clarity is required about those elements which should form part of every young person's education, irrespective of perceived ability, social background or school attended."

With the best will in the world, the progress report on the curriculum, which was published this week, suggests that we are still some considerable way from that objective.

I do not doubt the quality of the work that has been undertaken but, as the chief inspector remarks in a different context,

"commitment to self-evaluation must go beyond diagnosis to ensure that necessary action is taken and real improvement achieved."

The main messages of the process so far—that learning and teaching are at the heart of an effective curriculum—are hardly revelatory. What matters is how that insight will be translated into classroom practice to support successful learning, and to promote confidence, participation and responsibility. Margo MacDonald made some good points about teacher training, but why do we

have to wait another 15 months—at the earliest—for the publication of detailed guidance?

That said, we broadly support the aims of “A Curriculum for Excellence” and we welcome proposals to unify the curriculum and to introduce a simplified progression framework that will free teachers to teach creatively to a depth and breadth that will engage all their pupils. The reduction of assessment overload is surely an absolute priority.

Stewart Maxwell and other members highlighted the adverse effect on primary school children of teaching to the test, but that approach is even more prevalent in secondary schools, particularly when attainment of qualifications becomes all-important. That is so true that most teachers now take the view that their main purpose is to train pupils in how to pass their exams rather than to educate children or to teach thinking skills and open their minds, thereby preparing them for the world of work and for lifelong learning.

The minister will be familiar with a report from teachers in the north-east of Scotland called “Listen to the Teachers”, which was sent to him and to members of the Education Committee this month. It makes the point that we have, in effect, a mandatory national curriculum that is dictated by the SQA. The SQA sets the exams and thereby determines what is taught in our schools, which effectively stifles creativity. The pernicious nature of that state of affairs is highlighted by a history teacher who describes his experience of higher history courses. He said that ten years ago most teachers would have taught the whole course of ten topics, but that now most only teach four topics and those are gone over, and gone over again, giving pupils practice in every combination of essay that might come up in the exam. The result is that the experience of history is arid and technocratic.

Incidentally, another by-product of the situation is that teachers have abandoned the Scottish history element of the course—only 4 per cent do the Scottish question in the higher exam—because it is time-consuming and unnecessary. Given that reality, it is not nearly good enough for the minister to dismiss curriculum proposals by Professor Tom Devine and others by claiming that such ideas are not compatible with maintaining a non-statutory national curriculum in Scotland.

The progress report talks a good game. Its expressed goal is to give teachers more freedom to teach in innovative and creative ways. That chimes well with Graham Donaldson’s calls for space for imaginative teaching that can capitalise on approaches that make learning relevant, lively and motivating, and for the system to be much more rigorous and explicit about the development and certification of essential skills such as literacy and numeracy for all pupils.

None of that is new thinking; the Howie committee made the same points back in 1992. Why has the review group borrowed our own watch to tell us the time—and taken 15 months to do so? Why will it take at least another 15 months for any detailed guidance that initiates reform to emerge? Scotland’s pupils and teachers deserve better, and time is running out for the Executive to deliver.

16:51

The Deputy Minister for Education and Young People (Robert Brown): Given the number of teachers in the chamber, I—as a mere lawyer—rise with trepidation to reply to this excellent debate, which has been an example of Parliament at its best.

I have been struck most by the degree of consensus that members have displayed this afternoon. That encouraging sign shows that there is agreement across the major political interests—reflected in large part by agreement among professional interests—about the direction of travel in our education system. As Peter Peacock said, although we have much to be proud of in our education system, we also face a number of challenges.

As Murdo Fraser pointed out very effectively, these occasions tend to give rise to lists of special pleadings on the one hand and demands for decluttering the curriculum on the other. Those issues are at the heart of the curriculum review.

Adam Ingram might be surprised to learn that I do not disagree with a large part of his speech, in particular his comments about the extent to which teachers teach to exams. Such problems lie behind our approach. No doubt we will return to that difficult issue in future debates; however, it is essential that we start with the curriculum and then consider issues such as assessment, testing and examination procedures.

Fiona Hyslop: We are moving towards consensus on the matter, but will the minister be more specific about how he will involve the SQA in particular in making assessment an integral part of developing the curriculum review?

Robert Brown: That is part of the developing process. I do not have enough time to deal with the matter now but, bearing in mind the member’s earlier comments, I want to make it clear that this is very much a bottom-up process. I do not agree with Fiona Hyslop’s opening remarks that not enough teachers have been involved in the process. In fact, thousands of teachers—and no fewer than 750 head teachers—have been involved in it. I believe that one of the review’s strengths is the fact that a goodly proportion of the profession in Scotland has been involved in the discussion and debate on its development.

Fiona Hyslop: Will the minister give way?

Robert Brown: I am sorry—I have only five minutes.

Although Margo MacDonald took a slightly different perspective in highlighting—rightly—the need to involve the teaching colleges, I should set the record straight by pointing out that only yesterday 120 members of staff from all the teacher education institutions in Scotland attended one of a number of conferences that have been held to address teacher training needs in the context of the curriculum review.

In my five minutes, I will be able to touch on only one or two of the many useful points that have been made in the debate. Lord James Douglas-Hamilton rightly highlighted the need to declutter and to create space; indeed, that major objective lies at the heart of what we are trying to do.

The issue of whether some courses might be lost has been raised, but members who have read the report will know that the suggestion is, rightly, that there should be groupings rather than mergers. The proposed groupings include health and well-being, languages, technologies, religious and moral education and, as was mentioned earlier, social studies. Those groupings give considerable scope to draw together different elements in working towards the objectives that we aim to achieve at the end of the curriculum review process. That is important.

As Iain Smith said, good teachers are at the heart of the review, and his points about the relevance of the curriculum were absolutely right. As Sylvia Jackson said, we do not have a national curriculum; we have a curriculum that is locally directed and modified by national guidance. I am sorry that I have not been able to mention outdoor education and various other issues.

Like devolution, the curriculum review is a process, not an event, so we must take time to get it right. We must engage all teachers, not least the brilliant new teachers who are coming into the profession through our aiming for the target of having 53,000 teachers by 2007. The increasing teacher numbers, combined with falling school rolls, give us a once-in-a-generation opportunity to make a step change in the quality of education for all young people. Young people are our future, which is why we want every one of them to fulfil their potential, to be effective, committed and thoughtful citizens and to contribute their skills and effort to Scotland and the Scottish economy. There can be a virtuous circle. The prizes will be great if we get that right and the curriculum review is central to achieving that. I thank members for their contributions to what has been an interesting and important debate.

Parliamentary Bureau Motions

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Murray Tosh):

The next item of business is consideration of two Parliamentary Bureau motions. I ask Margaret Curran to move motion S2M-4217, on the establishment of a committee.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees to establish a committee of the Parliament as follows:

Name of Committee: Edinburgh Airport Rail Link Bill Committee;

Remit: To consider and report to the Parliament on the Edinburgh Airport Railway Link Bill;

Duration: Until the Bill has received Royal Assent, falls or is withdrawn;

Convenership: The Convener will be a member of the Labour Party and the Deputy Convener will be a member of the Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party;

Membership: Christine Grahame, Jamie McGrigor, Iain Smith, Scott Barrie, Mr Charlie Gordon.—[*Ms Margaret Curran.*]

16:57

Mark Ballard (Lothians) (Green): Members may find it odd for me to contest a motion on the membership of a private bill committee. As we heard yesterday during the debate on the Edinburgh Tram (Line One) Bill, the issue is normally whose arm can be twisted to go on such committees. However, at the Parliamentary Bureau on Tuesday, six names were proposed for the five places and the Green nominee was rejected.

It is worth recounting some of the history of the matter. In the past, the Greens have been criticised for not taking up places on private bill committees. As a small party, we face practical difficulties in taking up such places. For the tram bill committees, as most of our members either have residences in Edinburgh or represent the Lothians, we had difficulty in proposing names. Therefore, I made a commitment that, at the next opportunity, the Greens would propose a member to take up a place on a private bill committee. Chris Ballance, my replacement as business manager, proposed a Green member for the Edinburgh Airport Rail Link Bill Committee, which was the next private bill committee that needed members. The Bureau rejected the Green volunteer.

I understand that the suitability of Greens to serve on the committee was questioned because Greens, including me, have raised issues about the proposals for the Edinburgh airport rail link. That is strange because, if Greens are in some way ineligible to serve on the committee because

Green members have criticised the proposals, the fact that the rail link is a partnership commitment for the Executive parties surely makes all Executive members equally ineligible. It is important that members recognise the significance of the decision that we will take. I am sure that Margaret Curran agrees that no perception should arise that major and costly transport infrastructure projects do not get full scrutiny at committee or that any member of Parliament cannot put aside their initial thoughts, whether for or against a proposal, in considering it.

I therefore urge Parliament to reject the motion, which would not delay consideration of the scheme, but would allow for properly balanced representation on the committee. The important principle is that we should acknowledge what all members can bring to the process. Members should not be ruled out of participation in private bill committees because of opinions that they have given for or against proposals. I therefore urge members to reject the motion and to send it back to the Parliamentary Bureau.

17:00

The Minister for Parliamentary Business (Ms Margaret Curran): I am grateful to Mark Ballard for telling me earlier that he was going to object to the motion. I agree with Mark Ballard that all members who have served on private bill committees and, I am sure, those who are about to serve on them, give full scrutiny to those bills. The implication that, because we did not support the Greens, other members may somehow not demonstrate that proper scrutiny role, is insulting to members who have already served on such committees. In the past two weeks, we have agreed to two motions on such bills and Jackie Baillie and others have demonstrated to Parliament their clear scrutiny role.

