

MEETING OF THE PARLIAMENT

Wednesday 25 October 2006

Session 2

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DEPUTY FIRST MINISTER—Nicol Stephen MSP

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DEPUTY MINISTER FOR JUSTICE—Hugh Henry MSP

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DEPUTY MINISTER FOR EDUCATION AND YOUNG PEOPLE—Robert Brown MSP

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MINISTER FOR ENVIRONMENT AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT—Ross Finnie MSP
DEPUTY MINISTER FOR ENVIRONMENT AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT—Rhona Brankin MSP

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MINISTER FOR FINANCE AND PUBLIC SERVICE REFORM—Mr Tom McCabe MSP
DEPUTY MINISTER FOR FINANCE AND PUBLIC SERVICE REFORM—George Lyon MSP

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MINISTER FOR HEALTH AND COMMUNITY CARE—Mr Andy Kerr MSP
DEPUTY MINISTER FOR HEALTH AND COMMUNITY CARE—Lewis Macdonald MSP

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DEPUTY MINISTER FOR PARLIAMENTARY BUSINESS—George Lyon MSP

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DEPUTY MINISTER FOR COMMUNITIES—Johann Lamont MSP

Tourism, Culture and Sport

MINISTER FOR TOURISM, CULTURE AND SPORT—Patricia Ferguson MSP

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MINISTER FOR TRANSPORT—Tavish Scott MSP

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PRESIDING OFFICER—Right hon George Reid MSP
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PARLIAMENTARY BUREAU

PRESIDING OFFICER—Right hon George Reid MSP
MEMBERS—Bill Aitken MSP, Chris Ballance MSP, Ms Margaret Curran MSP, Margo MacDonald MSP, Alasdair Morgan MSP, George Lyon MSP

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25 October 2006

Scottish Parliament

Wednesday 25 October 2006

[THE PRESIDING OFFICER *opened the meeting at 09:00*]

Time for Reflection

The Presiding Officer (Mr George Reid): Good morning. The first item of business is time for reflection. Our time for reflection leader today is Katie McAdam from Barnardo's Youthbuild project.

Katie McAdam (Barnardo's Youthbuild Project): Good morning. I am happy to be here today. Young people like me do not always get the chance to say what is important to them. I hope that my account of the past year will inspire other young people and influence everyone here.

I am 18. I am an apprentice bricklayer—the only female bricklayer that Campbell Construction Group has. I left school with no qualifications. I wanted to go to college. Three times I applied and three times I was knocked back. I was really disappointed. I was keen on construction, but I knew that to get a job I needed experience and that to get experience I needed a job.

A friend told me that Youthbuild could help. Youthbuild is for people like me. It opens doors for young people who do not get a chance to go into work or to go to college or to gain experience. I got the placement that I wanted, which is working with bricklayers. I had to prove my ability to do such a physical job. At first I was just labouring, but I proved that I could keep up and soon I was laying brick and learning new skills. It was difficult being the only female, but the guys are great and I am now accepted as part of the squad.

I have since gained lots of experience and a long list of qualifications. Youthbuild encouraged me to apply for an apprenticeship with Campbell's. I got help with my maths so that I could pass the Construction Industry Training Board skills test. The interviews were very competitive, but my hard work and determination paid off and I was offered a bricklaying apprenticeship.

My job means a lot to me. It allows me to have money and to support my family, gives me something to get up for in the morning and enables me to work with people who believe in me and to believe in myself. When I say that it gives me something to get up for in the morning, I should point out that I start work at 8 o'clock. It is hard, but there is more to life than work.

Youthbuild has really improved my confidence. I have tried new activities such as sailing, and I am the secretary of the young builders club, where we all get to have a say about Youthbuild.

I am proud of what I have done. Others, too, have recognised it. Last month, I was highly commended in the 2006 United Kingdom young builder of the year awards. I have achieved a lot in the past year, and it has made me realise that many young people like me will struggle without the chances and support that I have had. All young people have the right to a positive future.

It has been a great year, but I offer one word of caution: in spite of all this success, you still have to pay your mum digs money.

Early Years Inquiry

The Presiding Officer (Mr George Reid): The next item of business is a debate on motion S2M-4931, in the name of Iain Smith, on behalf of the Education Committee, on its seventh report of 2006, on its early years inquiry.

09:04

Iain Smith (North East Fife) (LD): I am pleased to open this debate on the Education Committee's report on its early years inquiry. The committee's decision to hold the inquiry pre-dated my convenership, but I was pleased to have the opportunity to hear most of the evidence and to preside over a thorough and considered inquiry.

The committee was extremely consensual in its approach to the inquiry and agreed the final report unanimously. I start by thanking members of the committee from all parties, who helped to achieve that; our committee adviser, Professor Kathy Sylva of the University of Oxford, who is a world-renowned expert on early years and gave the committee invaluable advice throughout; and the clerks to the committee, for their extremely helpful input into the process and, in particular, for drafting the report. I also thank the many people throughout the country and beyond who contributed to the inquiry.

As well as taking the usual written and oral evidence, members went on the road. We visited local authority and voluntary sector early years operations in Glasgow and West Lothian and held an informal round-table discussion with private sector operators. Last October, we visited Sweden and Finland to find out about early years policies and practice there. We invited many of those who gave evidence to the inquiry to an informal reception here at the Parliament last night, both to say thanks for their invaluable contribution and to get their feedback on the report. I am pleased to say that, on the whole, the feedback was positive. Indeed, some organisations indicated that they are already acting to implement some of the report's recommendations, which is welcome.

In June, the committee held a high-profile launch of the report at the Cowgate under-fives centre here in Edinburgh. We also printed 10,000 copies of the executive summary, which has been widely distributed throughout the country. We have been encouraging a debate on the report since its publication. We welcome a number of stakeholders in the public gallery who have made the journey for the debate.

We are pleased that in its response to the report the Scottish Executive accepted many of our findings, although—as the debate will no doubt demonstrate—there are one or two areas in which

it prefers an alternative route towards what is, in effect, the same end.

No investment is more important than that which we make for our children. Time and again during the inquiry, we heard that investment in early years will pay dividends in the future, not only in the development of children's social skills, in their educational success and in their potential to contribute to wider society, but by helping to grow our economy by maximising people's opportunities to contribute to the workforce.

For the Education Committee, the impact of early years services on the individual child is paramount. All children should be cared for in a situation that stimulates their social, emotional, physical, cognitive and language skills, whether that care is provided by their parents, by relatives, by childminders or in a more formal nursery, playgroup or pre-school setting.

We recognise that economic activity is one of the best ways out of poverty and to promote social inclusion, and that an important element of that is the availability of quality child care. If our economy is to grow in the way we want, we need a vibrant early years sector that will give parents confidence that their children will be cared for while they are at work. Investment in early years services gives us, in effect, a triple whammy, by providing benefits to children, their parents and society at large. That is why the committee agreed unanimously that early years services must be an investment priority and that we need to find the resources to sustain that investment over the medium to long term. Early years must no longer be the Cinderella service in our education system.

Much has already been achieved. We now have universal entitlement to 12.5 hours of pre-school education for all three and four-year-olds. There has been a lot of progress towards improving staff qualifications throughout the sector. The Scottish Commission for the Regulation of Care and Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Education, through their inspections and reports on early years provision, have helped to drive up quality over the past few years. The child care strategy that the Westminster Government published in 1998 was a big step forward, but it pre-dates devolution. It is perhaps time to develop a new strategic framework that sets out how investment is to be targeted at the early years sector in the coming years.

A considerable sum has already been invested in the sure start programme. Although that investment has been welcomed, not enough is known yet for us to be able to say how effective it has been. That is why the report welcomes an Executive commitment to evaluate the sure start programme.

What form should future investment in early years take? Committee members visited Sweden and Finland, where investment in early years has been heavy and sustained over a long period. In many ways, it is tempting to replicate some of the good practice that we saw there. However, although there is a lot to learn from the Scandinavian approaches—not least about the respect that the sector is given in both countries—ultimately we have to accept that Scotland comes from a different starting point. Much is already in place, and we have different social problems and taxation and benefits systems. The challenge for us is to improve our early years sector in a way that fits best with the existing structures in Scotland and deploys the resources that are available to us most effectively.

The committee recognises that the single most important factor in improving quality in the early years sector, and the area in which we will get the biggest return, is raising skill levels throughout the workforce. Although there has been a big improvement in recent years, and despite the valuable and important job that the early years workforce does, it remains overwhelmingly female, poorly trained, poorly rewarded and undervalued.

Much of the debate since the report was published has been about the qualifications of the early years workforce. The argument has centred on whether teachers or people with other nursery qualifications are best placed to provide the stimulating experience for children to which I referred earlier.

We have a lot to say in the report about teachers in early years settings. Although the area is controversial, and some of our recommendations have been rejected by some commentators, all the evidence from the effective provision of pre-school education study—the only major, recent, large-scale, longitudinal study of early years that has taken place in the United Kingdom, albeit largely in England—is that children, particularly those from the most challenging backgrounds, make significant gains in their social and relationship skills and in their capacity for subsequent learning at school when supported by teachers, particularly from the age of three onwards. That is why we are uneasy about moves by some local authorities, such as Glasgow City Council, to redeploy teachers away from nursery schools.

That said, more important than the qualifications that people have is how they work with their colleagues and engage with the children. A feature of all the examples of best practice that we saw during the inquiry was a multidisciplinary team of professionals working together in integrated teams.

In the longer term, I would like to see a move towards a new set of qualifications for the early

years workforce that draws on the best from the present workforce to provide a comprehensive and flexible series of qualifications that ensure that all who work with young children can help to develop their social, emotional, physical, cognitive and language skills.

Since the committee's report was published, the Executive has published its long-awaited workforce review. I am pleased that it meets many of the aspirations in our report, although perhaps it does not go far enough in some important respects. The workforce review says little about how we can recast training for early years workers, including teachers, so that there is a much greater degree of flexibility than at present, with flexible learning methods and different entry and exit points depending on the kind of early years job an individual wants to do. However, that point is acknowledged in the Executive's response to the committee and we are assured that it is being taken forward, which is encouraging.

The committee was impressed by the family centres that we went to see during the inquiry, both in the voluntary and local authority sectors. Too often, family centres are seen as part of the landscape only in deprived areas, where a range of social problems means that people require extra support. At the excellent Whitdale early years centre in West Lothian, we saw a non-stigmatising service for three and four-year-olds that was seamlessly integrated with other types of care. We considered recommending a roll-out of family centres throughout Scotland and we commissioned research on the cost of doing so. However, we found that the cost of making such provision in every community in Scotland would be enormous and could not be justified as a responsible use of resources.

There has been some criticism of the committee's report on the ground that it does not recommend universal services. In fact—and this is not double-speak—we do recommend universal services, but that does not mean that every community, or indeed every child, should receive exactly the same type of service. In some communities, there might be a need for only an early years hub, where parents can find information about where the playgroup is or who the local registered childminders are, where they can get extra support and where parents and relatives can get training. In other areas, needs are more complex and a more sophisticated and comprehensive range of services is required. As a result of the high capital and revenue costs of family centres, they should be sited where they are likely to have the most impact, that is, in areas that face the greatest challenges.

We learned during the inquiry that many children have difficulty making the transition from early

years settings, particularly the change from very informal learning to more formal learning in primary 1, because sometimes they are not mature enough to cope. That is why we are pleased to hear that in its on-going curriculum review the Executive has pledged to introduce some of the best and most innovative early years approaches to P1, while at the same time ensuring that the informal learning in the early years sector is appropriately cognitively challenging.

We have a mixture of early years services in Scotland, some provided commercially, some provided by the voluntary sector and some provided by local authorities. That diversity might be welcome, but what is less welcome is that HMIE still identifies a significant quality gap between local authority services and others. It is vital that we strive to ensure that quality in the private and voluntary sectors is brought up to the same level as in local authorities as quickly as possible. A drive to improve the skills and qualifications of staff might go a long way to pushing up quality. We were encouraged by the willingness of the private sector providers to whom we spoke during the inquiry to support their staff in improving their skill levels. However, as we say in the report, perhaps local authorities need to build on the co-ordinating role they have taken with the workforce development fund in training staff in all sectors, including the private sector.

Another important issue is that the pace of change in the early years sector needs to be such that all parts of it can cope. The moves to professionalise the service that were announced in the workforce review will inevitably lead to upward pressure on salaries. It is important that we take steps to ensure that that does not force private providers to put up prices to the extent that they become unaffordable to many parents.

We found some evidence during the inquiry that voluntary sector initiatives can run into funding difficulties because of the complexity of some of the funding streams in local authorities and centrally funded projects. We heard reports of grants and revenue funding for early years facilities in the voluntary sector being awarded through a number of different departments of the same local authority, each with its own application forms, reporting requirements and monitoring systems. I am glad that the Executive acknowledges the problem in its response and is taking steps to address it.

In opening the debate on behalf of the committee, I recognise that change will not happen overnight, but I hope that the report has stimulated a wider debate on the early years and, more important, that it has helped to focus attention on what we need to do to develop the sector over the next 10 years.

I move,

That the Parliament notes the conclusions and recommendations contained in the Education Committee's 7th Report, 2006 (Session 2): *Early Years* (SP Paper 596).

09:16

The Deputy Minister for Education and Young People (Robert Brown): I begin by thanking the Education Committee for initiating the debate and for the early years inquiry that preceded it, as well as thanking Iain Smith for his comprehensive opening comments. The early years inquiry is a welcome contribution to the wider debate on early years services and it comes at a time of significant development in the area. As Iain Smith mentioned, I was involved with beginning the process when I was convener of the Education Committee. My only regret is that I did not have the opportunity to make the Finnish or Swedish visits that the committee undertook as part of the inquiry.

One of the hallmarks of this Parliament is its increasing focus on the prospects of our children and young people in Scotland and the growing understanding of what is necessary for children to thrive and prosper, so that they can take up the opportunities that are available to them and fulfil their potential in this increasingly challenging world.

We are all aware that children's earliest experiences play a fundamental part in shaping their lives. Future health, well-being, skills and abilities can depend on what happens to children in their earliest years. That is why it is important that we as public policy makers do our utmost to ensure that children have the best possible start in life.

The committee's report states that Scotland must have an early years sector that can provide the highest quality pre-school education, care and support for younger children, particularly those from families that face extra challenges. The Scottish Executive and every party in the chamber fully share those aspirations.

Our response to the committee gave more detail than I have time to go into today, but I take this opportunity to highlight some ways in which we are investing in the early years sector.

Parents want flexible, high-quality early years services for their children and, as Iain Smith rightly said, the key to improving quality is investment in the workforce. Iain Smith said that in August we published the report of the national review of the early years and child care workforce and the Executive's response to it. We set out how we plan to improve services and encourage investment in staff who work in the sector, which is

central to the Education Committee's recommendations.

The main features of the proposals include: the development of quality leadership in the early years and child care sector, which is central to almost everything that we try to do in Scotland, not least in education; the creation of a career structure for the workforce—we want to attract high-quality staff into the profession and keep them there, so providing routes for career progression will help to retain good and committed staff; and a fairer deal for partner providers of pre-school education, which was touched on in the Executive's review and by Iain Smith today. We have started by providing an extra £5 million a year to local authorities so that they can increase the amount that they pay to partner providers, enabling them to increase investment in their staff. We have also considered the guideline recommended floor level for support.

The committee's careful report recognises that effective development of leadership in the sector and the workforce will be incremental. It will build on success and experience and will widen opportunities and the workforce's understanding of the potential of its role in delivering so importantly at the front line through working with children. Such measures, and the other proposals listed in the Executive's response, are intended to give members of the workforce opportunities to develop their careers and gain qualifications. By investing in the sector and developing staff, we will improve the quality of care that is provided to our children. However, as Iain Smith rightly said, what we do will have to be balanced and appropriate for the sector.