To be absolutely honest, members of the bureau did raise an eyebrow because the only private bill committee for which the Greens have put forward a member is one with which they disagree, so the bureau was concerned about a lack of fairness. Members of the bureau are entitled to put forward names to serve on private bill committees because we see it as our proper parliamentary role, which we want our members to fulfil. I speak on behalf of all the major parties—all others that are represented on the bureau—in rejecting Mark Ballard's points. All parties agreed that we should go forward on that basis.

The Presiding Officer: I ask Margaret Curran to move motion S2M-4202, on rule 2.7.2.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees under Rule 2.7.2 that the Parliament shall meet in Committee Rooms 2 and 6 of the

Parliament at Holyrood as recommended by the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body until 21 April 2006.—[*Ms Margaret Curran*].

The Presiding Officer: The question on the motions will be put at decision time, to which we now come.

Decision Time

17:01

The Presiding Officer (Mr George Reid):

There are nine questions to be put as a result of today's business. In relation to this morning's debate on bridge tolls, if the amendment in the name of Tavish Scott is agreed to, amendments in the name of Murdo Fraser and Shiona Baird fall.

The first question is, that amendment S2M-4196.2, in the name of Patricia Ferguson, which seeks to amend S2M-4196, in the name of Michael Matheson, on congratulations for team Scotland, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

FOR

Aitken, Bill (Glasgow) (Con)
 Arbuckle, Mr Andrew (Mid Scotland and Fife) (LD)
 Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Richard (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Barrie, Scott (Dunfermline West) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Edinburgh Central) (Lab)
 Brankin, Rhona (Midlothian) (Lab)
 Brocklebank, Mr Ted (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Brown, Robert (Glasgow) (LD)
 Brownlee, Derek (South of Scotland) (Con)
 Butler, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (Lab)
 Canavan, Dennis (Falkirk West) (Ind)
 Chisholm, Malcolm (Edinburgh North and Leith) (Lab)
 Craigie, Cathie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (Lab)
 Curran, Ms Margaret (Glasgow Baillieston) (Lab)
 Davidson, Mr David (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Deacon, Susan (Edinburgh East and Musselburgh) (Lab)
 Douglas-Hamilton, Lord James (Lothians) (Con)
 Eadie, Helen (Dunfermline East) (Lab)
 Ferguson, Patricia (Glasgow Maryhill) (Lab)
 Finnie, Ross (West of Scotland) (LD)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Gallie, Phil (South of Scotland) (Con)
 Gillon, Karen (Clydesdale) (Lab)
 Glen, Marlyn (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Godman, Trish (West Renfrewshire) (Lab)
 Goldie, Miss Annabel (West of Scotland) (Con)
 Gordon, Mr Charlie (Glasgow Cathcart) (Lab)
 Gorrie, Donald (Central Scotland) (LD)
 Henry, Hugh (Paisley South) (Lab)
 Home Robertson, John (East Lothian) (Lab)
 Hughes, Janis (Glasgow Rutherglen) (Lab)
 Jackson, Dr Sylvia (Stirling) (Lab)
 Jackson, Gordon (Glasgow Govan) (Lab)
 Jamieson, Cathy (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (Lab)
 Jamieson, Margaret (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (Lab)
 Johnstone, Alex (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Kerr, Mr Andy (East Kilbride) (Lab)
 Lamont, Johann (Glasgow Pollok) (Lab)
 Livingstone, Marilyn (Kirkcaldy) (Lab)
 Lyon, George (Argyll and Bute) (LD)
 Macdonald, Lewis (Aberdeen Central) (Lab)
 MacDonald, Margo (Lothians) (Ind)
 Macintosh, Mr Kenneth (Eastwood) (Lab)
 Maclean, Kate (Dundee West) (Lab)
 Macmillan, Maureen (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)

Martin, Paul (Glasgow Springburn) (Lab)
 May, Christine (Central Fife) (Lab)
 McAveety, Mr Frank (Glasgow Shettleston) (Lab)
 McConnell, Mr Jack (Motherwell and Wishaw) (Lab)
 McGrigor, Mr Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 McLetchie, David (Edinburgh Pentlands) (Con)
 McMahon, Michael (Hamilton North and Bellshill) (Lab)
 McNeil, Mr Duncan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (Lab)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow Kelvin) (Lab)
 McNulty, Des (Clydebank and Milngavie) (Lab)
 Mitchell, Margaret (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Morrison, Mr Alasdair (Western Isles) (Lab)
 Muldoon, Bristow (Livingston) (Lab)
 Mulligan, Mrs Mary (Linlithgow) (Lab)
 Murray, Dr Elaine (Dumfries) (Lab)
 Oldfather, Irene (Cunninghame South) (Lab)
 Peacock, Peter (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Peattie, Cathy (Falkirk East) (Lab)
 Pringle, Mike (Edinburgh South) (LD)
 Purvis, Jeremy (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD)
 Radcliffe, Nora (Gordon) (LD)
 Robson, Euan (Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (LD)
 Rumbles, Mike (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (LD)
 Scott, John (Ayr) (Con)
 Scott, Tavish (Shetland) (LD)
 Smith, Iain (North East Fife) (LD)
 Smith, Margaret (Edinburgh West) (LD)
 Stephen, Nicol (Aberdeen South) (LD)
 Stone, Mr Jamie (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD)
 Tosh, Murray (West of Scotland) (Con)
 Turner, Dr Jean (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (Ind)
 Wallace, Mr Jim (Orkney) (LD)
 Whitefield, Karen (Airdrie and Shotts) (Lab)
 Wilson, Allan (Cunninghame North) (Lab)

AGAINST

Adam, Brian (Aberdeen North) (SNP)
 Crawford, Bruce (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP)
 Cunningham, Roseanna (Perth) (SNP)
 Curran, Frances (West of Scotland) (SSP)
 Fabiani, Linda (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Gibson, Rob (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Grahame, Christine (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Lothians) (SNP)
 Ingram, Mr Adam (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Leckie, Carolyn (Central Scotland) (SSP)
 Lochhead, Richard (North East Scotland) (SNP)
 MacAskill, Mr Kenny (Lothians) (SNP)
 Marwick, Tricia (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP)
 Mather, Jim (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Matheson, Michael (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Maxwell, Mr Stewart (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 McFee, Mr Bruce (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 Monteith, Mr Brian (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Ind)
 Morgan, Alasdair (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Neil, Alex (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee East) (SNP)
 Stevenson, Stewart (Banff and Buchan) (SNP)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Swinney, Mr John (North Tayside) (SNP)
 Welsh, Mr Andrew (Angus) (SNP)
 White, Ms Sandra (Glasgow) (SNP)

ABSTENTIONS

Baird, Shiona (North East Scotland) (Green)
 Ballard, Mark (Lothians) (Green)
 Harper, Robin (Lothians) (Green)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Ruskell, Mr Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
 Scott, Eleanor (Highlands and Islands) (Green)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 80, Against 26, Abstentions 6.

Amendment agreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that amendment S2M-4196.1, in the name of Jamie McGrigor, which seeks to amend motion S2M-4196, in the name of Michael Matheson, on congratulations for team Scotland, as amended, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

FOR

Aitken, Bill (Glasgow) (Con)
 Brocklebank, Mr Ted (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Brownlee, Derek (South of Scotland) (Con)
 Davidson, Mr David (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Douglas-Hamilton, Lord James (Lothians) (Con)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Gallie, Phil (South of Scotland) (Con)
 Goldie, Miss Annabel (West of Scotland) (Con)
 Johnstone, Alex (North East Scotland) (Con)
 McGrigor, Mr Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 McLetchie, David (Edinburgh Pentlands) (Con)
 Milne, Mrs Nanette (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Mitchell, Margaret (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Monteith, Mr Brian (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Ind)
 Scott, John (Ayr) (Con)
 Tosh, Murray (West of Scotland) (Con)
 Turner, Dr Jean (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (Ind)

AGAINST

Adam, Brian (Aberdeen North) (SNP)
 Arbuckle, Mr Andrew (Mid Scotland and Fife) (LD)
 Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baird, Shiona (North East Scotland) (Green)
 Baker, Richard (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Ballard, Mark (Lothians) (Green)
 Barrie, Scott (Dunfermline West) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Edinburgh Central) (Lab)
 Brankin, Rhona (Midlothian) (Lab)
 Brown, Robert (Glasgow) (LD)
 Butler, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (Lab)
 Canavan, Dennis (Falkirk West) (Ind)
 Chisholm, Malcolm (Edinburgh North and Leith) (Lab)
 Craigie, Cathie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (Lab)
 Crawford, Bruce (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP)
 Cunningham, Roseanna (Perth) (SNP)
 Curran, Frances (West of Scotland) (SSP)
 Curran, Ms Margaret (Glasgow Baillieston) (Lab)
 Deacon, Susan (Edinburgh East and Musselburgh) (Lab)
 Eadie, Helen (Dunfermline East) (Lab)
 Fabiani, Linda (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Ferguson, Patricia (Glasgow Maryhill) (Lab)
 Finnie, Ross (West of Scotland) (LD)
 Gibson, Rob (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Gillon, Karen (Clydesdale) (Lab)
 Glen, Marlyn (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Godman, Trish (West Renfrewshire) (Lab)
 Gordon, Mr Charlie (Glasgow Cathcart) (Lab)
 Gorrie, Donald (Central Scotland) (LD)
 Grahame, Christine (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Harper, Robin (Lothians) (Green)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Henry, Hugh (Paisley South) (Lab)
 Home Robertson, John (East Lothian) (Lab)
 Hughes, Janis (Glasgow Rutherglen) (Lab)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Lothians) (SNP)

Ingram, Mr Adam (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Jackson, Dr Sylvia (Stirling) (Lab)
 Jackson, Gordon (Glasgow Govan) (Lab)
 Jamieson, Cathy (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (Lab)
 Jamieson, Margaret (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (Lab)
 Kerr, Mr Andy (East Kilbride) (Lab)
 Lamont, Johann (Glasgow Pollok) (Lab)
 Leckie, Carolyn (Central Scotland) (SSP)
 Livingstone, Marilyn (Kirkcaldy) (Lab)
 Lochhead, Richard (North East Scotland) (SNP)
 Lyon, George (Argyll and Bute) (LD)
 MacAskill, Mr Kenny (Lothians) (SNP)
 Macdonald, Lewis (Aberdeen Central) (Lab)
 MacDonald, Margo (Lothians) (Ind)
 Macintosh, Mr Kenneth (Eastwood) (Lab)
 Maclean, Kate (Dundee West) (Lab)
 Macmillan, Maureen (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Martin, Paul (Glasgow Springburn) (Lab)
 Marwick, Tricia (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP)
 Mather, Jim (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Matheson, Michael (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Maxwell, Mr Stewart (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 May, Christine (Central Fife) (Lab)
 McAveety, Mr Frank (Glasgow Shettleston) (Lab)
 McConnell, Mr Jack (Motherwell and Wishaw) (Lab)
 McFee, Mr Bruce (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 McMahon, Michael (Hamilton North and Bellshill) (Lab)
 McNeil, Mr Duncan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (Lab)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow Kelvin) (Lab)
 McNulty, Des (Clydebank and Milngavie) (Lab)
 Morgan, Alasdair (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Morrison, Mr Alasdair (Western Isles) (Lab)
 Muldoon, Bristow (Livingston) (Lab)
 Mulligan, Mrs Mary (Linlithgow) (Lab)
 Murray, Dr Elaine (Dumfries) (Lab)
 Neil, Alex (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Oldfather, Irene (Cunninghame South) (Lab)
 Peacock, Peter (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Peattie, Cathy (Falkirk East) (Lab)
 Pringle, Mike (Edinburgh South) (LD)
 Purvis, Jeremy (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD)
 Radcliffe, Nora (Gordon) (LD)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee East) (SNP)
 Robson, Euan (Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (LD)
 Rumbles, Mike (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (LD)
 Ruskell, Mr Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
 Scott, Eleanor (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
 Scott, Tavish (Shetland) (LD)
 Smith, Iain (North East Fife) (LD)
 Smith, Margaret (Edinburgh West) (LD)
 Stephen, Nicol (Aberdeen South) (LD)
 Stevenson, Stewart (Banff and Buchan) (SNP)
 Stone, Mr Jamie (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Swinney, Mr John (North Tayside) (SNP)
 Wallace, Mr Jim (Orkney) (LD)
 Welsh, Mr Andrew (Angus) (SNP)
 White, Ms Sandra (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Whitefield, Karen (Airdrie and Shotts) (Lab)
 Wilson, Allan (Cunninghame North) (Lab)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 17, Against 96, Abstentions 0.

Amendment disagreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that motion S2M-4196, in the name of Michael Matheson, on congratulations for team Scotland, as amended, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

For

Adam, Brian (Aberdeen North) (SNP)
 Aitken, Bill (Glasgow) (Con)
 Arbuckle, Mr Andrew (Mid Scotland and Fife) (LD)
 Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baird, Shiona (North East Scotland) (Green)
 Baker, Richard (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Ballard, Mark (Lothians) (Green)
 Barrie, Scott (Dunfermline West) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Edinburgh Central) (Lab)
 Brankin, Rhona (Midlothian) (Lab)
 Brocklebank, Mr Ted (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Brown, Robert (Glasgow) (LD)
 Brownlee, Derek (South of Scotland) (Con)
 Butler, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (Lab)
 Canavan, Dennis (Falkirk West) (Ind)
 Chisholm, Malcolm (Edinburgh North and Leith) (Lab)
 Craigie, Cathie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (Lab)
 Crawford, Bruce (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP)
 Curran, Ms Margaret (Glasgow Baillieston) (Lab)
 Davidson, Mr David (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Deacon, Susan (Edinburgh East and Musselburgh) (Lab)
 Douglas-Hamilton, Lord James (Lothians) (Con)
 Eadie, Helen (Dunfermline East) (Lab)
 Fabiani, Linda (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Ferguson, Patricia (Glasgow Maryhill) (Lab)
 Finnie, Ross (West of Scotland) (LD)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Gallie, Phil (South of Scotland) (Con)
 Gibson, Rob (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Gillon, Karen (Clydesdale) (Lab)
 Glen, Marlyn (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Godman, Trish (West Renfrewshire) (Lab)
 Goldie, Miss Annabel (West of Scotland) (Con)
 Gordon, Mr Charlie (Glasgow Cathcart) (Lab)
 Gorrie, Donald (Central Scotland) (LD)
 Grahame, Christine (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Harper, Robin (Lothians) (Green)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Henry, Hugh (Paisley South) (Lab)
 Home Robertson, John (East Lothian) (Lab)
 Hughes, Janis (Glasgow Rutherglen) (Lab)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Lothians) (SNP)
 Ingram, Mr Adam (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Jackson, Dr Sylvia (Stirling) (Lab)
 Jackson, Gordon (Glasgow Govan) (Lab)
 Jamieson, Cathy (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (Lab)
 Jamieson, Margaret (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (Lab)
 Johnstone, Alex (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Kerr, Mr Andy (East Kilbride) (Lab)
 Lamont, Johann (Glasgow Pollok) (Lab)
 Livingstone, Marilyn (Kirkcaldy) (Lab)
 Lochhead, Richard (North East Scotland) (SNP)
 Lyon, George (Argyll and Bute) (LD)
 MacAskill, Mr Kenny (Lothians) (SNP)
 Macdonald, Lewis (Aberdeen Central) (Lab)
 MacDonald, Margo (Lothians) (Ind)
 Macintosh, Mr Kenneth (Eastwood) (Lab)
 Maclean, Kate (Dundee West) (Lab)
 Macmillan, Maureen (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Martin, Paul (Glasgow Springburn) (Lab)
 Marwick, Tricia (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP)
 Mather, Jim (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Matheson, Michael (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Maxwell, Mr Stewart (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 May, Christine (Central Fife) (Lab)
 McAveety, Mr Frank (Glasgow Shettleston) (Lab)

McConnell, Mr Jack (Motherwell and Wishaw) (Lab)
 McFee, Mr Bruce (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 McGregor, Mr Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 McLetchie, David (Edinburgh Pentlands) (Con)
 McMahon, Michael (Hamilton North and Bellshill) (Lab)
 McNeil, Mr Duncan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (Lab)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow Kelvin) (Lab)
 McNulty, Des (Clydebank and Milngavie) (Lab)
 Milne, Mrs Nanette (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Mitchell, Margaret (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Morgan, Alasdair (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Morrison, Mr Alasdair (Western Isles) (Lab)
 Muldoon, Bristow (Livingston) (Lab)
 Mulligan, Mrs Mary (Linlithgow) (Lab)
 Murray, Dr Elaine (Dumfries) (Lab)
 Neil, Alex (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Oldfather, Irene (Cunninghame South) (Lab)
 Peacock, Peter (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Peattie, Cathy (Falkirk East) (Lab)
 Pringle, Mike (Edinburgh South) (LD)
 Purvis, Jeremy (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD)
 Radcliffe, Nora (Gordon) (LD)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee East) (SNP)
 Robson, Euan (Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (LD)
 Rumbles, Mike (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (LD)
 Ruskell, Mr Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
 Scott, Eleanor (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
 Scott, John (Ayr) (Con)
 Scott, Tavish (Shetland) (LD)
 Smith, Iain (North East Fife) (LD)
 Smith, Margaret (Edinburgh West) (LD)
 Stephen, Nicol (Aberdeen South) (LD)
 Stevenson, Stewart (Banff and Buchan) (SNP)
 Stone, Mr Jamie (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Swinney, Mr John (North Tayside) (SNP)
 Tosh, Murray (West of Scotland) (Con)
 Turner, Dr Jean (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (Ind)
 Wallace, Mr Jim (Orkney) (LD)
 Welsh, Mr Andrew (Angus) (SNP)
 Whitefield, Karen (Airdrie and Shotts) (Lab)
 Wilson, Allan (Cunninghame North) (Lab)

AGAINST

Monteith, Mr Brian (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Ind)
 White, Ms Sandra (Glasgow) (SNP)

ABSTENTIONS

Curran, Frances (West of Scotland) (SSP)
 Leckie, Carolyn (Central Scotland) (SSP)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 108, Against 2, Abstentions 2.

Motion, as amended, agreed to.