Let me say a word about the composition of the workforce. One of our central aims is to ensure that children who face disadvantages—whether they live in deprived areas or not—can access high-quality provision. We believe that the broad approach that we have set out is the most practical way of achieving that goal. That approach will also deliver direct benefits to provision for children under the age of three, which many in the sector believe is the area that requires most improvement.

Let nobody doubt the Executive's commitment to teachers in Scotland. We have provided record numbers and record investment, and we are moving towards our target of having 53,000 teachers by the end of this session of Parliament. Teachers will continue to have an important role in pre-school provision, particularly in local authority services. Indeed, some of the curriculum changes that are being progressed mean that teachers can add value because they can be deployed across pre-school and early primary, and can provide continuity and a similar style for children who

move from nursery to primary 1 in the same school. However, as Iain Smith rightly says, there is a risk of curtailing the development of flexible and innovative services. Decisions on such matters rightly are taken locally, so that they reflect the varying needs across urban and rural, town and city, and affluent and deprived areas.

Fiona Hyslop (Lothians) (SNP): I acknowledge the Executive's moves to make improvements in primary 1 and in the transition from nursery to primary, but how many additional nursery teachers has the Executive employed? If the minister cannot tell me the answer now, does it not cast some doubt on how the Executive is meeting its targets for class-size reduction in P1? Is it taking nursery teachers out of nursery classes?

Robert Brown: As Fiona Hyslop is well aware, decisions on the deployment of teachers in local authorities are a matter for the local authorities themselves. They are the employers. As I have tried to suggest, they can take a comprehensive view across nursery and primary provision. Increasingly, they are able to deploy people to meet a number of different needs.

In its report, the committee touched on the balance between teachers and other professionals in the early years workforce. Iain Smith was right to mention the potential in the sector to develop new styles of professional involvement. The Executive is taking such ideas forward.

A key point to come out of the research that Iain Smith referred to and other research is the acknowledged need for reflective practice, that is, the ability of members of the workforce to consider day-to-day activities in nursery school or early years provision more broadly, and to use their skills to add value to local areas.

I mentioned the curriculum review a few moments ago. A curriculum for excellence will produce a curriculum for children aged from three to 18. Moving to a single curriculum that starts at age three recognises the importance of early years provision in a child's education. The early stage of the revised curriculum will extend to the end of primary 1. As highlighted in the Executive's response to the committee, the changes to primary 1 are likely to be among the most significant that flow from the new curriculum framework. We have therefore accepted the need for detailed planning and continuing support for staff in making the changes.

The committee report refers, in a number of its recommendations, to improving support for vulnerable children from an early age. As the committee heard in evidence, sure start Scotland—which is a big programme—is already delivering a wide range of services for vulnerable children from birth. In July, we launched pilots of

pre-school services for two-year-olds. The pilots are running in Dundee, Glasgow and North Ayrshire and will give some of our more disadvantaged children an extra year of pre-school provision, creating a platform for further development of services for younger children. We will rigorously evaluate the pilots to help us identify what works for vulnerable children in the age group and their families. As has been suggested, we will also consider the lessons that we can learn from the sure start programme.

The programmes that I have mentioned are only part of the picture. Other services for parents and families also significantly influence young children's lives. My final point is about early years services, which benefit from broader improvements to children's services, such as those in "Getting it right for every child" and the development of integrated children's services planning. The services that sit within the Education Department are not the only ones that impact on young children: high-quality services for early years learning is a commitment right across the Scottish Executive.

I conclude by genuinely thanking the committee for its report. I look forward to the debate, which is relatively short for such an important subject. MSPs have insights and knowledge from their contacts throughout Scotland, which the Parliament values immensely. They make a major contribution to our understanding of the mosaic of provision of early years services. In this area above all, we share a common and central aspiration for our young people.

09:25

Mr Adam Ingram (South of Scotland) (SNP): In commending the Education Committee's report and its recommendations to Parliament, we are contributing to a growing consensus—both here and throughout Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development countries—that early childhood education and care should be seen as a public good and should therefore be universally accessible and affordable for all children and families.

The consensus has been driven by a number of factors: a recognition of the importance of early education to children's social and cognitive development; a response to the needs of parents, especially mothers participating in the labour market; and the need to tackle child poverty by enabling parents with dependent children to take employment or training opportunities.

More recently, the benefits of early intervention have come to the fore. The youth justice improvement group report attracted some sensationalist reporting, but there can surely be no

doubt that identifying and tackling early signs of social, emotional and behavioural difficulties through support for children and families makes eminent sense. It is a national scandal that one in 20 of our children is referred to children's reporters for care and protection or for offending behaviour. The problem can be attacked only by dealing with root causes, not by treating symptoms.

We are lagging behind in the development of early years services, and little progress has been made since devolution. Universal access to free part-time nursery places is limited to 11 to 12 hours per child per week. The cost of formal child care is still prohibitively high for most parents, apart from the wealthy. The child care element of working families tax credit is too narrowly targeted to have a major impact.

Of course, we get what we pay for. The fact is that Scotland spends less than 0.5 per cent of gross domestic product on all early years education and care services. The minimum recommended by the European Commission's child care network is 1 per cent. Social democratic countries such as Sweden and Denmark spend more than 2 per cent.

We should be mindful that this Parliament does not have all the policy tools to hand with which to effect change. The tax and benefits systems could and should be used as key drivers for change. Although we welcome the provisions of Westminster's Work and Families Act 2006 to extend maternity leave and pay, Gordon Brown seems determined to stick to tax credits rather than move to provider subsidies. As well as easing the burden on parents, supply side subsidies would help to stabilise funding for services and make it easier to deliver improved staff pay, training and conditions.

With regard to funding, the committee found inconsistency, complexity and incoherence in funding streams and reporting requirements, and called for rationalisation and streamlining. The City of Edinburgh Council's suggestion that the Executive should create a single early years budget to cover sure start, the child care strategy, pre-school education, the working for families programme and aspects of the change fund has considerable merit and would raise the profile of and give impetus to early years work in local authorities. Such reform would provide a mechanism to encourage the reallocation of resources into early years provision and would attract additional funding for early intervention. It would also dovetail with moves to integrate children's services, which we are all keen to promote.

The family centre model that has been mentioned could deliver a range of services including care for under-threes and nursery

education for three and four-year-olds, in addition to family support. It has a great deal to offer, not least in facilitating multidisciplinary team working. Family centres would be particularly valuable in addressing the problems that are associated with poverty and disadvantage. Given that they are the centrepiece of England's 10-year strategy for child care, it is disappointing that the Executive regards the question whether more family centres are needed as a matter for local consideration and considers a three-year planning horizon to be sufficient for the delivery of high-quality services. The Scottish National Party begs to differ.

Finally, I turn to workforce issues. The committee's report states:

"The single most important factor in improving quality in the early years sector is raising skill levels across the workforce."

We are disappointed with the Executive's response to the national review of the early years and child care workforce and we share Unison's concern that the Executive has spurned the opportunity to develop a national framework of grades to create a career ladder for nursery nurses and has not sought to pursue national pay bargaining. Our nursery nurses surely deserve better.

We are deeply concerned that the Executive has explicitly rejected the committee's view on the role of teachers, which is that the use of qualified teaching staff ought to be a requirement in the delivery of pre-five education in disadvantaged areas because such staff have the necessary expertise to identify additional support needs and thereby facilitate early intervention.

Fiona Hyslop will set out the very different approach that we intend to pursue in government. In the meantime, I commend the Education Committee's early years inquiry report to Parliament.

09:32

Lord James Douglas-Hamilton (Lothians) (Con): We have heard three constructive speeches on a significant report that covers an area of vital importance. It is right that we are focusing on early years education, given that the most contemporary strategy document, "Meeting the Childcare Challenge: A Childcare Strategy for Scotland", is from 1998 and pre-dates devolution. The fact that the committee recommended unanimously that a review is required is a signal to the Executive that we on the Education Committee believe that we are on the right track.

I will mention three issues: first, the provision of family centres in our most deprived areas; secondly, the concept of early intervention for children, particularly those who have additional

support needs; and thirdly, the pressing need for a sufficiency of trained nursery teachers.

Many people view family centres as the future of early years provision in areas of deprivation. They involve multidisciplinary teams that provide, under one roof, a comprehensive array of integrated children's services, which include the pre-school entitlement of three to five-year-olds and wraparound care for children whose parents are at work. Family centres might also provide care for under-threes, information and training for parents and family carers, a base for local childminders and perhaps even health services. Alongside those services, children in care and parents who have been targeted for support will be assisted, which will help to reduce their isolation.

As our convener mentioned, we visited one of the few existing centres, the Whitdale centre in West Lothian, and were impressed by the quality of the various services that are provided. A recent study concluded that the wider the range of services that a family centre provides, the more effective it is. Provision of information and support for parents are considered to be essential in order to maximise the quality of care and learning at home. There is now a body of research evidence that shows that high-quality pre-school education for three to five-year-olds enhances opportunity.

I turn to the effectiveness of provision for under-threes. Unfortunately, the sure start scheme in Scotland has not yet been evaluated—I urge the Executive not to allow it to be forgotten—but evaluation in England suggests that the scheme has struggled to reach the most disadvantaged children. The committee feels that much of that deficiency is the result of the current status of provision for nought to three-year-olds as the poor relation of care for three to five-year-olds. Currently, one-year-olds are only one quarter as likely as four-year-olds to attend child care, and funding for the under-threes has lagged behind that for older children, which has increased.

Fiona Hyslop: Will the member give way?

Lord James Douglas-Hamilton: I will give way briefly, because I have quite a lot to say.

Fiona Hyslop: The committee is concerned that 36 per cent of children under three receive full-time care from their grandparents. Will the member comment on that?

Lord James Douglas-Hamilton: The point that Fiona Hyslop made is highly relevant and the issue needs to be focused on. I ask the minister to confirm in his wind-up speech that the sure start scheme in Scotland will be properly evaluated as soon as possible.

Early intervention can be effective but, for that to be the case, it must take place sufficiently early,

which is a question of facilitating access to social care specialists and of addressing the problems of parents and children by supplying them with services and support. That is better than waiting until children are affected by more severe problems that require more heavy-handed treatment. Within whatever structures are established, early identification of children who have additional support needs is essential.

That leads me to my final point, which is about the training of sufficient nursery teachers. Of course, the better trained and more experienced the staff, the better are their chances of identifying children for whom intervention is appropriate. The number of teachers in early years establishments has fallen by more than 10 per cent in the past two years alone, despite the backdrop of there being a more qualified workforce. Nursery teachers now comprise just 16.5 per cent of that workforce. I regret to inform Parliament that some councils even appear to have made a policy decision to phase out teachers from the early years sector.

Although I do not doubt that the new wave of childhood studies graduates should play a key role, I note the inspectorate's opinion that enhancement of skills and, in particular, leadership among the workforce is crucial for improvement. Surely, to reduce teacher numbers is not consistent with the drive to make early years education more closely focused on developing the child's skills in thinking, reasoning and remembering. The committee is highly supportive of improving the development of those cognitive skills in the early years and thinks that that could be delivered through "purposeful, well-planned play". The intention is to build the foundations for later more formal education.

The report contains suggestions on how training of teachers could be improved and it recommends that initial teacher training should be better integrated with training of other early years staff. In our view, early years education should be made a much more attractive destination so that applicant shortages for the places that exist can be reduced.

As the committee has highlighted, key opportunities to reform early years provision remain. The long-term benefits to a child of being started off on the right footing are indisputable, and it is crucial that that be achieved if we are to face up to the competitiveness and demographic challenges that are predicted for Scotland. To that end, I have elaborated on three sets of proposals. The first was about the need for family centres, the second was about early intervention, especially for children with additional support needs, and the third was about changes to the workforce that are required and the need to have more qualified teachers—nursery teachers, in particular—to underpin early intervention.

I hope and believe that the Executive will use the committee's recommendations to update its strategy and that it will establish a national framework to evaluate results. Our children are our nation's future—we must not fail the Scotland of tomorrow.

09:38

Ms Wendy Alexander (Paisley North) (Lab): I am delighted to have the chance to participate in the debate. As Education Committee members know, I was present for only part of its deliberations because I was on maternity leave, which gave me the opportunity to become an active consumer of early years services for the first time.

There is a growing consensus that the need for support for parenting and early years provision is one of the big issues of this century. To put the matter in an historical context, the 18th century is known for the growth of Scottish universities, the 19th century is remembered for the extension of primary education to all and the 20th century was when provision of secondary education was extended to everyone.

The early 21st century should be marked by a movement towards the introduction of child care that is available to all. If that is not to be characterised by provision that is based on the size of one's bank balance, we politicians need to be willing to move forward with the notion of an entitlement to pre-five child care for all families. The best example that we have of such provision so far is the entitlement to part-time nursery places for all three and four-year olds. The question that emerges from the committee's deliberations is what next. How will we extend that entitlement and make it real for more families over the next decade?

There are people—I count myself among them—who will question the cost. New entitlements are costly but, as we approach next year's spending review, I invite Parliament to consider a truth that applies to any parent. Imagine for a moment that a parent won the lottery on their child's 16th birthday. However large were their winnings on that day, they could have only a limited impact on the child's life chances because by 16 a child's character, behaviour, confidence, outlook and ambitions have all largely taken shape. However, a parent who wins the lottery when their child is only six months old could bring their wealth to bear on the child's outlook, experiences, ambitions and life chances. We cannot all win the lottery but, as guardians of the public purse, we can use the resources that are at our disposal to best nurture young lives.

Happily, we are in an age from which the rhetoric of the nanny state has largely gone, and

all parties recognise society's role as a partner of parents in raising their children. I will mention to the minister three areas from the Education Committee's report that commend themselves as the next steps. As we have heard from the committee convener, the minister and others, the single most important factor in raising the quality of the pre-five experience is the workforce's skills. Therefore, I am delighted with the way in which the Executive has responded in its review of the early years workforce and I hope that—as I think the Executive intends—a new profession of early years educators will develop in Scotland. I also hope that that group of professionals will be accorded respect that is commensurate with the importance of their responsibilities.

The committee identified the zero-to-three age group as a priority. I will draw for a moment on my experience: if a woman has young children with her for 14 hours a day, seven days a week, she simply cannot be the world's best mum all the time. Although mother and toddler groups have their place in the patchwork of mixed and variable provision, surely somewhere in the critical first three years of life there is space for an entitlement to a few hours a week of stimulation, support, learning and play.

Fiona Hyslop: Wendy Alexander mentioned having a child around for fourteen hours, but my young child does not sleep. She is right about entitlements, however. She mentioned universal provision, but the problem is that much of the funding for support for zero to three-year-olds comes through the working tax credit and other provision for working families. If we agree that some support is required for all mothers of zero to three-year-olds, we must find a way of having a supply side subsidy, even if it allows only a few hours of support a day.

Ms Alexander: The joy of not having sat through the whole of the committee's deliberations is that I can say that we need to think about the entitlement to support for zero to three-year-olds as we move forward. The workforce must come first and provision for zero to three-year-olds should come second.

We have an entitlement to two and a half hours a day of care for the three-to-five age group. It is popular and effective and it improves life chances. The convener rightly made the case for family centres where they are appropriate, particularly in deprived areas. In the final moments of my speech, I will add one idea for consideration. Children in Scotland has done much work recently on examining the role of food and nutrition in the pre-five sector—it has asked for a meeting with ministers on that, which I hope can be accommodated. All over Europe, children in nurseries spend the morning making their own

lunches—less Play-Doh and more dough. However, I want to make a serious point: by the time our children go to school, one in three has a serious obesity problem. The problem starts before they are five so, as we have taken creative play to the heart of the pre-five experience, it is time to bring that imagination to the debate on healthy eating.