Resolved,

That the Parliament congratulates Team Scotland for winning 29 medals at the 18th Commonwealth Games in Melbourne, which is the largest number of medals ever won by a Scottish team at an overseas games; recognises that this success is due to the hard work and dedication of our athletes and coaching staff and the valuable support provided by the Institute network, **sportscotland** and the World Class Performance Programme; believes that Team Scotland's success in Melbourne should act as a springboard to ensure even greater success for our sportsmen and women in the international sporting arena and will also inspire many young Scots to participate in sport; recognises the significant benefits to be gained for Scotland from London 2012 and a successful bid for

Glasgow to host the Commonwealth Games in 2014; acknowledges that access to good sporting facilities plays a significant role in the development of our nation's sporting talent; welcomes the investment in facilities through the Executive's National and Regional Facilities Strategy which will provide a first-class setting for our elite and developing athletes and which can also be enjoyed by local communities, and welcomes the imminent publication of the reports on the audit of local facilities.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that amendment S2M-4197.3, in the name of Tavish Scott, which seeks to amend motion S2M-4197, in the name of Shona Robison, on bridge tolls, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

FOR

Arbuckle, Mr Andrew (Mid Scotland and Fife) (LD)
 Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Richard (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Barrie, Scott (Dunfermline West) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Edinburgh Central) (Lab)
 Brankin, Rhona (Midlothian) (Lab)
 Brown, Robert (Glasgow) (LD)
 Butler, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (Lab)
 Chisholm, Malcolm (Edinburgh North and Leith) (Lab)
 Craigie, Cathie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (Lab)
 Curran, Ms Margaret (Glasgow Baillieston) (Lab)
 Deacon, Susan (Edinburgh East and Musselburgh) (Lab)
 Eadie, Helen (Dunfermline East) (Lab)
 Ferguson, Patricia (Glasgow Maryhill) (Lab)
 Finnie, Ross (West of Scotland) (LD)
 Gillon, Karen (Clydesdale) (Lab)
 Glen, Marlyn (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Godman, Trish (West Renfrewshire) (Lab)
 Gordon, Mr Charlie (Glasgow Cathcart) (Lab)
 Gorrie, Donald (Central Scotland) (LD)
 Henry, Hugh (Paisley South) (Lab)
 Home Robertson, John (East Lothian) (Lab)
 Hughes, Janis (Glasgow Rutherglen) (Lab)
 Jackson, Dr Sylvia (Stirling) (Lab)
 Jackson, Gordon (Glasgow Govan) (Lab)
 Jamieson, Cathy (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (Lab)
 Jamieson, Margaret (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (Lab)
 Kerr, Mr Andy (East Kilbride) (Lab)
 Lamont, Johann (Glasgow Pollok) (Lab)
 Livingstone, Marilyn (Kirkcaldy) (Lab)
 Lyon, George (Argyll and Bute) (LD)
 Macdonald, Lewis (Aberdeen Central) (Lab)
 MacDonald, Margo (Lothians) (Ind)
 Macintosh, Mr Kenneth (Eastwood) (Lab)
 Macmillan, Maureen (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Martin, Paul (Glasgow Springburn) (Lab)
 May, Christine (Central Fife) (Lab)
 McAveety, Mr Frank (Glasgow Shettleston) (Lab)
 McConnell, Mr Jack (Motherwell and Wishaw) (Lab)
 McMahon, Michael (Hamilton North and Bellshill) (Lab)
 McNeil, Mr Duncan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (Lab)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow Kelvin) (Lab)
 McNulty, Des (Clydebank and Milngavie) (Lab)
 Morrison, Mr Alasdair (Western Isles) (Lab)
 Muldoon, Bristow (Livingston) (Lab)
 Mulligan, Mrs Mary (Linlithgow) (Lab)
 Murray, Dr Elaine (Dumfries) (Lab)
 Oldfather, Irene (Cunninghame South) (Lab)
 Peacock, Peter (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Peattie, Cathy (Falkirk East) (Lab)
 Pringle, Mike (Edinburgh South) (LD)

Purvis, Jeremy (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD)
 Radcliffe, Nora (Gordon) (LD)
 Robson, Euan (Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (LD)
 Rumbles, Mike (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (LD)
 Scott, Tavish (Shetland) (LD)
 Smith, Iain (North East Fife) (LD)
 Smith, Margaret (Edinburgh West) (LD)
 Stephen, Nicol (Aberdeen South) (LD)
 Stone, Mr Jamie (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD)
 Wallace, Mr Jim (Orkney) (LD)
 Whitefield, Karen (Airdrie and Shotts) (Lab)
 Wilson, Allan (Cunninghame North) (Lab)

AGAINST

Adam, Brian (Aberdeen North) (SNP)
 Aitken, Bill (Glasgow) (Con)
 Baird, Shiona (North East Scotland) (Green)
 Ballard, Mark (Lothians) (Green)
 Brocklebank, Mr Ted (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Brownlee, Derek (South of Scotland) (Con)
 Canavan, Dennis (Falkirk West) (Ind)
 Crawford, Bruce (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP)
 Cunningham, Roseanna (Perth) (SNP)
 Curran, Frances (West of Scotland) (SSP)
 Davidson, Mr David (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Douglas-Hamilton, Lord James (Lothians) (Con)
 Fabiani, Linda (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Gallie, Phil (South of Scotland) (Con)
 Gibson, Rob (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Goldie, Miss Annabel (West of Scotland) (Con)
 Grahame, Christine (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Harper, Robin (Lothians) (Green)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Lothians) (SNP)
 Ingram, Mr Adam (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Johnstone, Alex (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Leckie, Carolyn (Central Scotland) (SSP)
 Lochhead, Richard (North East Scotland) (SNP)
 MacAskill, Mr Kenny (Lothians) (SNP)
 Marwick, Tricia (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP)
 Mather, Jim (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Matheson, Michael (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Maxwell, Mr Stewart (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 McFee, Mr Bruce (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 McGrigor, Mr Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 McLetchie, David (Edinburgh Pentlands) (Con)
 Milne, Mrs Nanette (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Mitchell, Margaret (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Monteith, Mr Brian (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Ind)
 Morgan, Alasdair (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Neil, Alex (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee East) (SNP)
 Ruskell, Mr Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
 Scott, Eleanor (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
 Scott, John (Ayr) (Con)
 Stevenson, Stewart (Banff and Buchan) (SNP)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Swinney, Mr John (North Tayside) (SNP)
 Tosh, Murray (West of Scotland) (Con)
 Welsh, Mr Andrew (Angus) (SNP)
 White, Ms Sandra (Glasgow) (SNP)

ABSTENTIONS

Maclean, Kate (Dundee West) (Lab)
 Turner, Dr Jean (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (Ind)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 63, Against 48, Abstentions 2.

Amendment agreed to.

The Presiding Officer: Amendment S2M-4197.1, in the name of Murdo Fraser, and amendment S2M-4197.2, in the name of Shiona Baird, fall.

The next question is, that motion S2M-4197, in the name of Shona Robison, on bridge tolls, as amended, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

FOR

Arbuckle, Mr Andrew (Mid Scotland and Fife) (LD)
 Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Richard (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Barrie, Scott (Dunfermline West) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Edinburgh Central) (Lab)
 Brankin, Rhona (Midlothian) (Lab)
 Brown, Robert (Glasgow) (LD)
 Butler, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (Lab)
 Canavan, Dennis (Falkirk West) (Ind)
 Chisholm, Malcolm (Edinburgh North and Leith) (Lab)
 Craigie, Cathie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (Lab)
 Curran, Ms Margaret (Glasgow Baillieston) (Lab)
 Deacon, Susan (Edinburgh East and Musselburgh) (Lab)
 Eadie, Helen (Dunfermline East) (Lab)
 Ferguson, Patricia (Glasgow Maryhill) (Lab)
 Finnie, Ross (West of Scotland) (LD)
 Gillon, Karen (Clydesdale) (Lab)
 Glen, Marlyn (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Godman, Trish (West Renfrewshire) (Lab)
 Gordon, Mr Charlie (Glasgow Cathcart) (Lab)
 Gorrie, Donald (Central Scotland) (LD)
 Henry, Hugh (Paisley South) (Lab)
 Home Robertson, John (East Lothian) (Lab)
 Hughes, Janis (Glasgow Rutherglen) (Lab)
 Jackson, Dr Sylvia (Stirling) (Lab)
 Jackson, Gordon (Glasgow Govan) (Lab)
 Jamieson, Cathy (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (Lab)
 Jamieson, Margaret (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (Lab)
 Kerr, Mr Andy (East Kilbride) (Lab)
 Lamont, Johann (Glasgow Pollok) (Lab)
 Livingstone, Marilyn (Kirkcaldy) (Lab)
 Lyon, George (Argyll and Bute) (LD)
 Macdonald, Lewis (Aberdeen Central) (Lab)
 MacDonald, Margo (Lothians) (Ind)
 Macintosh, Mr Kenneth (Eastwood) (Lab)
 Maclean, Kate (Dundee West) (Lab)
 Macmillan, Maureen (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Martin, Paul (Glasgow Springburn) (Lab)
 May, Christine (Central Fife) (Lab)
 McAveety, Mr Frank (Glasgow Shettleston) (Lab)
 McConnell, Mr Jack (Motherwell and Wishaw) (Lab)
 McMahon, Michael (Hamilton North and Bellshill) (Lab)
 McNeil, Mr Duncan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (Lab)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow Kelvin) (Lab)
 McNulty, Des (Clydebank and Milngavie) (Lab)
 Morrison, Mr Alasdair (Western Isles) (Lab)
 Muldoon, Bristow (Livingston) (Lab)
 Mulligan, Mrs Mary (Linlithgow) (Lab)
 Murray, Dr Elaine (Dumfries) (Lab)
 Oldfather, Irene (Cunninghame South) (Lab)
 Peacock, Peter (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Peattie, Cathy (Falkirk East) (Lab)
 Pringle, Mike (Edinburgh South) (LD)
 Purvis, Jeremy (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD)
 Radcliffe, Nora (Gordon) (LD)
 Robson, Euan (Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (LD)
 Rumbles, Mike (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (LD)

Scott, Tavish (Shetland) (LD)
 Smith, Iain (North East Fife) (LD)
 Smith, Margaret (Edinburgh West) (LD)
 Stephen, Nicol (Aberdeen South) (LD)
 Stone, Mr Jamie (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD)
 Wallace, Mr Jim (Orkney) (LD)
 Whitefield, Karen (Airdrie and Shotts) (Lab)
 Wilson, Allan (Cunninghame North) (Lab)

AGAINST

Adam, Brian (Aberdeen North) (SNP)
 Aitken, Bill (Glasgow) (Con)
 Baird, Shiona (North East Scotland) (Green)
 Ballard, Mark (Lothians) (Green)
 Brocklebank, Mr Ted (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Brownlee, Derek (South of Scotland) (Con)
 Crawford, Bruce (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP)
 Cunningham, Roseanna (Perth) (SNP)
 Davidson, Mr David (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Douglas-Hamilton, Lord James (Lothians) (Con)
 Fabiani, Linda (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Gallie, Phil (South of Scotland) (Con)
 Gibson, Rob (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Goldie, Miss Annabel (West of Scotland) (Con)
 Grahame, Christine (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Harper, Robin (Lothians) (Green)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Lothians) (SNP)
 Ingram, Mr Adam (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Johnstone, Alex (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Lochhead, Richard (North East Scotland) (SNP)
 MacAskill, Mr Kenny (Lothians) (SNP)
 Marwick, Tricia (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP)
 Mather, Jim (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Matheson, Michael (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Maxwell, Mr Stewart (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 McFee, Mr Bruce (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 McGrigor, Mr Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 McLetchie, David (Edinburgh Pentlands) (Con)
 Milne, Mrs Nanette (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Mitchell, Margaret (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Monteith, Mr Brian (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Ind)
 Morgan, Alasdair (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Neil, Alex (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee East) (SNP)
 Ruskell, Mr Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
 Scott, Eleanor (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
 Scott, John (Ayr) (Con)
 Stevenson, Stewart (Banff and Buchan) (SNP)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Swinney, Mr John (North Tayside) (SNP)
 Tosh, Murray (West of Scotland) (Con)
 Welsh, Mr Andrew (Angus) (SNP)
 White, Ms Sandra (Glasgow) (SNP)

ABSTENTIONS

Curran, Frances (West of Scotland) (SSP)
 Leckie, Carolyn (Central Scotland) (SSP)
 Turner, Dr Jean (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (Ind)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 65, Against 45, Abstentions 3.

Motion, as amended, agreed to.

Resolved,

That the Parliament notes the responses, analysis and conclusions set out in the recent consultation and review of Scotland's tolled bridges, including the Tay Road Bridge Joint Board's response; notes that the bridges review met

all of the Board's requests, and recommends an examination of the economic, social and environmental impact and cost of retaining or removing tolls from the Tay and Forth bridges, on Fife and Dundee, the proposals for which will be reported on as soon as possible.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that motion S2M-4217, in the name of Margaret Curran, on the establishment of a committee, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

FOR

Adam, Brian (Aberdeen North) (SNP)
 Aitken, Bill (Glasgow) (Con)
 Arbuckle, Mr Andrew (Mid Scotland and Fife) (LD)
 Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Richard (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Barrie, Scott (Dunfermline West) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Edinburgh Central) (Lab)
 Brankin, Rhona (Midlothian) (Lab)
 Brocklebank, Mr Ted (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Brown, Robert (Glasgow) (LD)
 Brownlee, Derek (South of Scotland) (Con)
 Butler, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (Lab)
 Chisholm, Malcolm (Edinburgh North and Leith) (Lab)
 Craigie, Cathie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (Lab)
 Crawford, Bruce (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP)
 Cunningham, Roseanna (Perth) (SNP)
 Curran, Ms Margaret (Glasgow Baillieston) (Lab)
 Davidson, Mr David (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Deacon, Susan (Edinburgh East and Musselburgh) (Lab)
 Douglas-Hamilton, Lord James (Lothians) (Con)
 Eadie, Helen (Dunfermline East) (Lab)
 Fabiani, Linda (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Ferguson, Patricia (Glasgow Maryhill) (Lab)
 Finnie, Ross (West of Scotland) (LD)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Gallie, Phil (South of Scotland) (Con)
 Gibson, Rob (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Gillon, Karen (Clydesdale) (Lab)
 Glen, Marilyn (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Godman, Trish (West Renfrewshire) (Lab)
 Goldie, Miss Annabel (West of Scotland) (Con)
 Gordon, Mr Charlie (Glasgow Cathcart) (Lab)
 Gorrie, Donald (Central Scotland) (LD)
 Grahame, Christine (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Henry, Hugh (Paisley South) (Lab)
 Home Robertson, John (East Lothian) (Lab)
 Hughes, Janis (Glasgow Rutherglen) (Lab)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Lothians) (SNP)
 Ingram, Mr Adam (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Jackson, Dr Sylvia (Stirling) (Lab)
 Jackson, Gordon (Glasgow Govan) (Lab)
 Jamieson, Cathy (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (Lab)
 Jamieson, Margaret (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (Lab)
 Johnstone, Alex (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Kerr, Mr Andy (East Kilbride) (Lab)
 Lamont, Johann (Glasgow Pollok) (Lab)
 Livingstone, Marilyn (Kirkcaldy) (Lab)
 Lochhead, Richard (North East Scotland) (SNP)
 Lyon, George (Argyll and Bute) (LD)
 MacAskill, Mr Kenny (Lothians) (SNP)
 Macdonald, Lewis (Aberdeen Central) (Lab)
 Macintosh, Mr Kenneth (Eastwood) (Lab)
 Maclean, Kate (Dundee West) (Lab)
 Macmillan, Maureen (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Martin, Paul (Glasgow Springburn) (Lab)
 Marwick, Tricia (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP)

Mather, Jim (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Matheson, Michael (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Maxwell, Mr Stewart (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 May, Christine (Central Fife) (Lab)
 McAveety, Mr Frank (Glasgow Shettleston) (Lab)
 McConnell, Mr Jack (Motherwell and Wishaw) (Lab)
 McFee, Mr Bruce (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 McGrigor, Mr Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 McLetchie, David (Edinburgh Pentlands) (Con)
 McMahon, Michael (Hamilton North and Bellshill) (Lab)
 McNeil, Mr Duncan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (Lab)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow Kelvin) (Lab)
 McNulty, Des (Clydebank and Milngavie) (Lab)
 Milne, Mrs Nanette (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Mitchell, Margaret (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Morgan, Alasdair (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Morrison, Mr Alasdair (Western Isles) (Lab)
 Muldoon, Bristow (Livingston) (Lab)
 Mulligan, Mrs Mary (Linlithgow) (Lab)
 Murray, Dr Elaine (Dumfries) (Lab)
 Neil, Alex (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Oldfather, Irene (Cunninghame South) (Lab)
 Peacock, Peter (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Peattie, Cathy (Falkirk East) (Lab)
 Pringle, Mike (Edinburgh South) (LD)
 Purvis, Jeremy (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD)
 Radcliffe, Nora (Gordon) (LD)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee East) (SNP)
 Robson, Euan (Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (LD)
 Rumbles, Mike (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (LD)
 Scott, John (Ayr) (Con)
 Scott, Tavish (Shetland) (LD)
 Smith, Iain (North East Fife) (LD)
 Smith, Margaret (Edinburgh West) (LD)
 Stephen, Nicol (Aberdeen South) (LD)
 Stevenson, Stewart (Banff and Buchan) (SNP)
 Stone, Mr Jamie (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Swinney, Mr John (North Tayside) (SNP)
 Tosh, Murray (West of Scotland) (Con)
 Turner, Dr Jean (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (Ind)
 Wallace, Mr Jim (Orkney) (LD)
 Welsh, Mr Andrew (Angus) (SNP)
 White, Ms Sandra (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Whitefield, Karen (Airdrie and Shotts) (Lab)
 Wilson, Allan (Cunninghame North) (Lab)

AGAINST

Baird, Shiona (North East Scotland) (Green)
 Ballard, Mark (Lothians) (Green)
 Canavan, Dennis (Falkirk West) (Ind)
 Curran, Frances (West of Scotland) (SSP)
 Harper, Robin (Lothians) (Green)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Leckie, Carolyn (Central Scotland) (SSP)
 Monteith, Mr Brian (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Ind)
 Ruskell, Mr Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
 Scott, Eleanor (Highlands and Islands) (Green)

ABSTENTIONS

MacDonald, Margo (Lothians) (Ind)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 102, Against 10, Abstentions 1.

Motion agreed to.

That the Parliament agrees to establish a committee of the Parliament as follows:

Name of Committee: Edinburgh Airport Rail Link Bill Committee;

Remit: To consider and report to the Parliament on the Edinburgh Airport Railway Link Bill;

Duration: Until the Bill has received Royal Assent, falls or is withdrawn;

Convenership: The Convener will be a member of the Labour Party and the Deputy Convener will be a member of the Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party;

Membership: Christine Grahame, Jamie McGrigor, Iain Smith, Scott Barrie, Mr Charlie Gordon.

The Presiding Officer: The final question tonight is, that motion S2M-4202, in the name of Margaret Curran, on rule 2.7.2, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to.

That the Parliament agrees under Rule 2.7.2 that the Parliament shall meet in Committee Rooms 2 and 6 of the Parliament at Holyrood as recommended by the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body until 21 April 2006.

Post Office Card Accounts

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Trish Godman): The final item of business today is a members' business debate on motion S2M-4101, in the name of Richard Lochhead, on Post Office card accounts. The debate will be concluded without any question being put.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament notes the recent announcement that Post Office card accounts are to be phased out by 2010; notes that this news has come as a shock to pension and benefits claimants in north-east Scotland, many of whom rely on the service especially where there are no local bank branches, as well as to Post Office staff who view the scheme as a vital service; believes that the phasing out of this service could put the future of some rural post offices in severe jeopardy and lead to many of these lifeline services being lost to communities already being stripped of other vital services; supports the National Federation of SubPostmasters campaign to have Post Office card accounts retained, and considers that the Scottish Executive should make appropriate representations to the UK Government on behalf of Post Office card account users in Scotland.

17:11

Richard Lochhead (North East Scotland) (SNP): It gives me great pleasure to open this debate, which is on a matter of great importance to many people in Scotland. As is customary, I begin by thanking all those who have signed the motion. More than 32 members have signed it, from every party in the chamber bar the Labour Party.