I welcome the guidelines that the Executive has offered for nutrition in the pre-five sector, but we need to do more. I would be grateful if the Executive would consider discussing piloting schemes to extend the entitlement of two and a half hours of nursery care to cover lunch at the end of the morning shift and an earlier start for the afternoon shift. That strategy would have multiple pay-offs through better nutrition for children and a social experience of eating. The international evidence on that is compelling and, if we endow our children with a healthy appetite for life, we will endow the next generation with experience of healthy eating that has, in truth, largely escaped our generation.

I welcome the Executive's commitment to streamlining the funding, which came through strongly in the committee's deliberations. I look forward to the minister's response.

09:46

Robin Harper (Lothians) (Green): There is so much in the report that I preface my remarks by congratulating the committee on the report's depth and breadth and on the basic premises behind its recommendations.

I will pick up on what Wendy Alexander said about nutrition, which I have brought up in a parliamentary question on nutritional standards in schools to the Minister for Education and Young People. At the moment, local authority nurseries are inspected—inspection does not extend to all nurseries. The minister's response was:

"The proposed legislation builds on the Scottish Executive's existing Hungry for Success programme which does not extend to the independent sector."—[*Official Report, Written Answers*, 8 August 2006; S2W-27291.]

Barnardo's also received a communication from the Executive—which it passed to me—that states that

"It is not normal practice for the Executive to place a legislative requirement insisting the independent schools sector introduce Executive policy."

The Schools (Health Promotion and Nutrition) (Scotland) Bill provides an opportunity for fresh consideration of which pupils need to be protected by nutritional standards. All provision that is subject to inspection by the Scottish Commission for the Regulation of Care should be included. Standard 3.4 of the national care standards for

early education and child care up to the age of 16 already states that children and young people should

“have access to a well-balanced and healthy diet (where food is provided) which takes account of ethnic, cultural and dietary requirements, including food allergies.”

That should be a reality for all children.

Robert Brown: There is a debate to be had about regulation versus guidance, but does Robin Harper accept that the important issue is that we are able to move forward? Provision throughout the non-state sector—private and voluntary—is disparate, so it is important that we work with the grain of what takes place in those establishments, where much good work is being done.

Robin Harper: I accept that but, as the minister said, the important point is that we are already beginning to work with the grain. There is general acceptance throughout the country that—as Wendy Alexander emphasised—nutrition for young children is extremely important. It is not just another concern; it is highly important.

Wendy Alexander mentioned the importance of play and creativity in early years education. I was delighted to note that despite complaints from primary schools about pupils not being fully prepared for primary school by their nursery provision, the committee report takes an opposing view, which is that primary schools should be adapting the curriculum in year 1 to include more play and creativity.

I would be appalled if we started measuring the success of early years education in academic terms using literacy and numeracy—we should not go down that road. I believe that about 80 per cent of what children have learned by the time they leave school at 16 has been picked up outside school. It is important to keep that in mind. Experience teaches children so much, and their experiences during early education are vital for developing motor skills, relationship skills and so on. Music is important for developing rhythm and movement. Colour is also important. There are even possibilities in respect of early risk assessment. We must also consider the importance of stimulation and being in a social environment. Those are the things that we should be considering: many of them are not measurable and are almost numinous, but when we go into a nursery, we know a good thing when we see it and that should be sufficient for us.

A lot of really good work has been based on that of people such as Montessori and Froebel and on the approach of the Steiner schools. I recommend to the Executive the work that has been done by the Rudolf Steiner school of Edinburgh and Balgreen primary school, which have been working together to establish ways of incorporating

creative activities and music into the primary curriculum. That could feed back down into nursery education.

The Education Committee's report and the speeches so far this morning have rightly mentioned the importance of integrated services. Yesterday, I had the privilege of visiting the new north-west Kilmarnock area centre with the Audit Committee. The centre is due to open on 13 November. The Executive should visit it—I know that it is supported by the Executive—and consider the special way in which it has been developed. The centre houses a comprehensive mental health service, a nursery and family centre, social day care for older people, a community health cafe and a fitness suite. There is also a new teach-and-treat dental facility. Everything is there for the community in that area, particularly when it comes to child care.

That development underlines the committee's recommendation that investment needs to be focused where it is needed. Such centres would not be appropriate in some places, although the centre that I mentioned is extremely appropriate for north-west Kilmarnock. It would be advantageous to follow the development of that centre to find out how services can be developed in the future. The services that are provided at that centre cannot simply be rolled out across Scotland because they depend so much on the willingness of all concerned to work together. A north-west Kilmarnock area centre existed previously, so the people at the new centre are ready to work together as they were already doing. They will move into the new premises together and all the connections have already been made. That sort of bottom-up community spirit can be deployed to the best advantage of our young people wherever it is appropriate to operate such facilities and wherever there are the opportunities to build on such work.

I will close with a bit of blue-sky thinking. If we had a citizens income—a basic income for all citizens—there would be far wider choice for mothers and fathers about how they care for their young children, whether they buy nursery care or use the nought-to-three care that is available in their areas. That is one little thought for the future.

09:55

Christine Grahame (South of Scotland) (SNP): I will focus on the haves and have-nots. I accept the benefits of the limited entitlement to nursery care for three and four-year-olds, but issues arise about parents who do not have much money because they are on benefits or have very low incomes. One parent explained to the Communities Committee that, notwithstanding that she had access to provision, she had to pay the transport costs for herself and another child to the

nursery, which she could not afford. The Deputy Minister for Education and Young People talked about flexibility, but that parent does not have access to such flexibility. When the limited provision was finished, she could not take up a job because she had to look after her child. I will touch on integration of taxes and benefits later, but that is an example of the real issues that affect individuals in vulnerable groups and areas.

The Education Committee's report and the speeches so far have been interesting. The report states:

"Investment in the 0-3 sector has not increased at the same pace"

as elsewhere. That age group is a very vulnerable stage, when it is possible to catch a child and turn his or her fortune around such that a family pattern need not be repeated generation after generation. Accordingly, we should invest far more in family centres, to which the committee report and members have referred.

I am grateful to Adam Ingram for advising me that family centres deliver a range of integrated services. People do not work in silos anymore and social work, education and health care can all be accessed in the same place. Family centres provide support for carers of children and families. In addition, nutritious meals are served, so those centres are an excellent development. However, I note that there are only 162 family centres in Scotland, half of which are run by local authorities and the remainder of which are in the voluntary and private sectors.

That brings me back to evidence that was given to the Communities Committee on poverty and deprivation. Two single parents advised that committee that they had run such a service. They did not call it a family service, but it was an integrated unit that attracted seedcorn money from the usual suspects—Lloyds TSB and others. When they ran out of that money, however, they had no more funding, so it all ended and crashed around them. People who had begun to build confidence in the family centre lost that and concluded that there was no longer much use in attending the centre because it would not be there a year later.

There are problems in respect of continued funding, so I will move on to that issue, which I cannot believe we are still raising. Years ago, the Justice 1 Committee discussed early intervention to prevent people from going to jail, and it discussed the idea that some children who are not given much help between the ages of nought and three will end up on a criminal path partly as a result of that. We went on about simplified funding streams—not just for local authorities, but in the voluntary sector.

Paragraph 133 of the report mentions—yet again—

"the complexity of funding arrangements."

We are seven years into this Government, yet we still cannot sort out funding for something like the Jeely Piece Club. If the Executive cannot sort out funding for the Jeely Piece Club, it is not going to be doing very much for the Scottish budget. The situation must be dealt with. We cannot have people competing for funding streams, making applications and cross-applications over and over again. Surely that ought to be remedied PDQ.

Another terribly important issue is the workforce for early years provision. I am quite surprised that nobody from the Scottish Socialist Party is here for the debate—its members seem always to be banging on about how nursery teachers should get more pay, but have not bothered to contribute to the debate. There we go—they must have other things on their minds. We must value the people who deal with young children. We should not decide that people who deal with children aged from nought to three are worth only £6 an hour, but that is apparently the median pay for child care staff. Cleaners are paid more than £6 per hour, but people are asked to accept lower pay than that for looking after vulnerable children as they develop, for relating to them during the day, for giving them experience of interacting with and reacting to adults, and for developing their social skills with other children.

That takes me on to childminders. I am indebted to the Education Committee for this information:

"More than 24,000 children ... are currently looked after by ... childminders in Scotland."

I presume that that means those who are registered, and that we are not talking about unofficial childminders. One third of those children are under three, yet I read in the report that childminders have

"no current requirement for any training prior to an application for registration being made."

That is a stone that we should look under. I do not blame childminders, but we should train and support people who look after children, often in the community, and on whom people who have little money often rely for child care.

That takes me on to unofficial childminders. I think the current jargon is “kinship carers”: the grandparents, aunts, sisters or whoever who look after children. People who are on benefits could be trained and paid to provide child care. I think—I am not sure about this—that people can earn no more than £20 per week before their benefits are affected. Surely it is not beyond the wit of anyone to increase that level so that people can earn some money and still receive their benefits. Those people could include pensioners, if they were properly employed. Many grandparents provide child care but are not paid to do so, although they have many skills. Wendy Alexander took me back to dim and distant days and, like Fiona Hyslop’s child, mine did not sleep. I do not know about 14 hours’ care—something more like 24-hour care was needed.

Seven years down the line, the matters that I raise are serious. The minister talked in his speech about the “mosaic of provision”. I call it a patchwork—which is patchy—rather than a mosaic. We cannot continue to have the figures to which Adam Ingram referred for children who are going into the children’s hearings system. Most of those children need care and protection. I do not always blame the parents, who often come from situations in which they needed care and protection. We must break the societal link and give those children a chance. I will use a cliché again—we cannot continue to have Scottish children who are born to fail because our society does not give them the proper support.

10:02

Mr David Davidson (North East Scotland)
(Con): I congratulate the Education Committee on producing a report that highlights a range of issues. The committee has done a pretty fair job. My only regret is that it has not told the Executive what to do, because it is fairly obvious that the committee has a better grasp of things than some of our Executive colleagues do.

The formative years are essential. People either have a good set of formative years or they do not—it is as simple as that. If people do not have good formative years, they are disadvantaged from an early stage. Whoever starts with a child—parents, grandparents—is not taught about that. We do not teach young people how to be parents, although doing that is essential if children are to be given a real start in life.

I have a granddaughter who will be three at the end of the week and who lives in England. I hear about the opportunities that she can access in her small rural community. A lady there recently set up in the private sector a music exercise that involves not just dancing and playing instruments, but learning about tunes and interacting with other

children. That is all that that lady does. My granddaughter also goes to the local state-run nursery and to something else. All that is because her parents know how to give her a chance and some advantage. I rest my case on the need for young parents to be supported, preferably from before they have children.

Comments have been made about sleepless nights. My regional aide’s daughter has just turned one and my aide can count on the fingers of one hand the number of hours of sleep that she has had this week. That is just part and parcel of having children. She is managing to obtain childminding so that she can continue to have a part-time job, to keep her brain engaged. She and her husband can afford that, but not everybody can. A huge issue is access to child care and how we support people to find that care, which allows them some life of their own. People may have an economic requirement to get to work. Wendy Alexander mentioned two and a half hours’ care a day, but in the school holidays that will hardly keep somebody in a part-time job unless they put their hand in their pocket to buy something else.

There are huge areas of deprivation. No one has talked about rural areas, in which transport is a major issue and in which the critical mass does not always exist to keep a pre-school facility going. Some primary schools have pre-school operations, but children still have to reach them and such children do not go on the school bus. Deprivation is experienced in a series of places—not just in high-rise flats in Glasgow, but in rural areas throughout Scotland. Everybody says that it is wonderful to be brought up in the country, but it is not. The country is a dangerous place—it is not safe. Such areas do not have pavements and some communities do not even have play areas. Neighbours can be quite a distance away. We need to consider a social network when dealing with early years provision and support to help families to give their children the best start in life.

There is little doubt that the quality of staffing varies. We know that many staff have qualifications and that others are trying to obtain further qualifications. Job security is not guaranteed. In Aberdeen not too long ago, some staff lost their jobs because of cuts. It is staggering that the minister cannot say what the staffing level should be, as I presume that he has some input into the grant-aided expenditure settlement for local authorities. The moneys that are voted to go to local authorities must have some correlation with the number of bodies on the park. I agree with the minister that it is up to a local authority to decide where money should go in the system, as long as it goes into the sector for which it was originally intended. I am not a great believer in ring fencing, but I expect all the money for the education sector to be spent on that sector. If the

amount is deliberately being pushed up for the early years sector, it is vital that it should be seen to go to that sector.

The committee mentioned vulnerable children in its report. How early will we start to assess every child's individual needs, such as health or disability needs? That is the key issue. How many young children are written off at primary school because they are deaf or do not have good hearing when those facts could be picked up early? Such assessment should happen in the early years sector.

As the minister knows, I am totally against mainstreaming, but how will we support children who need specialist care? Their parents are obviously under great pressure, and we must ensure that those young vulnerable people, who will have special needs for all their lives, are given the support that they need. The Executive must consider that. In the previous debate on special needs, the minister failed to answer the questions, so I hope that he says something about that today.

Robin Harper talked about several interesting issues. He is right to consider the child's needs holistically—we should do that. He talked about a citizens wage. I recall that he did not support the Conservatives in the first session when we talked about a voucher scheme that parents could use for different types of early years provision, whether from the independent sector, the voluntary sector or a council. Such a scheme would give parents choice. All providers would have to meet the right standard. Will Robin Harper eventually see his way to taking a slightly different approach?

We have heard interesting and valid comments from the SNP. However, the SNP suggests interfering with the Westminster-based tax credits system, which is slightly outside our remit this morning. I would have thought that the SNP would want to consider more carefully what the Executive is doing and what the committee has covered. However, there is an element of truth in the idea that the issue comes down to affordability.

Fiona Hyslop: In paragraph 139 on page 32 of its report, the committee identifies the importance of the tax and benefits system in ensuring a joined-up approach to child care.

Mr Davidson: I am pleased to be reminded of that, but the point is that neither the committee nor the Executive has the powers to do anything other than identify that. We must work on what the Executive is currently doing within the powers that are available to this Parliament. We must use what we have while we can. If we do that as a primary exercise, it would be the best way forward.

We are not all experts on this matter, but we are all genuinely concerned that we give children in Scotland the best opportunity. I know from the

primary head teachers that I have spoken to throughout the country that children who have been through a fairly successful nought-to-three and three-to-five programme blossom earlier in school. They are more receptive, more participative and so on. As has been said in relation to family centres and the like, we must ensure that there is reasonably equal access throughout Scotland to all the services for all Scotland's young children.

10:10

Mr Kenneth Macintosh (Eastwood) (Lab): I do not know whether colleagues have seen the film "Parenthood", but a favourite scene of mine in that film is when one set of parents—Rick Moranis and his wife—are talking to their daughter. Rick Moranis says to his daughter, "You are really falling behind in your Japanese classes and your calculus is not going as well as expected. Frankly, you'll need to improve your attitude if you're going to get the grades you need for university. Your whole career could be in jeopardy." The camera pulls out and he is talking to his three-year-old daughter. I do not know why that thumbnail sketch of pushy, middle-class overachievers should appeal to me. I said as much to my wife as we dropped off our four-year-old at his Kumon maths class after nursery.

The point is that there is a diverse range of needs and demands in our society for pre-school education, for both the formal education sector and voluntarily run playgroups and toddler groups that provide child care, including wraparound care, for our hard-pressed working families. There is also a need for early intervention for families with the most chaotic backgrounds.

What we have achieved over the past 10 years is remarkable. The expansion of nursery education for all three and four-year-olds who want it in this country perhaps ranks as the proudest achievement of the Parliament. It is one in which we can all take pride. Only time will tell, but I suspect—I certainly hope—that future generations will reap the benefit of the commitment that we are making in investing in the education of our youngest children.