The debate concerns this little card that I have in my hand. It brings huge benefits to hundreds of thousands of people in Scotland. Approximately half a million benefit payments are made by the Department for Work and Pensions and other Government departments into Post Office card accounts in Scotland. Although some Scots receive more than one payment, it is true to say that hundreds of thousands of people hold such accounts in post offices the length and breadth of Scotland.

The system allows the Government to pay benefits directly into people's card accounts. People can then go to their local post office and withdraw their benefits in their local community. A pamphlet given to people who wish to apply for an account tells them that the account is a "simple and convenient" way to manage their money. Benefit claimants, Post Office staff and others are absolutely furious that the Department for Work and Pensions has decided that, in 2010, the accounts will cease to exist. The hundreds of thousands of Scots who hold these accounts feel betrayed and deceived. Many of the more vulnerable are fearful of how they will cope.

The many people who hold these accounts thought that the Government would recognise the value of the service, not only to people who hold the accounts but to wider society—particularly rural communities where the viability of the local post office will be jeopardised.

The people who opened these accounts were never told that the service would be temporary. They thought that it would be permanent and they welcomed that. However, the Government's message appears to be that, no matter what people think, and no matter how much they value their Post Office accounts, they will have to open bank accounts and like it or lump it. There will be no other choice.

The account holders thought that the Government might place the interests of the wider community above the interests of high street banks. They thought that the Government recognised that giving business to high street banks instead of to our post office network would undermine that network—again, particularly affecting rural communities and the many villages and towns that do not want important facilities such as post offices to disappear. Many rural communities have already lost banks and shops and sometimes schools. The last thing that people want is the viability of the post office network to be further undermined.

Post Office card accounts are popular for various reasons. First, many people who hold them like the idea of having their benefits paid into a separate account rather than having them paid into their main bank account because that helps them to budget and manage their finances. Only last week, I turned up at the sub-post office in Methlick in Aberdeenshire, where I was met by several customers who were waiting to discuss their fears about the closure of such accounts. One of their fears was that they would lose the ability to manage their benefits as effectively as possible.

The proposal to pay benefits into bank accounts means that many people will not be able to withdraw cash locally because many rural communities do not have the option of using a local bank. We all know that many banks on constituency high streets have closed in recent years. It might be possible to withdraw cash from a local autobank, if there happens to be one in a local shop and the shop is still open, but in some of our more remote rural communities it often costs £1.75 to use such autobanks. We must remember that many of the more vulnerable members of society are holders of Post Office card accounts. To someone who is on a low weekly income, such as a pensioner, £1.75 is a lot of money and they should not be asked to pay such a sum.

Citizens Advice Scotland has expressed great concern about the impact on financial inclusion if people who do not have bank accounts are not able to use Post Office card accounts in the future. Members were all sent a copy of that organisation's briefing and I am sure that many members will quote from it. The fact that 12 per cent of Scotland's population do not have bank accounts means that many people rely heavily on the Post Office card accounts that they hold at their local post offices.

Maintaining the viability of the local post office network in our rural communities by ensuring that it continues to have business is another important issue. I know that sub-postmasters throughout Aberdeenshire and north-east Scotland—I am sure that many other members have spoken to sub-postmasters in their areas—fear that if Post Office card accounts are lost in the years ahead, the viability of their post offices will be undermined and even more community post offices will be lost. The proposal could be the straw that breaks the camel's back.

I will outline what action must be taken. First, we should not allow the Department for Work and Pensions to cease the relevant contract in 2010; the announcement that it would do so came as a bolt out of the blue. The existing contract should be enhanced and should be used to help to modernise our post office network. More vulnerable members of the public should be able to use Post Office card accounts for direct debits because, for example, that would allow them to get discounts on their energy bills, which have rocketed over recent years. Such people have as much right as the rest of us to access such discounts.

The DWP should be told to stop undermining our post office network by persuading people to opt for bank accounts instead. That practice must come to an end. The Government in London must acknowledge the wider benefits to society that Post Office card accounts bring and the Scottish ministers must make the firmest and most vigorous representations to it about saving those accounts and must express their concern to United Kingdom ministers about a proposal that will remove the many benefits that accrue to people in Scotland from having access to them. Most important, the minister must stand up at the end of the debate and declare her support, and that of the Scottish Government, for maintaining Post Office card accounts. She must recognise their value and pledge that she will pick up the cudgels on behalf of the hundreds of thousands of customers in Scotland's communities who both rely on those accounts and accrue many benefits from doing so.

17:18

Mr David Davidson (North East Scotland)

(Con): I congratulate Richard Lochhead on securing the debate and wish him a fond farewell from the Parliament—I will not say more than that.

I am glad that we are having a debate on such an important subject, which was debated at Westminster yesterday. We cannot divorce the issues to do with the card from the survival of post offices in suburban and rural areas. There are enough barriers to getting a card in the first place. Many people have to jump through all sorts of hoops. According to a figure that was cited yesterday, there are 22 steps to getting a card. I am sure that the system could have been made a little simpler. In the past, the Conservatives came up with a swipe card that had the potential to be more flexible, but it seems to have been ignored by the Department for Work and Pensions.

Richard Lochhead mentioned access to banking services, which is becoming ever more difficult. It is important that people have access to such services.

When I was a local councillor, Post Office Counters was very helpful in assisting the survival of a small sub-post office. It resited it in a Co-operative village store; indeed, it expanded services, which made the community even more viable. People did not have to pay for a taxi to go to a local town to get hold of their pension or benefits.

We need to look more closely at the ways in which we can support communities. The Deputy Prime Minister has lost any street cred that he may have had in terms of his support for communities and the more vulnerable in our society. With this announcement, it has all gone out of the window.

The main theme of Citizens Advice Scotland in all of this is inclusion, but it has also highlighted the inconsistencies in the system. I agree with CAS that the role that the card plays could be expanded; all benefits should be paid through the Post Office card account. It is vital that people can access their money. The beauty of the card system is that someone cannot get into debt. I note the point that Richard Lochhead made about direct debits, which always have to be planned. Perhaps they should be made weekly. In that way, people would not get a shock when a large amount of money was withdrawn from their benefit payments.

All in all, the debate is about community. We need to debate how the involvement and facilities of the Scottish Parliament can be brought to bear on a matter that is only partly related to this Parliament. That does not need to stop us from joining together and holding hands on the issue.

Many people cannot afford a car nowadays. They may not even have a bus service in their part of the country or be able to go long distances to access banking services or their benefits. If the Government cannot continue to supply benefits in cash, is it really going to involve people in charges to go somewhere where they will be charged again to access what, in many cases, is not a large amount of money?

Parliamentarians at Westminster have had good debates on the subject; I have read the *Hansard* reports. There is cross-party support for the extension and expansion of the POCA scheme. I hope to hear a fairly positive response from the Deputy Minister for Environment and Rural Development tonight, although I am well aware that all of this is not in her gift to give. I hope that she is supportive of the notion that, if we cannot retain the POCA system in Scotland, we will consider the implementation of a version that can be used in Scotland.

17:22

Rob Gibson (Highlands and Islands) (SNP):

Each year, some 6,500 pensions and benefits are paid out in post offices in the constituency of Ross, Skye and Inverness West and 5,400 are paid out in the constituency of Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross. In Springburn, 14,000 of those same benefits are paid out in post offices. Across the country, that adds up to a large number of people who rely on our post offices and, in particular, on their Post Office card account.

I have visited post offices in various parts of the Highlands in my region. The pattern that is emerging is consistent, whether one hears the account from customers or from staff. When pension books were abolished, business at sub-post offices dropped by some two thirds; pensioners stopped using their post office. In time, pensioners got used to using their card accounts, but this system is now also under threat of abolition, in 2010. The authorities could not have done more to undermine people's confidence in their ability to access payments through their local post offices.

Of course, more categories of allowance could be paid through the Post Office card account system. For example, I understand that local housing allowances and educational maintenance allowances could be paid in this way. Why has the Government not implemented that? If that were to happen, the POCA system could become very viable.

Richard Lochhead and David Davidson outlined the difficulties that are inherent in setting up a POCA. Constituents and friends have had the greatest of difficulties in that regard; dozens of

letters flew back and forth before their accounts were finally set up. It seems almost as if the Government has a deliberate policy of putting people off these accounts.

The friends in question live in the village of Rosehall in Sutherland. If there was a reduction in its business, the post office in the village would close, as would the local shop, which is attached to it. If that were to happen, pensioners and benefit claimants in Rosehall would have to travel nine miles to the bank in Lairg or 13 miles to Ardgyle to use a cashline machine. As Richard Lochhead said, they would also have to pay £1.75 to access their money. That would be ridiculous.

Sparsely populated areas are put under double pressure, and poorer people on low incomes who try to use their local post offices, which are part of the social fabric, are being dissuaded from doing so. People in the north face surcharges from private carriers to bring goods to the north, and post offices are being cherry picked because of the way in which privatisation is being brought in. We are seeing yet another nail being driven into the heart of the system, and it is essential that we get cross-party support in Scotland and that we look to the minister to tell us exactly how she is going to deal with the Department for Work and Pensions to represent the views expressed by what I hope is the united voice of people here.

It is not too late. It is not yet 2010. People in many a community are only too delighted to see that we are discussing the issue. I thank Richard Lochhead for securing this evening's debate, and I hope that members across the Parliament have signed his motion.

Presiding Officer, I beg your permission to leave, as I have a pressing engagement, but I shall read the minister's response in due course.

17:26

Shiona Baird (North East Scotland) (Green): Richard Lochhead has secured an important debate on an issue that could have a severe impact, once again, on more vulnerable people and on those who live in rural areas.

The background to the debate has been well aired, but such is the guile with which the matter has been progressed that it needs constant highlighting. When the Post Office card account was introduced, it was never thought of as a temporary initiative. For any of us who were involved on behalf of families or friends, it was a new system to replace the old. Maybe we, or I, did not look at the small print, but I well remember having to persuade my elderly neighbour that the new card account would not change her ability to collect her pension at our local village post office.

However, the post office in our village of Auchterhouse closed down many years ago, so we depend on the much larger neighbouring village of Birkhill and Muirhead. The post office there shares its premises with a greatly valued chemist and pharmacy, which services a busy health centre just around the corner. A major campaign was launched several years ago, when the small but busy pharmacy was under threat. Its closure would have led to the closure of the post office, so the less mobile and those most in need of local services would have suffered most. Closure would also have added considerably to climate change, as many more vehicle miles would have been needed to get to Dundee to collect prescriptions. Our post office is not unusual. Most local branches share premises with other businesses.

Withdrawal of the Post Office's contract with the Department for Work and Pensions will mean a potential loss of £1 billion over seven years. That is not a significant amount in terms of Government money, but it is highly significant when just a small movement of trade away from those small businesses could sound their death knell. Trading margins can be low in small retail businesses, but we do not put a price on service to the community. Closure of small businesses in the local community is a loss not only to the staff but to the whole community. We are all the poorer when local services are lost.

One has to question the lack of joined-up thinking in the proposals when there is so much rhetoric on social inclusion, regeneration and rural repopulation—not to mention climate change and oil depletion. Does anyone put a price on the consequences of such decisions? It is not exactly a huge amount of money in Government spending terms, and I am sure that we could all identify a number of more wasteful projects or policies where we could make substantial savings—enough, probably, to open many of the recently closed branches.

In its informative briefing, Citizens Advice Scotland was right not only to be forthright in its criticism of the decision but to plan pragmatically for the withdrawal of the card accounts. CAS is realistic enough to know that, however loud and right the protest is, the decision has probably been made, so I support that organisation's forward thinking to ensure that the transfer to opening a basic bank account is as easy and stress free as possible. However, as has been pointed out, it must be recognised that banks are becoming equally scarce and inaccessible for the less mobile. With the huge rise in internet banking, I fear that the die is cast for many branches, especially in the more remote rural areas. We are failing to serve our people in the best way.

17:30

Stewart Stevenson (Banff and Buchan) (SNP): I congratulate Richard Lochhead on securing this timely debate.

It is interesting that most members' speeches have focused on rural areas. I think that that is a mistake, because this is not only a rural issue; it is also an issue for people who live in urban areas. I will explain why. In rural areas, the Post Office card account has an important role in supporting the post office network and preserving a lynchpin source of economic and retail activity in communities, but for its users it is an important instrument by which people can manage their money.

One of the great paradoxes in our society is that we expect the most sophisticated money management of the people who have least money. If I or other members here run out of money and realise that we will have to spend a little bit more, we will go to a cash machine, stick our card in and get the money out. We will not think too much about it. If we do, it might be a momentary twinge that we may have to account to our spouse when he or she does the accounts at the end of the month. I do that, even if colleagues do not.

For people with less money, however, basic accounting and the management of money is a constant and enduring challenge. In the old days, for people without much money, the most effective way of accounting was jam-jar accounting. People had a set of jam jars on the sideboard and they put money in the jam jar for the rent, for the tallyman, for the insurance policy and so on. They could see what they were doing.

The principle of jam-jar accounting is the one that the Post Office card account supports. People know that, each month, there will be a certain amount of money in the electronic jam jar and that they can spend it in the way that they plan. That is the value of this instrument: it helps people to manage their money. The important point is that the money is not in one big pot—they can think of it as being in different little pots that they can use for different purposes.

The POCA is one example—it is by no means the only one—of the Government approaching something in the wrong way. It had an open tender among financial organisations to establish the infrastructure for the POCA. An American bank won the contract, but it was not one of the major banks that already supply bank accounts to people the length and breadth of the British isles that could, at a relatively small marginal cost, have provided the service within the context of their overall computer processing systems.

The contract went to a US bank that had no track record of providing processing services in

the United Kingdom. The cost of providing the service was substantially higher than it would have been if the Government had sat round the table with the existing banks and co-operatively got them to provide a service. That is one reason why the Government has, almost perversely, sought to make it difficult for people to have the accounts—so the accounts wither on the vine and the Government does not have to provide economic support for them.

As I represent a rural area, I join colleagues in saying that in rural areas we value the post office above almost any other high street activity. We must make every effort to aggregate remaining economic activity into post offices. Banks will continue to close. I know that one branch of a bank closed because it was doing only 20 transactions a week. Other branches are doing a similarly low number of transactions. The post office remains important and this card remains important to many people. I hope that the minister can find a way, within the limits of the powers of this Parliament, to help people to preserve this card.

17:34

Mr Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): I congratulate Richard Lochhead on securing the debate. On a personal level, I wish him well as he enters the comparatively uncharted territory of a by-election.

It is imperative that we urge Westminster to extend the contract for Post Office card accounts past 2010. If we stand aside and allow the contract to expire, we will be held responsible for the closure of countless post offices, particularly in rural areas and poor urban areas.

When the pension collection system was switched from books to card accounts, it caused great inconvenience to many elderly people, many of whom were confused by the new system. Many distrusted the new card system and were frustrated that it would not provide a monthly account statement. However, at least they were still able to pick up their pensions at the post office. Now, if we are not careful, we will again force change on the most vulnerable people in society—pensioners and people on benefits. We will be asking people, especially in constituencies such as mine—Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross—to travel far from home to collect their pensions at a bank.

As Rob Gibson said, post offices are the hubs of small rural communities, but banks are often many miles apart in the Highlands and there is no guarantee that pensioners, who often no longer drive, will have a bank anywhere near them from which they can collect their pensions. My former

leader, Charles Kennedy, said that the Post Office card account

"gives easy and uncomplicated access to pensions at the most local level possible."

In the UK, no less than 4.7 million people have registered for Post Office card accounts. Clearly, something in the system appeals to benefit claimants, so it simply makes no sense to end the programme. When those 4.7 million people signed up, they were never told that the system's time was limited—they were misled, which was, I am afraid, wrong. Let us not wrong them again by allowing the system to end.

The strain that ending the card account system would put on pensioners is only a small part of the problem. We have heard that the Post Office card account contract generates £1 billion in income for the Post Office. Furthermore, sub-post offices are often or nearly always located in a store, as members have said. That is certainly the prevalent situation in the Highlands. The stores rely on the business the post office brings in to keep them viable. When—not if, but when—those post offices are forced to close because of the drop in revenue, the small businesses will lose their clientele and it will not be long, as other members have said, before they, too, are forced to shut their doors.

The position is simple. I believe that it would be hypocritical of us to have last week favoured the Scottish Executive's strategy for an ageing population and then for us this week not to declare genuine concern for the welfare of our pensioners. If we allow the destabilisation of social networks, which will result from post office closures, we will have failed in our duty to promote the growth of social capital, preserve the souls of our rural communities, provide for pensioners and protect our rural post offices.

17:37

Christine Grahame (South of Scotland) (SNP): Inevitably, at this stage of the debate, I may replicate points that have already been made, although I do not want to do so.

What strikes me first is that the vulnerable and less well-off people in our communities are given so few choices in life, and another is being withdrawn from them. Indeed, as I think Richard Lochhead said, 12 per cent of Scots do not have a bank account. Some people do not have one because they have difficulties in opening one. Someone else said that the great asset of the Post Office card account system is that someone cannot get into debt through using it. As Stewart Stevenson said, the people who use the card account system are those who are expected to manage their finances far better than, for example, MSPs manage theirs—I speak for myself.

Do members know that there are more sub-post offices in Scotland than there are bank branches and that they are in places that bank branches never reach? However, the sub-post offices are often being removed from such places now. There are some 1,400 sub-postmasters—that is a generic term; I know that there are sub-postmistresses—in Scotland and about 1,100 of their sub-post offices are simply not profitable to operate. The withdrawal of card accounts will obviously have a negative impact on key community businesses that are already fragile. They are also social talking shops—more of that later.

As I understand it, Lloyds TSB and the Clydesdale Bank currently have arrangements with the Post Office to allow clients to access their accounts at Post Office branches. It would be a good move to require the Bank of Scotland and the Royal Bank of Scotland, which I understand have about three quarters of personal banking business in Scotland, to make the same arrangement with the Post Office card account. That would allow us to support the cards further, rather than withdraw the current support.

Furthermore, there is a prospect that Government funding to the Post Office Ltd will cease in 2008. In Scotland, that funding represents a payment of some £15 million for delivery in rural areas of services that would otherwise be uneconomical. That would be a double whammy.

As members said, the small local shop that is attached to a sub-post office might be the only shop in the village. I have used such shops. They are the places where people meet. They are the places where people find out who is pregnant, by whom, or whether it is all just a rumour. They are the places where people find out who is unwell: if an elderly person does not turn up at the post office, people become curious and check on them. Those things happen. A sub-post office is more than just a place where people collect their money; it is a place where people meet and gossip. It would be a triple whammy if such places were lost to communities. It therefore seems ironic that the Post Office card account system is to be phased out at a time when the Minister for Communities is talking about regeneration and the Minister for Environment and Rural Development is talking about rural regeneration. The loss of the card system will lead to rural degeneration.

I will not take up more time. I support Richard Lochhead's motion and I hope that the minister will take the issue to Westminster and make our wishes come true.

17:41

Mr Adam Ingram (South of Scotland) (SNP): I add my congratulations to Richard Lochhead on securing the debate. His description of the situation in north-east Scotland applies equally well to the south-west, which I represent.