The evidence submitted to the inquiry makes it clear that merely increasing the hours available in pre-school education is not what is now needed. The committee and our special advisers looked in detail at the cost of various policy choices and their benefits to children and their families. We shied away from the idea of simply doubling the 12.5 hours of pre-school that is currently available.

Flexible provision—coupled with higher quality provision, which I will return to shortly—that is adapted to the needs and wishes of families in all

our different communities is where we see real gains being made in our vision for Scotland's early years provision.

I will touch on a few areas in the sector, in relation to which I felt points emerged from our inquiry. I will start with family centres. I believe that all the committee members were hugely impressed by the two family centres that we visited—the one in West Lothian and the Jeely Piece Club in Castlemilk in Glasgow.

The Jeely Piece Club is run by the voluntary sector, although it clearly receives a lot of support and assistance from the local authority. It has managed to reach out to families across the community. There were pre-school services, playgroups and toddler groups. Crucially, support was provided for parents and support was provided for families with the most difficult home backgrounds, including drug abuse.

There were issues about how those families mixed or did not mix with others, but the centre had made it work. It has created an ethos of a non-stigmatised service that is used by some out of choice but by others out of need and it has delivered for families in the community. We wish to see that model of service being expanded throughout Scotland—not necessarily in family centres everywhere—but it is important that integrated support is available in areas where such investment will make the biggest difference.

It is interesting that the Jeely Piece Club is voluntarily run. It is worth noting that we want to maintain the diversity and pluralism that the early years sector currently offers. Not everyone wants the educative hothouse approach to their child's learning that I touched on earlier. As Robin Harper mentioned, nobody necessarily wants an overly strong emphasis on formal lessons or on providing an early start to numeracy and literacy.

I am conscious that in our drive to push up standards and quality we are in danger of driving out some of the informal care that is available, for example through playgroups. Such provision is highly valued by parents who are more interested in allowing their children to socialise in a safe and secure environment and to enjoy being children than necessarily start on the formal curriculum. Christine Grahame mentioned that perhaps the most important step we could take in securing such provision would be to secure its funding and it was clear that sure start was the most useful of the many sources of funding available to the family centre that we visited and to the sector. What was surprising was the lack of hard empirical data to build on the anecdotal evidence that sure start is making a clear difference for our young people. I believe that the Executive has noted and is acting on our suggestion for further research on the matter. In the meantime, work can still be done to

rationalise the current cocktail approach to funding early years provision.

Having praised the diversity of the sector, I should make it clear that I see local authorities as the key partner in any early years strategy and in particular in driving up quality. Every member who has spoken in the debate has touched on the importance of improving quality in early years education and care, the emphasis that we want to put on training and education for the workforce and the need to improve the qualifications of those involved in educating our youngest children. In particular, much has been said this morning about the importance of the presence of a teacher in each early years setting. As the son of two teachers, I do not want to detract from that, but we should put it in context. In our own children's nursery, I would challenge anyone to distinguish between the teacher and the nursery nurses. The leadership and input of the teacher are essential, but we should not decry the professionalism of the nursery nurses and others who work alongside them.

Perhaps equally important are the links that exist between the primary school and the pre-school or nursery provision. It strikes me that the biggest quality gap exists between the stand-alone, private sector providers and the nurseries that have the closest links to their primary school—they are often located in the school playground or next to the school. If we are to drive up quality and improve the status and qualifications of the workforce, we must tackle the divide between what happens at pre-school and the start of compulsory education at five.

I hope that the committee's report offers a number of practical steps that the Executive can take to improve early years provision, as well as a vision for the next 10 years, around which we can all unite to make the next decade as successful for our children as the past 10 years have been. I commend the report to the Parliament.

10:17

Donald Gorrie (Central Scotland) (LD): I am pleased to speak in the debate. The report, which I have read, is excellent. It covers all the main points and is written in comprehensible English, so I give it very high marks.

Every speech that we have heard so far has contained some useful comments. If everyone can consider themselves to have been patted on the back, I will not have to mention them again.

My relationship to nursery probably goes back further than that of any other members. My father worked in India in the forestry service. Nursery prepared me for politics. I remember that at a sports day there was a tug-of-war between the

boys and the girls. We discovered that the girls were going to have the teacher, who to my five-year-old eyes was a very large lady, pulling on their side. I accepted that, because girls are weaker than boys so a bit of help is okay. However, I then noticed that the girls' end of the rope was tied round a tree. Politics is like that—I spend all my time pulling against the tree.

My first point—all the points have been covered to some degree in the report and in other speeches—is about involving the whole family, including grandparents, aunts and so on. It is necessary to use parents' talents and to bring on their talents in addition to using the talents of the paid professionals who are helping them. It is necessary for them to work together. We have a tendency in this country to compartmentalise and draw a line between what nursery nurses can do and what teachers can do, and so on. You may have a cleaner who, in many ways, is far better at teaching the kids than other people are. Everyone should be part of the team, including families. Given that children also learn at home, more parents and families should be encouraged to teach their children and show them nice books with pictures.

My enthusiasm for history began with H E Marshall, the lady author of books including "Scotland's Story" and "Our Island Story". The books had smashing pictures of Bruce toinking de Bohun over the head with his battle-axe, Black Agnes of Dunbar, Catherine bar-the-door and other splendid people. I read those books at home. If we harness the home and the family and bring all the services together, we will get on better than we do at the moment. A lot of good work is being done, but too much of it is done by way of bits here and there.

My second point is on valuing staff. My elder son has been a Liberal Democrat councillor in London for only the past six months, but he made an observation that had escaped my notice in the course of 35 years as a politician. He told me that public bodies—councils, Governments and so on—find it much easier to invest in things than in people. Someone can be photographed outside the local family centre or whatever, but a council cannot do that if it has recruited some really good people because it is harder to photograph that sort of thing. People can also be a problem: they can become difficult and need to be moved on in some way, whereas a building or equipment cannot answer back. We must invest in people and value them, by putting in place a good career structure. That is what matters, not what we call people—early years educators or whatever.

I do not denigrate people who teach in universities. However, at the moment, there is a hierarchy in which those who teach in universities

are considered to be very clever and valuable; those who teach in secondary schools are considered quite clever and valuable; those who teach in primary schools are considered to be not so clever and valuable; and those who teach and work in nurseries are considered to be at the bottom of the heap. If the situation cannot be turned around, we should at least have an equality of esteem. Teachers of three to fives can make more difference to a young person's career than can their university teacher. Training is also important. Many staff are good at their job, but they do not understand all the problems and difficulties. In bringing together the education and care of children who live at home or in care, staff need to understand that.

Given that I am one of the members who always enthuses about play, I will put in a plug for play. Whether they are in schools or public places, the design and use of playgrounds is important. Play teaches children to socialise by helping them to learn that they have to take their turn on the chute and so on. It also teaches them risk management and makes them less obese.

I turn to investment and the need for simplification in this area, which one or two other members have mentioned. There must be a simpler and better organised way in which to invest in early years education. Again, we are not quite as bad at investment as the English are. I am assured that some head teachers in England now have to employ people whose only job is to extract money out of the confused public funds that are available to schools. Schools are having to employ people who are expert at getting funding for schools out of all the funny funds that now exist. Schools have to do that because mainstream funding is not adequate.

Although the situation in Scotland is not as bad as it is in England, the investment flow is far too complicated. Mr Brown needs to cut this Gordian knot. I will present him with a sword—or whatever it was that Alexander the Great used—and say, "For God's sake, sort out this muddle of confusion over funding." A lot of money is available; let us direct it better into an overall scheme. We have done a lot of good work, but we now need to do it better. The report is a good step forward.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Trish Godman): We move to wind-up speeches.

10:24

David McLetchie (Edinburgh Pentlands) (Con): I commend the Education Committee for its report. A number of useful and entertaining points have been made in the debate, some of which drew on personal experience.

For me, the striking feature of the report is the interlinking nature of early years education. First, it

has to provide support for families within which live some of the most vulnerable children in our society. It also has to provide child care, which is an issue that affects all families—regardless of income or circumstances—and nursery education, in which we prepare our children for formal schooling. Adam Ingram rightly highlighted the point that the City of Edinburgh Council made in its evidence on the desirability of having a single budget for early years services that have to embrace those very different facets. The point was well made; it is worthy of consideration by the Executive and our councils.

I turn to nursery education. Although the Scottish Executive has now introduced a universal entitlement to a free nursery place for every three and four-year-old, the provision is limited to around 12.5 hours per week and to school term times. Christine Grahame and other members noted that point. The last Conservative Government made a significant step forward in the provision of nursery education through its nursery voucher scheme for four-year-olds, which was scrapped by the incoming Labour Government. Funding of some £70 million had been committed to the voucher scheme project. I have no doubt that, in the fullness of time, the scheme would have been extended to three-year-olds and that it would have been directly comparable in terms of its scale, scope and cost to the present scheme.

There is one fundamental difference between the old voucher scheme and the present system, however. Our scheme empowered parents to make the choice between a local authority nursery school and one that was run by the voluntary or private sector. The scheme was much more flexible in enabling a parent to top up nursery provision; parents who are at work or who want to work require to do that, given the limitations of the 12.5 hours per week provision of the current system.

That freedom of choice is anathema to a Scottish Executive whose principal objective, in tandem with that of Labour-run councils, is to squeeze choice out of the education system. Accordingly, we have a situation where a council that is not in the position of being able to be the sole provider of nursery education is not only the main provider of nursery education but the commissioner of provision from the voluntary and private sectors. That is a mistake, as I am sure Mr Macintosh will happily recognise.

Mr Macintosh: Rather than harking back to policies that were rejected almost 10 years ago, perhaps Mr McLetchie will recognise that, although there was nothing wrong with the voucher scheme, it emphasised child care. The old scheme put the interests of families and parents before those of the child. The nursery

provision that all members of the Scottish Parliament introduced has the interests of the child at heart. Of course, in emphasising the education of the child, it is also of benefit to the parent. More important is that it brings social benefit to the whole country.

David McLetchie: Both schemes have their merit. The key issue in the debate is who runs the system and who can make the choices. Do we want a scheme that takes a child-and-parent-centred approach, where the parent makes a choice from the range of providers that suits their family circumstances, or one that dictates the choices and options?

I turn from nursery education to look at the child care side of the coin. In his 2004 budget, Gordon Brown introduced a salary-sacrifice child care voucher scheme, which enables a parent to forgo up to £55 per week or £243 a month in salary in order to take that remuneration in the form of a child care voucher. The benefit to the parent is that the voucher is neither taxable nor subject to the employee's national insurance contribution. Accordingly, when the comparison with financing child care out of after-tax income is made, the parent saves almost £23 a week, or £100 a month. From the employer's standpoint, the voucher scheme has the added benefit of the employer not having to pay their national insurance contribution on the amount of the salary foregone. That more than covers the administrative cost of the scheme. The child care voucher can then be spent by the parent on child care that is provided at a nursery or by an agency-supplied nanny, as the parent chooses, to fit the parent's circumstances and the child's needs. The underlying principle is therefore one of parental choice and the Chancellor of the Exchequer's child care voucher scheme would fit more happily with the Conservative nursery education voucher scheme than it does with the current system. I have praised Mr Gordon Brown for embracing the Conservative principle of choice, which I commend to the Scottish Executive, but it is a matter of regret that his child care voucher scheme has so far had a miserable level of take-up.

The most recent figures indicate that across the United Kingdom only 30,000 parents of children under five used child care vouchers in 2005-06. By 2009-10 it is estimated that only 90,000 parents will have used vouchers. Why is that? I am sure that that is the question that Fiona Hyslop was about to ask, which I will answer. The responsibility lies with employers. Earlier this year, I received a letter from a constituent who is a teacher. She complained that the City of Edinburgh Council does not offer such a child care voucher scheme to its staff, although the scheme would be of considerable benefit to her and other working mothers employed by the council. I was

prompted by her inquiry to ask the Scottish Executive a number of parliamentary questions about the scheme and the extent to which it is available to employees in the public sector in Scotland, but I was told that, in relation to councils and non-departmental public bodies, the information is not held centrally—

Christine Grahame: That is a surprise.

David McLetchie: A fair comment from Mrs Grahame.

That information should be held centrally if we are to devise a joined-up strategy for child care, nursery education and support for families. Moreover, the public sector, as employers, should take a lead on the matter. The Scottish Executive should require all councils and public bodies under its control to offer child care voucher schemes to their staff. Given that some 25 per cent of the workforce in Scotland is employed in the public sector, such action would provide a huge boost to the scheme, help many families and cost the Scottish Executive not one penny piece out of its budget. I am sure that Mr Robert Brown will see the sense of that and I commend the policy to him.

10:32

Fiona Hyslop (Lothians) (SNP): This morning's meeting of the Parliament has offered an interesting reflection on how far Scottish democracy has progressed. It started with time for reflection led by an 18-year-old female bricklayer and—in a Parliament in which 40 per cent of members are women—it continued with a debate in which nine speakers have been men and only two have been women, despite the fact that the subject matter has traditionally been regarded as a women-led agenda.

We must acknowledge, as the Education Committee's report does, the importance of the women—particularly those in the workforce—who provide most of the care, support and education of young people. The committee witnessed and applauds the pride and passion of all the people who work in the early years sector. Katie McAdam said that all young people deserve a positive future, which is exactly what the report and the debate are about.

Lord James Douglas-Hamilton said that we must invest in early years for the Scotland of tomorrow. He is right. We heard about the cognitive development that is important if we are to build a knowledge economy. Members also said that if we are to tackle issues to do with justice and antisocial behaviour and ensure that our young people have good social skills and behaviour, action must be taken at a very early stage. Perhaps we should consider early years intervention and support in the context of the

justice debate. Christine Grahame touched on that.

Early years support and intervention are about the Scotland of today as much as they are about the Scotland of tomorrow. It is important that children in the here and now receive support in a safe and stimulating environment. When we and the Government consider budgets, we must acknowledge that care and support for today are as important as investment for tomorrow.

Important points have been made on interesting strands of the debate. The Education Committee supported the momentum in the early years of devolution for the provision of education for all three and four-year-olds, and much of the debate has focused on nursery provision for children in that age group. However, the committee feels most passionately about the zero-to-three agenda, to which the Parliament can make a difference. It is not local councils but health authorities that have the lead responsibility for children under three in Scotland. The fourth edition of "Health for All Children"—Hall 4—noted that there has been a reduction in access to health visitors, who are the only point of contact for many people with children under three. We must consider who provides services if we want there to be universal provision, which is a theme in the committee's report. Universal provision does not mean that everybody should receive the same service; it means that everybody should receive something, which is the message that emerges from the debate.

We must consider provision for children under three, which has been described as a "mosaic", a "cocktail" and a "patchwork". As the committee said, services must be integrated at the point of delivery. The system is currently a morass and is far too complicated. We must simplify the structures around provision.

Wendy Alexander said that everyone should have an entitlement to services, but interpretations differ as to what the entitlement should be. David McLetchie made the case for a voucher system—whether those are vouchers in the traditional sense or tax credits—but he talked about a demand-led approach to child care. He was right to say that Gordon Brown has introduced such an approach but, although the voucher scheme has helped some people, it has not improved the delivery of child care services. People need choice and flexibility, which is why a shift in emphasis from a demand-led approach to child care to an approach that considers supply and integrates services would provide more flexibility and choice and deliver better services, particularly in areas that are hard to reach, whether they are rural areas or deprived communities, as David Davidson said. The issue is at the heart of the debate.

With the exception of the Labour Party, I think that every party in the Scottish Parliament would like the Parliament to have increased economic powers. The debate on fiscal autonomy always focuses on economic matters such as changes to corporation tax, but perhaps the Parliament could take a lead and consider supply-side issues and the benefits of having increased powers over funding streams for child care. Perhaps that is the dialogue that we should have with Westminster. The committee makes a benign statement about the integration of funding streams, but integration is genuinely needed if we are to improve service delivery.

Parents in Scotland pay up to 70 per cent of their child care costs, unlike parents in other countries. Committee members took part in fascinating visits to Finland and Sweden, where parents pay only 30 per cent of the costs. That makes a huge difference to families. We also considered the experience of children in other countries. In Helsinki, every child receives the same food and learns the social skills that are so important—Wendy Alexander mentioned nutrition.

The extension of the nursery school day, even by a few hours, would help to improve children's experiences. The Scottish National Party is committed to increasing nursery provision by 50 per cent and acknowledges that nursery provision is not just about education but can help parents. The SNP thinks that every child should have access to a nursery teacher—currently only 40 per cent of children do. Those two policies could make a difference.

The committee's report should be regarded as a staging post and not as the end of a process. It should represent the start of dialogue and debate. At last night's reception, I heard that as a result of the report, East Lothian Council is interviewing candidates for the post of early years development officer working with children under three and the private sector. Change is happening, which is the report's purpose.

There are big gaps in the national review of the early years and child care workforce. Consideration must be given not just to improved provision but to structural matters. It was remiss of the Executive to neglect the consideration of nursery teachers in the review.

We must provide support for grandparents if we are serious about the zero to three-year-olds. Research shows that 36 per cent of under-threes and 15 per cent of three to five-year-olds are looked after by grandparents, many of whom have finished their working lives and are looking forward to their retirement. They support their children and grandchildren out of love, so the least that we can do is to provide support for them. Ken Macintosh talked about the informal arrangements in

playgroups and other support. Nobody says that we must be prescriptive about grandparents, but their support for their grandchildren should be acknowledged and valued through some kind of social provision. Again, that cannot be done through vouchers or a demand-led approach. If we are serious about supporting grandparents in Scotland, we must have an integrated supply mechanism to fund child care.

I will end on a point about the early years funding strategy. The City of Edinburgh Council is absolutely right to ask why we have a separate schools budget but not a separate early years strategy and funding stream. Such a strategy would allow integration with child protection work in the health sector—a lot of integrated work is happening on that—and additional support for learning. A single funding stream that gave local authorities flexibility in deploying resources—as the committee's report states, they are the best placed to do that—is a meaningful measure that could come from the committee's report and the debate. I hope that the debate is not the end of a committee inquiry but the start of a continuing debate that has some meaning, because we are considering not only the children of Scotland's today but the children of Scotland's tomorrow.

10:41

Robert Brown: I said at the start of the debate that I anticipated high-quality speeches from members, with many issues on which to reflect. That has indeed been the case, which makes it difficult to summarise the debate and draw out the main strands. Many excellent speeches and good points have been made.

Adam Ingram suggested that nothing has happened on early years since devolution, but that is quite simply not the case. A great deal has happened since devolution, even simply in funding terms. Ken Macintosh talked about the measures on nursery school provision which, as he rightly said, are a major achievement of the Parliament. Since 1999, we have provided workforce development funding of £30.8 million. We provide funding for parenting support, the bookstart scheme, the Family Fund and sure start Scotland, the funding for which is at present £56.9 million, increasing to £59.9 million in 2007-08. We also have the children's strategy, the funding for which is £44 million. A lot of money is going into early years learning.

I accept that we are still developing and that we have reached a certain stage in our progress on early years. A lot of good work has been done and many new facilities have been put in place. Issues arise to do with co-ordination, availability throughout the country, funding streams and perhaps a strategy, which has been mentioned.

Several good points have been made about those issues. However, we start from a high base and we are making progress, with many actions having been taken. The issue is how we can make the existing provision more effective, universal, accessible and affordable.

As Iain Smith rightly said, the measures are being taken for a series of purposes—for personal child development, to improve the economy of the country and to address the child care needs of parents and families. The important issue of families has been highlighted. The linkages between early years education in formal settings, such as nurseries and play centres, and what happens in families are important. Several members have drawn out the opportunities that exist to put in place substantial connections of that sort.

Iain Smith listed the main themes in the report, which are the impact of early years learning on children; the need for a child care strategy; the need to raise skill levels; the longer-term issue of qualifications; and funding arrangements, the complexity of which has been raised several times. The Executive is aware of the importance—in the early years sector, as in other sectors—of providing a coherent and sensible funding structure. We have said that we will consider that. The issue was discussed yesterday at the Education Committee as part of the committee's budget examination. That is an important matter on which we can make progress.

The funding issue is linked to the issue of a child care strategy. There are calls for strategies on all sorts of matters. For example, Donald Gorrie talked about a strategy on play. A strategy is the right approach at certain points in the development of policies, but the issue is whether a strategy adds value to what is being done on an issue. As we are moving toward the end of the present session of Parliament, the issue of a child care strategy is probably one that should be discussed further at the beginning of the next session. A good case can be made for reviewing the child care policy and making progress on the matter. However, the implementation of any measures would be for the Executive that is in place after the election in May 2007.

Several points have been made about the evidential basis of the sure start programme. A fair bit of mapping and examination has been done of the sure start provision in Scotland, most recently in 2004. As was mentioned, an evaluation has been carried out in England. We are taking on board the lessons from the English experience, although it is slightly different in detail from the Scottish experience. We must have a close examination of the on-going lessons from sure start and the other provision throughout the sector.

There has been a lot of talk about the skills and composition of the workforce. The balance of teaching provision is an important issue.

Iain Smith: There is an issue that has been raised with me since the committee's report was published—it was repeated last night at the committee's reception for early years stakeholders. Because teachers are being withdrawn from nursery school settings, fewer places are available for placements for teacher training in those settings, which will obviously have a long-term knock-on effect on the future availability of nursery teachers. Will the minister reflect on that and perhaps have discussions with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities and the teaching colleges on how the matter could be addressed?

Robert Brown: Iain Smith makes a valid point. One of our big successes in expanding the teaching workforce generally has been the provision for supporting the workforce through initial teacher training and probationer support. I am more than happy to discuss that important issue with Iain Smith and to consider it further. We want our teachers to have the opportunity to experience different settings.

David Davidson, Christine Grahame and others made important points about the issues that arise in rural settings. The Executive's funding for pre-school education acknowledges the higher costs of providing services in rural and remote areas. It is for local authorities to determine how to use the funding, but I am well aware from the conversations that I have had with providers throughout the country that it is difficult to sustain small centres in more sparsely populated areas. There may have to be a different method of provision, but that is a matter for local authorities. Where appropriate, we are ready to discuss with local authorities ways in which the matter can be approached more effectively.

Some members, primarily Wendy Alexander, raised the importance of nutrition in the early years. We acknowledge that, which is why we issued the national nutritional guidance for early years in January 2006. The issue is on-going and we will continue to consider it. Christine Grahame mentioned childminder training, although other members did not raise the issue to a great extent. In our response to the committee's inquiry, we undertook to examine the need for pre-registration training for childminders. The issue is difficult because of the differences in provision that exist. We want to keep in place the provision and not frighten people off, but standards are important. Executive officials will meet the Scottish Social Services Council and the Scottish Commission for the Regulation of Care to consider further the implications of the matter.

Fiona Hyslop: It has been suggested to the committee that we should consider mandatory training for childminders. However, that can be provided only if finance is available to provide relief support for childminders who undergo training. The councils are obviously best placed to provide that. Has the Executive considered that matter seriously?

Robert Brown: Although I would not rule out anything in that connection, mandatory training for childminders is quite a complex issue, with many implications. The main focus of the Executive must be to concentrate on the general workforce, particularly in early years learning. It is important to move forward in the childminding domain, which is why, as I indicated, we are trying to discuss with the relevant authorities—the Scottish Social Services Council and the care commission—what further can be done in that regard. It is a complex issue, to which there is no one single answer, so we are interested in any suggestions.

The importance of early years learning has been stressed by everybody in the debate. We are at a crossroads in that regard. There is more that we can do. There are too many young children whose circumstances mean that they are disadvantaged at an early age—that point was raised by a number of members. The problems that children have in their early years can remain with them and can influence them later in life. Our children deserve the very best of services, not just to prepare them for later life but to enhance the quality of their lives now. We have made significant progress. We are committed to improving services further to meet the needs and demands of Scotland's youngest children and their families. The debate has been excellent, with considerable contributions across the board. I welcome the continuing debate about the precise way in which we move forward on a series of issues. I am sure that that debate will take wings as we move towards the election.

10:51

Dr Elaine Murray (Dumfries) (Lab): It is some years since I have had the pleasure of summing up a debate. In summing up, members always say that the debate has been interesting, but in this case that is true. That is not surprising, as the subject of the debate is one of the most important responsibilities of the Scottish Parliament. That is demonstrated by the useful responses that the Education Committee has had so far to the inquiry findings.

At the core of the inquiry is how we provide high-quality and flexible care for every child. We recognise that care will be provided in a variety of settings, including the parental home. It is therefore not just professional input that is

important to determine the quality of the care; there must also be access for parents to advice on parenting skills. I agree with David Davidson on that. I was interested in his colleague David McLetchie's praise for the Chancellor of the Exchequer, whom I applaud on his attempts to get Labour Party policy taken up appropriately by public bodies. However, there is a difference between the entitlement of parents to assistance with care and the entitlement of every child to a good-quality start in life. I wish we lived in a world in which every parent knew exactly what was best for their child. As a parent of three children—now grown up—I doubt that I always knew best for my children; I am sure that every other parent has their failings just as I did.

Vulnerable children must have their needs identified as early as possible so that intervention can be put in place. Where required, that intervention must be sustained and coherent throughout the child's education. In her metaphor about winning the lottery, Wendy Alexander eloquently described the importance of investment as early as possible. We can make far more difference when someone is six months than we can ever make when they are 16, although that is not to say that people do not turn their lives round at 16. In time for reflection this morning, we heard a tremendous contribution from a young woman who has become involved in training in an unusual sphere. That shows how young people are able to turn their lives round. I felt for her, being the only female builder in her workplace. At one time, I was the only female physical chemist at work, so I know how it feels to work in a very male environment.

As many members have said, excellent education can be delivered only if the workers discharging that vital role are well trained, properly rewarded and well respected. Some of the pronouncements that the committee has made about the involvement of teachers have been a little controversial. We based them on research—admittedly from England—that has demonstrated the important role of input from qualified teachers in improving attainment later in education, especially among children in the most disadvantaged communities. We recognise that the system in England is different from that of Scotland; we were therefore concerned that some local authorities are withdrawing qualified teachers from their early years workforce and we recommended that the Executive should provide clear guidance to councils on their deployment of qualified teaching staff. Last night, I had an interesting conversation with Carol Ball of Unison, which does not accept that recommendation. She says that, after 29 years of experience in the early years sector, she does not believe that the teaching qualification makes much difference.

There is still an interesting debate to be had between the different professionals involved in the early years sector. I hope that the Executive can facilitate that debate in some respect and provide useful guidance to local authorities.

Initial teacher education may require to be changed to make the early years a more attractive area in which to study and work. The committee believes that there may be opportunities for joint training of teaching and other child care staff. That happens in Scandinavia; unfortunately, I did not manage to get over there to see how things are done, but colleagues tell me that it was an interesting experience. In the longer term, a joint core curriculum for teachers and other early years professionals should be developed, allowing people to start off in comprehensive child care and education training and then branch out into teaching or other parts of the education and care of children. That model can perhaps be developed in future.

The need for flexibility in career choice and the need for quality in the training of the early years workforce were key findings of the Executive's national review of the early years workforce. Several committee members have mentioned how impressed they were by their visits to family centres and how those centres are able to provide non-stigmatised provision. We believe that that type of provision should become more widely available. However, we commissioned an analysis of the cost of universal provision of that type in every school community and recognised that, in the short term, however much we might like it to happen, the cost is prohibitive. We suggest therefore that provision should be increased initially in more disadvantaged communities, where early intervention will be of most benefit. We believe that family centres should be delivered by local authorities working with other partners and that that approach will enable communities to develop the models that are most suited to their needs. It is almost a community planning model, in which local authorities can take a lead but other partners will be involved and will be important.

Robin Harper, Ken Macintosh and others mentioned the problems of transition between the early years and primary 1. Transition in education—from early years to primary school and from primary to secondary—is a problematic time. Indeed, the problems of people leaving secondary school and going into further and higher education were mentioned on the radio just the other day. At all those stages, differences in learning and teaching methods can be problematic. The committee's adviser, Professor Kathy Sylva, impressed on us the benefit of some degree of directed learning in the very early years. She used the example of children learning how to clap out the rhythm of words, which enables them to

understand the component shapes of words as a precursor to reading skills. Equally, child-directed, play-based learning can make a contribution in the early years of primary school, so the committee welcomes the Executive's commitment to better integration of the three-to-five and primary 1 curriculums.

As Ken Macintosh and others have said, early years providers in the voluntary sector, in particular, commented on the problems posed by multiple funding streams, which can make longer-term planning difficult. It was a wee bit uncharitable of Christine Grahame to state that the Executive has no interest in addressing that. In other areas, the Executive has been trying to bring together funding streams, but we recommend that the Executive review the present arrangements and try to progress that work in the early years sector.

As many members have said, the evaluation of sure start in England has suggested that there have been benefits to some parents but not to others. So far—perhaps because of the timescales involved—there does not seem to have been much benefit to children themselves. The committee is keen for the Executive to evaluate sure start in Scotland to ensure that we are achieving what we hope to achieve. We asked the Scottish Executive to reflect on and update the strategy that was produced by the Scottish Office in 1998 and to produce a vision of how that can be built on over the next 10 years.

I finish by thanking—as the convener did—the clerks; the witnesses, who gave both oral and written evidence; and the early years centres that entertained us and allowed us to interact with their young people. In particular, I thank the little boy at the Cowgate under-fives centre who showed me his collection of insects, some of which were no longer alive. I was most impressed by the spirit of scientific inquiry being fostered in such a young child.

Freight Transport Inquiry

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Trish Godman): The next item of business is a debate on motion S2M-4926, in the name of Bristow Muldoon, on behalf of the Local Government and Transport Committee, on its 10th report in 2006, on its inquiry into freight transport in Scotland.

10:59

Bristow Muldoon (Livingston) (Lab): I will first set out the reasons why the Local Government and Transport Committee decided to hold an inquiry into freight transport. We acknowledged the importance to the Scottish economy of good freight transport links and the fact that representatives of the Scottish haulage industry had submitted to the Parliament a petition urging such an inquiry. In my view, the inquiry is another good example of the opportunity that the Parliament's public petitions procedure presents to the people of Scotland to influence the issues that are discussed in the Parliament. I give particular credit to Mr Phil Flanders of the Road Haulage Association for taking the initiative and submitting the petition to the Parliament.

The terms of reference for the inquiry were to examine freight transport policy in Scotland and, in particular, to consider: the future prospects for the Scottish road haulage industry and the impact on the Scottish economy of any changes that would affect it; the contribution of all modes of freight transport such as road, rail, water and air, including their environmental impact; and the Scottish Executive's targets in encouraging the transfer of freight from road to rail and water.

We appointed Professor Alan McKinnon, the director of the logistics research centre and director of research for the school of management and languages at Heriot-Watt University, to advise us on the inquiry. I express my gratitude and that of the committee to Professor McKinnon for his invaluable advice and assistance throughout the inquiry.

I record my thanks to the committee clerking team, particularly Martin Verity, Alastair Macfie and Rebecca Lamb for the customary excellent level of support to which we have become accustomed in the Parliament but which we should never take for granted. I also thank every individual in the organisation who contributed to our inquiry. They are far too numerous to be mentioned in full today, but they are all acknowledged in our report.