It is interesting that the Department for Work and Pensions feels the need to take a second bite at the cherry that is the post office network's share of the benefits transaction business. It appears that Post Office card accounts are taking a much bigger share of the business than was anticipated by the DWP when it conceded card accounts to sweeten the pill of automated credit transfer of benefit payments to bank accounts some three or four years ago. I understand that the DWP had anticipated 1 million card accounts, but there are now 4.5 million such accounts. The DWP underestimated the determination of sub-postmasters to stay in business and to serve their communities.

Those figures are also a measure of the Government's failure to engage the major banks, which in Scotland means the Royal Bank of Scotland and the Bank of Scotland, as Christine Grahame said, in the setting up of basic bank accounts for people on low and fixed incomes, who work with a cash budget from week to week, as Stewart Stevenson described. The great attraction of the card account for pensioners is that it incurs no charges. Therefore the risk of going overdrawn and receiving a letter from the bank that tells them that they have incurred a £25 penalty can be avoided. Until such matters are resolved and the post office network can be guaranteed an income from the provision of services to bank customers, the income from benefits transactions via card accounts will remain vital to the viability of that network, especially in rural areas.

The importance of the network to rural life cannot be overemphasised, as many members have said. Not only is the post office often the only provider of financial services in a rural area, but it is often the only shop for miles. For many pensioners in particular, such post offices offer a lifeline—in a very real sense—to other services and to the outside world.

I am sure that ministers are well aware of the vulnerability of the rural post office network in Scotland and I hope that they will actively represent to their counterparts in London the concerns that have been expressed during the debate. There is a feeling that the DWP has been duplicitous in withdrawing a hard-won concession on Post Office card accounts and, as Christine Grahame said, there is trepidation about the future of the subsidy to the rural network, which is due to end in 2008.

17:44

The Deputy Minister for Environment and Rural Development (Rhona Brankin): I, too, congratulate Richard Lochhead on securing the debate and I welcome the opportunity to debate a subject that is important to many Scots who live in rural areas. I have lived in a rural area for most of my adult life and the subject is important to me.

Both postal services and the payment of benefits are, of course, reserved matters—that has been mentioned in the debate and we are all aware of it. However, they are clearly important and they impact on people and communities throughout rural Scotland. We therefore have a strong interest in ensuring that any changes take account of the interests of our people and communities. I wanted to say that up front in my response to the debate.

I wish now to outline the facts about the Post Office card account and the payment of pensions and benefits. The POCA was introduced because the old system of payment books was inefficient and open to fraud and did nothing to encourage people to use the banking system. We know, and have heard tonight, that many customers like the accounts. They are simple to understand and use and they are still run through the local post office. However, the POCA has limitations. People who use a POCA earn no interest on their money. They cannot pay money into their account or save money on paying bills by setting up direct debits. Although the POCA is more efficient than the old system, it is still much more expensive for the Government to pay into a POCA than into a bank account.

The DWP will continue to fund the POCA until March 2010 as planned, as is set out in its contract with Post Office Ltd. In the meantime, the DWP will be working with Post Office Ltd to explore what alternatives to POCAs might be developed. At present, there are about 25 separate accounts that can be used for accessing benefits and cash at the post office, including basic bank accounts that are run by a commercial bank. Those accounts have been pioneered by the Government and the major banks to promote genuine financial inclusion. They are designed to maintain the best aspects of the POCA while addressing its limitations. They are simple to use and most of them do not allow the user to become overdrawn. Basic bank accounts encourage people to save and manage their money. Most important, they can be accessed over a post office counter as well as through a bank or cashpoint. Many members have emphasised the importance of accessing accounts through post offices.

As we have heard in the debate, changes in benefit payment arrangements present issues for many rural post offices. Many members have stressed how important post offices are to rural

communities, especially to older people, and how highly people value them. I agree with that and I absolutely recognise the importance of post offices, particularly to rural communities. However, the reality is that the vast majority of rural post offices are far from being commercially viable.

The rural post office network across the UK has been shored up since 2003 by an annual sum of £150 million from public funds and by an agreement with Post Office Ltd to prevent all avoidable closures. The funding is due to end in March 2008. The no-avoidable-closure policy has been extended to the autumn to allow for further consideration of the way forward and for a managed approach to network change. In the longer term, the network must evolve to meet current demand.

Stewart Stevenson: I do not disagree fundamentally with what the minister has said. However, I wonder whether she might be prepared to suggest to the UK Government that it renegotiates the contract and gives it to another party. I quote from condition 15.4 of the terms and conditions for the card accounts. This illustrates my point and illustrates how the system works.

“J.P. Morgan Europe Limited”—

which is the bank that processes the accounts—

“sends your information to another country which does not have the same data protection laws as the UK.”

If we brought that role home to a UK-based company, we might get a more cost-effective deal for the customers.

Rhona Brankin: We have to continue talking with the Department of Trade and Industry and the DWP. We are all agreed about the importance of having a range of products available in local post offices. We will keep talking. I do not think that there is any disagreement that we need to come up with a solution that meets the needs of people in both rural and urban communities, recognising the financial exclusion that is faced by many people and ensuring that people can get access to high-quality banking products that benefit them fully.

Mr Davidson: May I help the minister on that point?

Rhona Brankin: Go on, then.

Mr Davidson: In retail and commerce, if someone's back is against the wall, they seek to diversify their business, market themselves and get additional business through the door. Perhaps the Government could play a role in this. Perhaps in the minister's inquiries to the south she could find out what savings could be made if all the benefits were included in a single system that would continue to get the post offices business.

Rhona Brankin: We are considering a range of alternatives. I will go on to outline some of the pilots that are under way. No final decisions have been taken about the way forward. We need to be able to seek a solution, which is exactly what we intend to do.

We have emphasised the particular Scottish needs and priorities in our discussions with the UK Government and representatives of the Post Office. We will not accept a one-size-fits-all approach that fails to take account of Scottish communities' needs and circumstances. We have to ensure that any changes are managed strategically, rather than allow the network to decay in a haphazard way, which we must avoid. We advocate involving communities fully in consulting on and shaping the future of the network.

There are two encouraging initiatives. The first is the pilot work that Post Office Ltd has conducted with some of the Government funding to which I referred. It has considered how services can be provided more efficiently while continuing to meet local demand and retaining the social value of post offices, which many members have mentioned.

The lessons of several schemes, including a mobile van around Wick and a travelling sub-postmaster near Castle Douglas, have contributed to a recent encouraging report from Post Office Ltd that might help to shape a more sustainable future for the postal network.

The second initiative is being launched by Communities Scotland. It is setting up a programme that will offer business advice to post offices in deprived areas throughout the country. It is a modest measure—there is a limit to how much we can do legally—but I am sure that it will be cost effective.

I welcome today's debate.

Richard Lochhead: Does the minister agree that it would send out a powerful message if she was able to say on the record that the policy in Scotland is to support the retention of Post Office card accounts?

Rhona Brankin: I have said that we have to be able to work out a solution that best suits people who live in rural areas and urban areas and which recognises that post offices are hugely important to the social fabric of communities. People should be able to access a range of banking products and benefits in the most efficient way. We have not yet found that solution; more consultation has to be carried out. However, the pilots will work with local people to try to identify the best local situations. We need to be able to learn from the pilots. We have not yet found a final solution, but Scottish ministers will continue to work with Government

ministers in the south to ensure that Scotland's needs are taken into consideration.

The Government has an interest in the future of our rural post office network. We acknowledge the social value of post offices, which we will continue to reflect in our discussions with the UK Government.

There is to be a DTI-led consultation on the future of the post office network later in the year. I encourage people to engage in the process to make their views known. We need collectively to seek a solution that is appropriate and adapted to the needs and circumstances of rural Scotland.

Meeting closed at 17:54.

Members who would like a printed copy of the *Official Report* to be forwarded to them should give notice at the Document Supply Centre.

No proofs of the *Official Report* can be supplied. Members who want to suggest corrections for the archive edition should mark them clearly in the daily edition, and send it to the Official Report, Scottish Parliament, Edinburgh EH99 1SP. Suggested corrections in any other form cannot be accepted.

The deadline for corrections to this edition is:

Thursday 6 April 2006

PRICES AND SUBSCRIPTION RATES

OFFICIAL REPORT daily editions

Single copies: £5.00

Meetings of the Parliament annual subscriptions: £350.00

The archive edition of the *Official Report* of meetings of the Parliament, written answers and public meetings of committees will be published on CD-ROM.

WRITTEN ANSWERS TO PARLIAMENTARY QUESTIONS weekly compilation

Single copies: £3.75

Annual subscriptions: £150.00

Standing orders will be accepted at Document Supply.

Published in Edinburgh by Astron and available from:

Blackwell's Bookshop
53 South Bridge
Edinburgh EH1 1YS
0131 622 8222

Blackwell's Bookshops:
243-244 High Holborn
London WC1 7DZ
Tel 020 7831 9501

All trade orders for Scottish Parliament documents should be placed through Blackwell's Edinburgh

Blackwell's Scottish Parliament Documentation
Helpline may be able to assist with additional information on publications of or about the Scottish Parliament, their availability and cost:

Telephone orders and inquiries
0131 622 8283 or
0131 622 8258

Fax orders
0131 557 8149

E-mail orders
business.edinburgh@blackwell.co.uk

Subscriptions & Standing Orders
business.edinburgh@blackwell.co.uk

RNID Ttypetalk calls welcome on
18001 0131 348 5412
Textphone 0845 270 0152

sp.info@scottish.parliament.uk

All documents are available on the Scottish Parliament website at:

www.scottish.parliament.uk

Accredited Agents
(see Yellow Pages)

and through good booksellers

Printed in Scotland by Astron