To inform the report, we received written evidence from a wide range of sources, including representatives of major industrial organisations and companies, trade unions, environmental

organisations, companies involved in all aspects of haulage by road, rail, air and water, people responsible for transport policy at local authority level, and the Minister for Transport and his advisers.

We undertook a number of site visits to inform our consideration of the issues. We visited the port of Grangemouth, which is operated by Forth Ports plc. It is Scotland's main container port and each year handles more than 100,000 containers on short-sea services, mainly to Rotterdam and Tilbury. Most of the freight tonnage that Grangemouth handles is in the form of bulk liquids moving to and from the BP refinery and chemical complex by pipeline.

Members of the committee visited Prestwick airport, which last year was the seventh busiest air freight airport in the United Kingdom. Passenger flights now substantially outnumber air cargo flights at Prestwick. There has been a decline in air freight tonnage in recent years, which is mainly due to the decline of the electronics industry in Scotland.

Members of the committee also visited the Eurocentral rail freight terminal at Mossend, which is a major intermodal terminal operated by Britain's largest rail freight company, English Welsh & Scottish Railway Ltd. The terminal opened in 1994 to coincide with the opening of the channel tunnel and is now part of the wider Eurocentral freight village, which comprises various warehouses and factories.

We hoped to have a site visit to the Superfast Ferries terminal to meet representatives of the company and although it was not possible to co-ordinate dates with representatives for a visit to Rosyth, members were able to meet them to discuss their situation. Members will be aware that, in the past year, Superfast Ferries has reduced the frequency of its sailings from daily to three sailings per week.

Having set the scene, I turn to some of the report's key recommendations and conclusions. I will not be able to cover them all and I hope that other members of the committee, or indeed other members of the Parliament, will cover any omissions. I will touch on each of the main modes of transport, but I will start with road freight, given that it is by far the most used means of freight haulage. The road network handles approximately 70 per cent of all freight tonnage and 62 per cent of tonne kilometres in Scotland. It is therefore by far the dominant mode of freight transport and is likely to remain so.

In the past, road tonne kilometres have generally increased in line with economic growth but since 1998 there has been a decoupling, for which there could be several reasons. It could

reflect a restructuring of the Scottish economy. It could be that centralisation in economic activity and the wider sourcing of supplies have been weakening.

The decoupling of the economy and road haulage could be due to the increased penetration by foreign carriers of the Scottish haulage network. The precise level of market penetration by non-UK registered hauliers is not known, although the Burns inquiry estimated that it is around 5 per cent. We believe that it is important that we establish an accurate measure of that activity and its impact on the Scottish economy and the environment.

Fergus Ewing (Inverness East, Nairn and Lochaber) (SNP): As the convener of the committee quite rightly said, the committee recommended that the Scottish Executive should conduct research into the extent of market penetration by foreign hauliers. However, the Scottish Executive's response has been only to say that it will comment on the issue. Does the convener agree that it is essential that we have that research on the extent of the problem, given that the total price per litre on diesel in the UK is 91p, whereas in countries such as France, Ireland, Denmark and the Netherlands, it is 71p—20p less tax per litre?

Bristow Muldoon: I thank Mr Ewing for his customary party-political point. It is important that we have a measure of foreign competition, but the committee acknowledged in its report that fuel prices are but one aspect of the cost to the road haulage industry. If 5 per cent is an accurate figure for foreign penetration of the market, that implies that there is a 95 per cent share for hauliers who are domiciled in the UK; in most other industries, that situation would be regarded as extremely healthy.

I accept that it is possible that the impact of foreign competition is felt most keenly by smaller hauliers, so the level of penetration could still be an issue. In that context, I agree with Mr Ewing that it is important that we understand the level of penetration and its impact on Scotland.

Mr Ewing raised the issue of fuel prices. Recent increases have happened as a result of increases in the world oil price. I certainly acknowledge that that creates issues for the haulage industry and industry in general. However, I suggest to Mr Ewing that many such issues are not just outwith the power of the UK Government, but would be well outwith the scope of an independent Scotland to influence.

The road transport directive was mentioned in the inquiry. We acknowledge that there is a delicate balance to be struck. I believe that the directive is an important measure in order to

ensure that workers' rights are protected and that safety is paramount in the road haulage industry. In that regard I support the measures fully. However, concerns were raised about whether there was consistency in how Britain applies the directive. I encourage the British Government and the Scottish Executive to ensure that there is consistency of application in Britain and throughout Europe.

Given that I am rapidly running out of time, I will skip over other aspects of the road haulage industry so that I can concentrate on other areas of haulage.

In recent years there has been growth in the haulage carried by rail. Much of that is a result of partnerships that have been developed between road hauliers and rail hauliers, which are to be welcomed. However, it has also been a result of transporting coal to major power stations, which might well be temporary. We encourage the Scottish Executive to work with the rail industry to ensure that the capacity exists for rail freight to continue to develop and that the pricing mechanisms are right in order to encourage and support the further movement of freight by rail.

Areas for investment that were mentioned include the Glasgow south-western rail line, both as a freight route in its own right and as an alternative route to the west coast main line. We would encourage ministers to consider carefully the case for investment in extra capacity and gauge enhancement on that route.

On the Forth rail bridge, the good news is that it is not suffering fatigue to the same extent as its younger neighbour is. However, issues were raised about its capacity.

The committee heard evidence regarding current issues between the Executive and rail operators in relation to charging on the Stirling-Alloa-Kincardine line. The committee recommends that the Executive resolves that issue to ensure that full benefit is gained from the investment in that line.

I am reaching the end of my allocated time—

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Murray Tosh): I will give you one more minute, in recognition of the lengthy intervention that you took.

Bristow Muldoon: That is good news.

The committee was strongly supportive of the freight facilities grant scheme. However, we believe that there is a need for greater transparency in terms of the environmental and social benefits that accrue from developments that are financed by the freight facilities grant. We recommend to the Executive that it conduct a full assessment of the scheme to ensure that there is

a cost-effective mechanism in relation to securing full environmental benefits in the transport sector.

On port issues, the committee noted with disappointment the fact that the frequency of the Rosyth to Zeebrugge link had been reduced. However, we believe that major opportunities exist for Scotland to develop its water-borne freight potential. In particular, we recommend that the Executive seek to progress the proposals to develop deep-sea container facilities at Hunterston and Scapa Flow to service links between northern Europe and other parts of the world.

I will bring my opening remarks to a close at this point and try to address other points when I wind up.

I move,

That the Parliament notes the conclusions and recommendations contained in the Local Government and Transport Committee's 10th Report, 2006 (Session 2): *Report on Inquiry into Freight Transport in Scotland* (SP Paper 619).

11:12

Fergus Ewing (Inverness East, Nairn and Lochaber) (SNP): I add my congratulations to Phil Flanders of the Road Haulage Association. I also congratulate the Aberdeen haulier Rab Howie, whose evidence impressed the Public Petitions Committee and led to this inquiry being conducted by the Local Government and Transport Committee. I thank the Freight Transport Association and hauliers throughout Scotland for their valuable input and the information that they provided to the inquiry.

Freight transport is essential to the economy of Scotland. It supports and provides around 137,000 jobs. It has been said that, if every lorry went off the road, the country would be at a standstill in three days' time—the shop shelves would be empty and public services would come to a rapid halt.

Another point that is not readily understood by all is that the haulage industry has cleaned up its act immeasurably in the past decades. Since 1991, the emissions have been reduced in respect of particulates and noxious gases by a factor of around 90 per cent. In 1991, one heavy goods vehicle produced the same volume of emissions as 10 do now. That is a tribute to the industry. With the introduction of Euro 5 by 2009, standards will improve further. What a shame that Gordon Brown has said nothing about what grants, if any, will be available to United Kingdom lorries to meet the Euro 5 standards when countries such as Germany have already committed to that. When did anyone last see black smoke coming from the back of a lorry?

The committee did much good work. We all support the transference of goods from the road to

the railway. Ironically, it is companies such as John G Russell, the Transport Development Group, Eddie Stobart and the Malcolm Group that are leading the way in transferring goods from road to rail. We want that trend to grow. We support their efforts. All members of the committee were unanimous in the view that such work was valuable.

We want timber lorries in Scotland's forests to be able to use red diesel. The Executive's response is particularly lily-livered in its refusal to recognise the fact that, in Belgium and France, two tanks are used, which enables the usage of red diesel to be monitored through the tachograph system. That initiative removes the argument that HM Revenue and Customs previously adduced, which was that it would be impossible to prevent avoidance. Given that the tonnage of timber traffic is set to increase from 6 million tonnes a year to 8 million tonnes a year, this is a key argument. I am disappointed that the Executive has not given any positive welcome to that fact.

The committee would like serious consideration to be given to the idea of increasing the speed limit on roads such as the A9 to 50mph. It is ridiculous that lorries are trundling along such roads at 40mph. They are not designed to do that. It probably increases the incidence of accidents and it certainly does no good for anyone's blood pressure, as I can confirm.

We would like a more haulage-friendly approach to be taken by more councils—such as the one for the area in which I am presently standing—to allow delivery of goods to shops. The committee heard evidence from across industry about the need for improvements to the road network and recognised that substantial improvements will be necessary to tackle and alleviate congestion.

The committee recognised that the need for an additional crossing of the Forth is "paramount". I would say to the Executive parties that government is about making tough choices. We face a choice between, on the one hand, spending—according to the Executive—£609 million on burrowing a tunnel under a live runway at Edinburgh airport, which is one of our busiest and, on the other hand, investing that money in an additional crossing of the Forth, whether by way of bridge or tunnel. The Scottish National Party believes that the choice is a no-brainer. The effects of the Forth road bridge being closed to HGVs by 2013 are already being felt in Fife. We believe that it is already far, far too late. There have been years of dithering and delay on the part of the ministers with responsibility for transport. Nonetheless, an SNP Government next year will end that delay and order a new Forth crossing to be proceeded with.

Bristow Muldoon: Does the member recognise that he demonstrates lack of ambition for Scotland

when he says that there is a choice between the Edinburgh airport rail link and a continued crossing of the Forth? Does he agree that Scotland's economic interests are best served by ensuring that we have good transport links to and from Fife as well as good rail links to and from Edinburgh airport? Further, does he recognise that Fife will be one of the biggest beneficiaries of the new rail link?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Mr Ewing, following that intervention, which was almost as long as the one that you made earlier, I will compensate you as I compensated Bristow Muldoon.

Fergus Ewing: I do not agree with Bristow Muldoon. We can have a much cheaper rail link to Edinburgh airport.

The level of diesel tax in the UK is 20p to 25p higher than the average across the European Union. It costs 90p at the pump to buy a litre of fuel in the UK whereas, in Latvia and Luxembourg, it costs 56p. That means that foreign lorries can drive for free throughout the UK using petrol that they have bought on the continent. Five years ago, Gordon Brown recognised that fact. The situation is compounded by the fact that, according to the Vehicle and Operator Services Agency, foreign vehicles are not being properly maintained—the lack of maintenance is as high as 50 per cent in countries such as Eire. If foreign operators are not paying to maintain their vehicles and are paying lower fuel tax, how on earth can Scottish hauliers compete with two hands tied behind their back?

In its response to the report, the Executive said:

"Nevertheless, the Executive will aim to ensure that Scottish concerns are appropriately taken into consideration by the UK Government."

What on earth does that mean? The fact is that the Scottish Executive has done nothing to tackle a problem that Gordon Brown acknowledged five years ago and which Douglas Alexander acknowledged this week. The SNP believes that, instead of receiving what Jack McConnell calls a union dividend, Scottish hauliers receive only constant, unfair, unreasonable and onerous tax demands.

11:20

David McLetchie (Edinburgh Pentlands) (Con): The inquiry into freight transport in Scotland was the first parliamentary inquiry in which I participated as a member of the Local Government and Transport Committee. The convener of the committee, Bristow Muldoon, gave a fair summary of our conclusions, drawing upon the considerable amount of oral and written evidence that we received and which is acknowledged in the report.

In many respects, the subject might more appropriately have been investigated by a House of Commons committee. The major concerns of the members of the road haulage industry whose petition was instrumental in the setting up of the inquiry were, first, as Fergus Ewing rightly said, the price of fuel in the United Kingdom relative to the cost to our European competitors, and secondly the impact of the road transport directive. Both matters are properly the domain of Her Majesty's Government and Scotland's other Parliament at Westminster. Although we were able to consider substantial matters that are within the competence of the Scottish Parliament and the Scottish Executive, it strikes me that, because transport embraces major devolved and reserved aspects, future inquiries might appropriately be undertaken by joint committees of Scottish members of Parliament and members of the Scottish Parliament.

It remains a mystery and a disappointment to me that, nearly eight years after the Scottish Parliament was established, we have signally failed to establish joint working arrangements between our two Parliaments, which would both enhance the union and give greater weight to our joint deliberations.

On the road transport directive, we have had legislation for years that governs the working hours of drivers in the road haulage industry. The legislation is enforced through the use of tachographs and it is in the interests of the welfare and safety of both drivers and other road users. I therefore fail to see the necessity for a further European directive, which will serve only to push up the cost of distribution. Moreover, as Fergus Ewing and Bristow Muldoon pointed out, it was suggested in evidence to the committee that the directive is not being applied uniformly throughout the European Union and that, as a result, we suffer a competitive disadvantage from the enthusiastic and vigorous enforcement of the provisions in this country by comparison with other member states.

Much of the evidence is anecdotal and impressionistic; some of it is frankly xenophobic and harks back to a protectionist era that would deny our businesses and customers in Scotland the benefits that flow from competition and the free market in the European Union. However, the evidence shows that the road transport directive is misconceived and that, as is the case with other industries, an opt-out would have been desirable.

The other striking feature of the inquiry was the dominance of road haulage and its importance to the Scottish economy. Although it is desirable to encourage modal shift from road to rail where that is possible and economically sensible—the report contains a number of excellent examples of the

positive benefits of doing so, one of which Fergus Ewing mentioned—it would be foolish and naive to determine our budget priorities on that basis if that resulted in a failure to maintain and improve the road network in Scotland, on which our prosperity depends.

In that respect, the Government and the Scottish Executive bear a heavy responsibility for freezing the roads programme that they inherited from the previous Conservative Government. The misconceived policy of freezing the programme has now been reversed, but valuable time was lost. Recently published figures from Audit Scotland show that the backlog of maintenance work on our trunk roads and local roads totals some £1.8 billion. That is further evidence of the problems that face all road users, including hauliers, and the problems are likely to be exacerbated because catching up with the backlog will inevitably mean more roadworks and hence more congestion and delays.

However, the policy of procrastination is alive and well. It is no better exemplified than in the complacent attitude that the Executive exhibits to the condition of the Forth road bridge and the possible need for a new road crossing. It is, of course, right to take all the appropriate measures to deal with cable corrosion and to seek to prolong the lifespan of the bridge. However, given its central and paramount importance to the Scottish economy, it is frankly unforgivable that the Executive dillyed and dallied for months before instructing Transport Scotland to commence preparatory work on a replacement crossing. We know that the present bridge might be closed to heavy goods vehicles as early as 2013 and that a new crossing could take 10 or more years to construct.

The Executive has agreed to take action on a number of the recommendations in the report, and that is welcome. However, we must not lose sight of the big picture and the fundamental importance of improving and maintaining the Scottish road network. Let there be no more delays in ensuring that it is fit for purpose.

I support the motion.

11:26

Paul Martin (Glasgow Springburn) (Lab):

David McLetchie made a powerful point about the need to work with Westminster, but I remind him that, had there been a different scenario on 1 May 1997, there would be no Scottish Parliament for Westminster to work with because the Tories did not support the idea. Phil Flanders should consider that factor because, if there was no Scottish Parliament, he would not have been able to lodge his public petition in the first place. He

would have got as far as the lobby at Westminster. One of the positive aspects of the inquiry is the fact that it was initiated by the Parliament's public petitions process.

The committee received a lot of helpful and good-quality evidence from all the industries that are involved. The haulage contractors were willing to come forward with their ideas about the challenges that the freight industry faces and they suggested a number of initiatives and ways in which progress could be made. I was most impressed by their commitment to the movement of freight to the rail network. However, I am not convinced that the rail industry and the haulage industry are working in collaboration as effectively as they should be. The rail industry needs to be more open about the opportunities that are available given the capacity of the network, and I call on the Minister for Transport to consider how we can ensure that more open information is available to the haulage industry. Such information will allow the industry to take forward the projects that it suggested during the inquiry.

A number of points were well made during the inquiry, but some of them were contradicted by the evidence that was provided by our adviser, Professor McKinnon. For example, the points that we heard about driver shortages were contradicted by Professor McKinnon's evidence. We need further research on the matter. There are good training organisations—I know that Christine May has a particular interest in training—including Ritchies HGV Training Centre, which is located in my constituency. It provides good opportunities for drivers to enter the market in the first place, and we should ensure that we continue to encourage the initiative and innovation that such companies have shown.

A number of members have strong views on increasing the speed limit on single-lane carriageways. Fergus Ewing has made well-informed comments on the issue on a number of occasions. However, I am not convinced that we have the evidence to make such a change. We need more independent research into the proposal and its implications for safety and logistics. We should consider the proposal, but we should be cautious. I note, however, that a number of witnesses made powerful points on the matter and that it should not be dismissed.

We discussed the provision of roadside facilities for haulage contractors. The trade unions representing the contractors made the point on many occasions about the need for us to plan more effectively for good-quality and low-cost roadside facilities for haulage contractors. That is not an issue reserved to Westminster, but one on which we can influence local authorities and road networks to ensure that we provide quality

facilities for haulage contractors throughout Scotland. There are good examples of several areas in which the issue has been pursued, but much further work could be done.

A number of contractors made a powerful point on a subject on which we perhaps did not elaborate in our recommendations—the demands that are placed on haulage contractors by their clients. In particular, they mentioned the supermarket industry, which has placed unreasonable demands on contractors on a number of occasions. I do not think that we addressed that effectively in our recommendations.

The Minister for Transport should show leadership by calling a summit with haulage contractors and their clients and examining more effective ways of ensuring that they work logistically with the haulage industry to make more effective use of the loads that travel on our road networks. The haulage contractors raised many examples of their concern that they were perhaps not making best use of the load potential because of demands that are placed on them by clients. We need leadership from the Executive to ensure that clients take the issue seriously.

The inquiry was lengthy, but we tried to reflect on the issues in Phil Flanders's original petition for which we have devolved responsibility. I assure the petitioners that we intend to ensure that the issue is carefully monitored and taken forward.

11:32

Mr Andrew Arbuckle (Mid Scotland and Fife) (LD): I was on the Local Government and Transport Committee in the early stages of the inquiry into freight transport but, in the manner of a footballer being moved from one club to another mid-season, I was transferred—with no fee—to another committee midway. I congratulate Bristow Muldoon and the committee on investigating this important issue and I am sorry that I was not there to see it to its conclusion.

More than any other European country, Scotland requires good freight transport links. Situated as we are in the north-west corner of Europe, we are at a financial disadvantage when it comes to exporting our goods into mainland Europe. We are also disadvantaged when it comes to bringing goods in from abroad. Beyond the international dimension, as MSPs from more remote areas know, there are areas in Scotland where the provision or otherwise of good transport links determines its economic fate.

I believe that our track record on freight transport in the second half of the 20th century was not good. The availability of cheap fuel, combined with the neglect of the local rail and shipping

networks, has left us with a great deal to do in the 21st century.

I welcome the committee's recommendation on the need to expand water-borne freight. For bulky goods, on a cost-per-tonne basis, it is the cheapest option available. Members may not believe that, but the proof lies in the fact that it is cheaper to transport lamb by ship from New Zealand to the UK than it is to road haul it down from the north of Scotland to the south of England.

Wherever we have bulk goods to haul, we should remember the one advantage that Scotland has: it is almost surrounded by water. The proper integration of freight systems should be used to increase the level of seaborne tonnage.

I agree with Paul Martin, who highlighted that the key to success is in the integration of freight. That is especially true of the rail network. It is not a new idea. Some 40 years ago, I physically transferred seed potatoes from road to rail transport at a station that, sadly, has now closed. Incidentally, in a previous generation, the same trade was carried out by road transport loading on to light coastal boats that travelled up and down the east coast.

One activity in which I hope rail will play an increasing role is forestry, which Fergus Ewing referred to. Thanks to planting regimes 30 to 40 years ago, we can expect a doubling of the tonnage of wood being harvested in the next decade, but forestry is concentrated in remote areas with low-grade and easily damaged roads that are not built for HGV traffic. We need to get more timber on to rail.

I mentioned travelling up and down the east coast, which brings me inevitably to the required replacement of the Forth road bridge, which is a major concern in the Fife economy, for the whole of the east side of Scotland and, in my opinion, for the whole of the country. For many hauliers and businesses, the major issue is not the level of tolls; the big worry is what happens if the existing bridge is taken out of commission or HGVs are not allowed to cross it before a new crossing is put in place.

Politicians throughout Scotland cannot ignore the need for major investment in a new crossing, and such is the importance of the new crossing that any delays based on funding priorities will not be acceptable.

Bruce Crawford (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP): Will Mr Arbuckle give way?

Mr Arbuckle: I think I can answer Mr Crawford's point before he gets to his feet. I will give him a chance later if I do not.

Any prudent individual or business about to embark on major expenditure must carry out

research to ensure that the best and most appropriate investment is made. I hope that that part of the process comes quickly to a conclusion so that we can move swiftly on to replace the existing crossing.

I commend the committee for picking up on the issue of weight restrictions due to weak bridges on all grades of road. They cause costly diversions and disadvantage areas on the wrong side of the bridge. Weak bridges should be repaired. Priority has to be given to that work, particularly in rural areas. Many rural areas are badly affected by the weight limits that restrict HGVs.

I would like to see a further recommendation that Scotland should resist any further increase in gross vehicle weights allowed by the European Union. That is not a luddite view but a sensible response based on the quality of our road network in rural areas.

Many other recommendations arise from the inquiry, but in conclusion I support the report and commend the Local Government and Transport Committee for its work.

11:37

Mark Ballard (Lothians) (Green): I congratulate the committee on a thorough and wide-ranging report on an important issue.

The report notes that road freight is by far the dominant mode of freight transport in Scotland and that it is likely to stay that way. I want to concentrate my remarks on rail transport. Governments have said that they want a shift from road to rail, so it is important that we recognise why it has not happened.

I am pleased to see that the motion has received support in all parts of the chamber, from my good friend Fergus Ewing to the Labour Party. Rail freight has increased since 1993 but, as the report points out, it has declined since its peak in 2001-02 and most of the increase is due to coal. Nonetheless, the report states in paragraph 242 that we are

“on the eve of a major rail freight revival.”

If we are on the eve of a revival, what can be done to hasten the arrival of the revival?

The Executive has put money into the freight facilities grant, which is welcome. We support further exploration of that grant, and we should recognise that despite the fact that it has achieved a reduction of less than 2 per cent, it did so on a modest outlay—only £13 million this year. I note the committee's note of caution that the quickest wins may already have been realised by the freight facilities grant, but I argue that, because of rising fuel prices, there are now many more options.

It is fair to congratulate the Executive on retaining the freight facilities grant when England and Wales have abandoned it. That shows that the Executive can take a lead rather than simply follow England and Wales. We need more such positive thinking on transport solutions from the Executive.

I am pleased to read in the Executive's response to the committee's report that work has been done to reduce the complexity of the grants process. That is the positive step forward that we need.

The committee highlights the need for a vital upgrade of the Glasgow south-western line and for the introduction of dual tracking. At the moment, there is a major congestion problem that is caused by coal trains. We cannot expand rail freight or rail passenger traffic without double tracking, which would be welcome in the south-west.

Fergus Ewing: Does my good friend Mark Ballard agree that to allow much more freight to be transferred from road to rail it would be prudent for us to invest widely in the Scottish rail network, to enable more frequent services and more capacity in the whole network, instead of spending up to £1 billion on Holyrood 2—also known as the Edinburgh airport rail link? [*Interruption.*] I thank the minister for his running commentary.

Mark Ballard: I agree completely with my good friend Fergus Ewing. In the previous debate on the issue, he was quite right to point to 44 pinchpoints that are highlighted in the rail utilisation strategy. I think that he attended last year's meeting of the Finance Committee in Elgin, at which there was much discussion of the very small amount of money that would be needed to transform the Inverness to Aberdeen line into a line that is capable of taking a large amount of freight. There is much work that could be done on the pinchpoints.

Bristow Muldoon rose—

Mark Ballard: I am sorry, but I must make more progress.

Another pinchpoint is the Forth bridge. I am a bit disappointed by the Executive's response to the committee on the problem of charges for the Stirling-Alloa-Kinross line, because it is vital that we get freight capacity off the Forth bridge and on to the line. Dealing with the problem would allow freight to be shifted from heavy goods vehicles that use the Forth bridge on to the line. Whatever road crossings we have over the Forth, the long-term aim must be to get capacity off road and on to rail. If we manage to make that transition, the current bridge will have the lifespan of 120 years that was envisaged for it. We must shift traffic off it in order to extend its lifespan. That, rather than opting for an additional crossing, is the solution.

I was struck by the comments of Bill Ure of the Rail Freight Group about the need for the four companies that are involved at the moment—English Welsh & Scottish Railway Ltd, Freightliner Ltd, GB Railfreight Ltd and Direct Rail Services Ltd—to make more effort to get traffic on to the railways. They need to be much more light-footed, as he described. I am pleased that a partnership between Tesco, Eddie Stobart Ltd and DRS has delivered a real shift of freight from the roads on to rail. To get the transition that we seek, we need more cross-organisation working of that sort and to encourage more sales effort north of the border.

We also need investment in terminals and facilities. There are no terminals in Edinburgh, Perth, Dundee or Fife, where they are needed. We need greater utilisation of Mossend and to deal with the congestion problems at Grangemouth. Much work can be done to bring about a revival of rail freight. There is huge potential for shifting freight from road on to rail. For that to happen, we need both Executive support and more effort from the rail freight companies—more sales work and work with logistics companies. I welcome the report for its wide-ranging vision.

11:44

Mr Kenny MacAskill (Lothians) (SNP): The committee inquiry was initiated at the request of the Road Haulage Association. I will comment on the road haulage sector in due course. The investigation was wide ranging and much of it is very welcome, but it is inadequate for us to say simply that some matters are reserved to Westminster and that there is little that can be done. That is not a union dividend but an on-going problem that compounds the agony for our freight sector.

Some important issues emerged tangentially from the inquiry. We must address port policy, which has been touched on. As Mr Arbuckle indicated, consideration of the matter is long overdue and we must pick up and run with it here in Scotland.

We are a nation that is almost surrounded by water and that includes islands and archipelago communities. We have a history of seafaring, never mind shipbuilding. It is somewhat perverse that we are concentrating on marine national parks and possibly fossilising many of our communities rather than on a port policy and strategy that will allow our society and economy to motor.

When we hear evidence from the likes of Bill Burns at Clydeport about what can be done at Hunterston or Scapa, we realise that there is an opportunity for Scotland to change from a peripheral country at the very extremity of Europe to a port of entry and embarkation. We must use

that opportunity to our advantage, for example by turning Hunterston into the access port for Ireland and elsewhere. We have to pick up and run with that strategy.

The strategy could be applied to other sectors, such as air freight. When we think about the tragedy of the Pan-Am bombing that brought down a plane over Lockerbie, it is sometimes forgotten that it neither took off from nor was due to land at a Scottish airport. It flew over Scottish territory because the natural route from North America to Europe is the great northern circle, which takes planes over Scotland. Iceland has used that to its benefit and Scotland has a huge air freight opportunity at Prestwick.

I remember being told by Tom Wilson, the past chief executive of Prestwick airport, that it was faster to get freight to Slough by landing it at Prestwick rather than Heathrow because of the congestion and problems there. There is a clear advantage in developing not only our port policy but our air freight strategy to turn to our advantage our geography, which we have viewed as a disadvantage, and to take it from there.

The Forth road bridge has been mentioned and will be again. It is of fundamental importance to the Scottish economy and to the road haulage sector. There is no discernible alternative. We have to be clear about the current situation. I have always supported the idea of a second bridge to carry westbound traffic, on the basis that the original bridge is salvageable, sustainable and capable of operating if we reduce the volume of traffic on it. I believe that that is possible, but we need to be certain that a second bridge will not be a replacement for the first—if it is, it will need to be a parallel bridge—but additional, to allow the first bridge to operate under the 100-year strategy that Mr Ballard mentioned.

We would be neglecting our duty to the road haulage sector if we said that foreign drivers are only a slight problem, just because they contribute to our economy. As other members have said, clear evidence about the problems of road safety was presented on television and radio today. When I inquired about the use of speed cameras, I was told that more than 50 per cent of tickets issued on the A7 and the A1 are given to foreign drivers, who seem able to speed with impunity. We are not simply trying to cut down speed; we are trying to stop the carnage. I do not agree with the Confederation of British Industry that foreign drivers are adding to our economy; in fact, they undermine a vital part of it.

The transport sector in Scotland is a huge success story. Politicians in all parts of the chamber stand up to say how wonderful it is about the Royal Bank of Scotland and HBOS, and so it is—we should be proud of them. Equally, in public

transport, we have a worldwide success story in Stagecoach and FirstGroup plc. They not only provide transport infrastructure in Scotland, which we sometimes criticise—correctly; they punch well above their weight globally. We should praise that.

David McLetchie: The two companies that the member identified as worldwide successes would not have blossomed had they not been privatised under the previous Conservative Government.

Mr MacAskill: I am not going to get into deregulation. Of course we support those companies' successes, but we do not support deregulation.

The haulage sector is a great success story for Scotland and haulage companies try hard in difficult circumstances. Drivers are sometimes perceived as actors in a Yorkie advert, but they do a difficult job in difficult circumstances, often on roads that leave a lot to be desired. They face unfair competition from abroad because of the difference in wage levels, the fuel that they are able to buy, the rates that they tender and the business that they can take.

If we allow foreign competition to undermine Scottish haulage companies, we will lose good Scottish companies and replace them with a Trojan horse. In years to come, we will have to face the social and economic consequences on our roads and in our businesses. That is why we cannot simply say that these matters are reserved to Westminster. We have to act against unfair competition and support a Scottish success story.

11:50

Mr David Davidson (North East Scotland) (Con): I congratulate the Local Government and Transport Committee on its report. I was a member of the committee when it got as far as appointing an adviser, and I congratulate the present members on the work that they have done since then.

It has been a privilege to witness the love-in between the Scottish Green Party and the Scottish National Party this morning. I find it hilarious that the Green left says that we do not need a road bridge across the Forth, while the Green right says that we need a replacement. I watch the debate with great interest.

Kenny MacAskill of the SNP made a point about our harbours and the hazards to them. In Aberdeen, we are threatened by a wind farm development off the beach. It will be a hazard to shipping and to the fishing industry, to say nothing of what it might do to tourism. It is important that we do not forget our maritime history.

In a previous life, the minister and I have spoken at conferences on the northern motorway of the

sea—a project that would also involve the Baltic countries and Russia. There are great opportunities. There is potential for a base at Scapa for container transfer to smaller vessels that would go round the UK coast. However, if that is to happen, it has to be clearly understood that there will be support for freight transfer to the maritime sector, just as there has been support for the transfer from road to rail.

As all speakers so far have said, it was a petition from the Road Haulage Association that led to the committee's report. We cannot do without road haulage: 70 per cent of goods in Scotland move by road. Full stop. There is no argument about it: we have to ensure that the road haulage industry can develop alongside other means of transport for goods.

Fuel costs have been mentioned. All kinds of issues arise. I would like Westminster to pay attention to those issues because, for many Scottish businesses, the distance to market is where problems come in. I recall when large fleets of lorries in Peterhead and Fraserburgh were bunkered locally. Those lorries have been driven off the road by unfair foreign competition—by lorries that never buy any fuel here, that do not pay any road access charges, and that chew up the roads. In fact, the new supertyre on some continental trucks is part and parcel of the tremendous damage that has been done to the Forth road bridge.

We need a level playing field for all road users. I am not saying that foreign competition should not come in, but there should be a level playing field in the UK. When the Conservatives were in power, we proposed that lorries should display discs to show that a contribution was being paid towards the maintenance of the UK's roads. That proposal is due for a reprise.

It is interesting that the road haulage industry is the only one that seems to be directly damaged by the working time directive—especially when we are being told of a shortage of qualified drivers. That has to be looked into.

The poor—and dangerous—state of roads around Scotland should have been dealt with by now. As David McLetchie said, our road improvement programme was abandoned by the Labour Party in 1997. Labour members should hang their heads in shame rather than try to take credit for whatever is going on now. They did not act quickly enough. Because they postponed action, inflation has increased the costs. Replacements and upgrades will now be even more expensive. The A96, A9, M8, M80, A8000 and M74 have all been delayed. Those roads have still not been fixed, and they must be.

Mark Ballard said that rail is wonderful, but I wonder whether the Scottish Green Party will

propose an extension of railway lines so that they take in parts of northern and western Scotland. It would be a very expensive programme, but it might solve some problems.

Bruce Crawford: Whose proposal is that?

Mark Ballard *rose*—

Mr Davidson: It is a Green proposal.

Congestion is a problem and we have to ask what we can do to relieve it. The Aberdeen western peripheral route has been talked about for years, but we still do not know when it will be started, partly because of the proposed additional road, which the Executive has still not consulted on, as far as I am aware. The minister has run the risk of the AWPR going through some extended process when the road should have been started. Many businesses that were located to the north of Aberdeen have relocated to the south of the city. We built the A90 up to Aberdeen.

It is vital that we do not consider only a bridge that provides just one way of crossing the Forth—we must have a multimodal structure that enables us to increase capacity for freight and passenger services across the Forth by splitting them and making it possible for higher speed trains to be accommodated. I have just come back from Taiwan, where trains that operate at four different speeds can be run on the same track because of sophisticated signalling. We might have a great deal to learn from that. A decision on the Forth road bridge must be made as quickly as possible.

On connectivity, I would like the minister to consider carefully the nonsense of the Guild Street freight yard being closed when it is adjacent to Aberdeen harbour. We need to have connectivity between different modes of transportation.

Comments have been made about air freight, but that is not where the big growth will be—the big growth will come about as a result of having a good infrastructure development programme in Scotland that allows us to move goods freely by road or by rail, according to what is appropriate. I look to the minister to outline some concrete solutions to the issues that the committee has identified.

11:56

Christine May (Central Fife) (Lab): The importance to Scotland's economy of the ability to move freight—both goods and finished materials—to where it is needed is perhaps one of the least appreciated aspects of the debate about the future of our country's prosperity.

I welcome the industry representatives who are in the public gallery, who include representatives of Glenhire transport from Glenrothes and Barclay

Brothers of Methil, both of which are in my constituency. I hope that other members will join me in taking the opportunity to meet them after the debate.

One of the most contentious and most noticed aspects of the movement of freight by road or rail is the impact that it has on the movement of people. The committee heard evidence on that and we are all familiar with the complaints of people whose journeys to work are delayed by a convoy of lorries or a slow-moving—or, in the case of passengers on the Fife circle line, a broken-down—freight train.

John Home Robertson (East Lothian) (Lab):

Perhaps I should declare an interest as the holder of an HGV licence. Does the member agree that the 40mph speed limit is causing congestion and danger on our roads, is giving rise to pollution because of reduced fuel efficiency and is no longer necessary because of the higher quality of lorry braking systems? Should the issue not be considered urgently by our colleagues at Westminster?

Christine May: I agree with John Home Robertson on all three points. Although Paul Martin provided some caveats on increasing the speed limit on narrower roads, in the majority of cases a good case can be made for having a speed limit that is both complied with and enforced, rather than one that anecdotal evidence suggests is neither complied with nor enforced effectively.

In the Enterprise and Culture Committee's report on business growth in Scotland, transport was identified as a major concern. The Executive's investment in transport infrastructure is most welcome, especially when it will reduce the environmental impact of the movement of people and goods. In spite of the strident cries of some members, it is clear that a certain amount of investment in roads contributes to improvements in the environment. We have heard about the need for traffic to be able to move efficiently to reduce emissions. The huge investment in the Stirling-Alloa-Kincardine railway will ease the demand on the freight paths on the Forth rail bridge. Those of us who use passenger services on that route welcome that.

Fergus Ewing: I fully agree with the member on the importance of English Welsh & Scottish Railway removing from the Forth rail bridge the substantial amount of coal freight that is carried across it at present, but does she agree that that freight will not be moved on to the Stirling-Alloa-Kincardine line if Transport Scotland and the minister insist on levying an additional rail toll? The imposition of such a toll on any operator on the UK rail network is unprecedented.

Christine May: That point was made by a number of other speakers this morning and the committee acknowledged it. It cries out for further investigation and to be dealt with.

I am pleased to note the progress that has been made—I target this comment at the minister—in getting the go-ahead from Network Rail for the Earlseat rail halt, which will allow coal to be taken from the opencast sites in Fife by rail instead of by road.

Another area that the Enterprise and Culture Committee considered and that the Local Government and Transport Committee picked up is skills development and training, on which I congratulate the Executive, the industry and training providers. Skills for Logistics—which I understand is also represented in the public gallery this morning—is the sector skills council for the industry. As with all sector skills councils, it is a partnership between the industry and training providers, and a quick look at its website shows the range of activities that are being undertaken to improve the quality and quantity of the workforce in freight transport and logistics.

It is important to remind the Parliament, as the committee pointed out in its report, that the industry routinely offers a much wider range of specialist services than just putting things on lorries, trains or ships and moving them from A to B. Those services include warehousing, stock handling and information technology services. Skills for Logistics delivers apprenticeships, Scottish vocational qualifications in a range of skills and the Get Up To Speed e-learning application, which provides online support for the theory test that is required for category C, C+E and other goods vehicle licences. There is also the young driver scheme and the Scottish driver training scheme.

The Executive has invested £11.8 million in the Scottish road haulage modernisation fund, which is supported by a steering group that includes the Road Haulage Association, the Freight Transport Association and Skills for Logistics. It is targeted at tackling driver training, recruitment and retention problems; safe and fuel efficient driver training—there is significant evidence that that is already having an impact—and development of driver training through the use of truck simulation technologies and truck simulator training. In addition, the fund supports the costs of a study to quantify the value of the freight transport sector to the Scottish economy. I hope that the results of that study will lead to a better and better-targeted taxation system for the industry.

Foreign drivers were and continue to be a great concern. The minister might wish to reconsider the Executive's response to the report's comments on foreign drivers. Although it is true that their

presence may help competitiveness, it is also true that as at least six European Union countries have not yet ratified the road transport directive, the playing field is very slanted, particularly for smaller Scottish businesses.

I return to the threat to the Scottish economy of the continuing delay in taking a decision on building a new Forth crossing at Queensferry. I will give members some statistical information. We are looking at a detour of 32 miles per trip. There are 7,835,000—well, an awful lot. I beg members' pardon, as I am getting stuck with my numbers. It is, in fact, 70—

Bruce Crawford: It is 784,000.

Christine May: I thank Bruce Crawford. Commercial vehicles of more than 3.5 tonnes make 784,000 vehicle trips per annum, which equates to more than 25 million miles. The largest vehicles, which weigh more than 32 tonnes and constitute approximately 20 per cent of the total, will incur an extra fuel cost of approximately £15 and an extra hour, which will cost about £30 to £35 per trip. That equates to £2.4 million in fuel and £5.5 million in other costs. Smaller vehicles will incur proportionate extra costs.

The delay in giving the go-ahead for an additional bridge and the lack of certainty about that go-ahead are causing unnecessary concern to businesses not only in Fife but throughout Scotland and unnecessary damage to the Scottish economy.

12:05

Ms Maureen Watt (North East Scotland) (SNP): Although I am a member of the Local Government and Transport Committee, I joined it some two months into its evidence gathering on freight transport, so I do not feel as knowledgeable about the subject as some of my committee colleagues.

I am glad that committee undertook the inquiry. The public perception is that there are too many lorries on our roads. As Fergus Ewing rightly pointed out, the movement of freight is vital to our economy, but the public are right to think that not enough is being done to move freight on to rail.

Some sectors of our economy, such as the coal industry, have always preferred to move their goods by rail—indeed, coal accounts for three quarters of rail freight—and others are trying to move in that direction. That notably applies to the supermarkets, a move that has undoubtedly been helped by the freight facilities grant. It is a matter of regret to me and others that, to help them to make a quick fix and a quick switch, supermarket owners get those grants while still making huge profits, whereas I am sure that many smaller

companies that need to transport their freight ought to be targeted, as that would allow more goods to be moved by rail. As Mark Ballard pointed out, during the committee's evidence taking there seemed to be some confusion about who may access freight facilities grants. That needs to be clarified and the grants better publicised.

Bristow Muldoon: Will the member give way?

Ms Watt: I will just carry on for a minute.

That is only one side of the coin. Often, transporting freight by rail is hampered by antiquated rail infrastructure. The Executive must work more closely with Network Rail to improve the infrastructure of our railways. We are often told that such improvements cannot be made because the height of bridges, for example, means that the bridges would need to be replaced. However, as Network Rail has pointed out, such problems can often be resolved by lowering the rail track. Dualling track is hugely expensive, but a few strategically placed loops can make a huge difference to freight and passenger volumes on our railways. In evidence to the committee, Network Rail said that such work need not cost a huge amount of money.

I refer to the paragraphs on sea transport in the committee report. As Kenny MacAskill said, people are increasingly recognising the natural transport highway that surrounds Scotland, which is a grossly underutilised resource. In an age when our whole planet is threatened by climate change, not to use ships to transport goods is a nonsense. Why do electronic goods need to be flown between the far east and Europe? In cases in which that mode of freight transport is necessary, we should ensure the use of Scottish airports where they are closest to the export and import market destinations, which would avoid hauling goods to airports further south. We need a total shift in our current thinking that we need everything yesterday. Scotland is a natural strategic hub for transport between Europe, Scandinavia and North America. Scotland must be exploited as a break-bulk centre, with our smaller ports able to handle more freight.

Short-termism prevails, however, and in Aberdeen, which is a major port serving the oil industry, the former Labour administration made the ludicrous decision that the rail track to the harbour should be lifted to make way for a new shopping centre—a decision that has not been reversed by the current Lib Dem-Tory administration. There has been no long-term strategic thinking there from any of the unionist parties.

Although the impact of canals on the movement of freight is limited overall, some of them can

undoubtedly be used for short hauls of timber or quarry stone. Those goods can be taken to ports via the Caledonian canal, for example, and some limited use could be made of the Forth and Clyde canal.

Undoubtedly, as is evident from the debate so far, any discussion of freight transport is still heavily focused on road transport, on short-haul journeys and on our local Scottish hauliers. The debate has focused on whether our hauliers compete on a level playing field and whether the Scottish Executive is doing everything that is in its power to support them. I agree with the committee's convener: we must ensure that Westminster and Brussels confirm that directives such as the working time directive are adhered to fairly throughout Europe.

The Scottish Executive can do much more to relieve pinchpoints in our road infrastructure. We all know where they are—most notably in the north-east around Aberdeen, as David Davidson said, because of the lack of the western peripheral route. All the hauliers in agriculture, timber, agricultural engineering, oil, agricultural feedstuffs, food and drink—notably whisky—and more are totally frustrated and angry about the lack of progress on that. The Scottish Executive could make the greatest impact on the road and rail infrastructure if it had the will to do so, so I ask the minister to act on the recommendations in the report.

12:11

Donald Gorrie (Central Scotland) (LD): I look forward to Scotland having an efficient national transport strategy and I hope that rail, seaborne and water-borne traffic will be properly recognised in it. The committee's report covers many issues quite well; I will pick up on a few and strengthen their arguments with the minister and external forces.

The reduction in the frequency of the ferry service from Rosyth is lamentable and has done much harm. It has discouraged passenger use and—more important to the debate—freight use. I know that it is not our service—it is commercial—but surely we can make arrangements with the commercial people by a combination of carrots and sticks that will make it worth their while to return to having a sensible daily service.

The committee refers to Grangemouth being developed as a logistics hub, which is an admirable idea. Grangemouth has much potential for container traffic. The concept of developing other industries and services around transport hubs is good. We can help to pay for improving hubs by creating more activity and wealth round about, rather than throwing grants at them. The

same applies to other centres in central Scotland, in which I obviously have a particular interest. The railway freight termini at Mossend and Coatbridge have great potential to attract more activities, services and businesses than they have attracted. However, we must improve the local infrastructure, so that lorries can take stuff to and from rail depots. The interplay between road and rail is important for all depots.

The lack of any decent Scottish connection to the channel tunnel is an important issue for passengers and freight. Some years ago, an enthusiast buttonholed me at great length on the subject of a new railway line from central Scotland to London that would serve Glasgow and Edinburgh and provide a high-speed passenger service and a freight service. Some pundits have said that a high-speed passenger service is a frightfully bad idea that would cause more pollution than aeroplanes do. That seems to me absolute rubbish, but it may be true—I do not know.

A better network for passenger and freight trains to take Scots not only to the south of England but on to the continent is surely common sense. We must press the Government at Westminster to produce a decent British rail network that connects on to the continent.

On the use of the Forth bridge and charges for the use of the Stirling-Alloa-Kincardine railway, there is a strange comment in the report: because the taxpayer has helped to pay for the new railway, it is reasonable to make a charge for freight operators to use it. It is not reasonable for the public to put tax money into a new railway only for nobody to use the railway because there is an extra charge. Such an approach is amazingly short-sighted. The issue should be about the best use of the new railway, and if that means having no additional charge, there should be no additional charge. We should not allow some stupid bureaucrat to get in the way.

Bristow Muldoon: Does Mr Gorrie agree that if significant operational savings were to be made by freight operators that use the new line, it would be reasonable for the public and private sectors to share those savings?

Donald Gorrie: I accept the point about sharing savings, but we should persuade people to use the new railway line, rather than have them burden the Forth bridge, which could then be left free for other trains. The issue is the tipping point for a decision by freight operators to use the line. If freight operators are made to contribute to the extent that they will not use the line, the approach is self-defeating. Common sense must enter into proceedings.

A key concept in the report is that of developing centres of activity, which could stimulate our

economy a great deal. The committee has considered whether freight facilities grants would continue to be a good thing, as any improvement that they make might be more marginal. However, the concept is right, and if a proposal is evaluated and shows that the whole ensemble would benefit the local community and the Scottish economy, some contribution from the Executive would be fair enough.

Obviously, canals cannot make a huge contribution, but as somebody who enjoys walking along them I see their great potential. For example, the canals were used to bring all the coal to Edinburgh and lots of big ships, by the standards of the day, across from the Forth to the Clyde and vice versa. There is potential in canals for freight as well as for fun and games and recreation.

Rail has great potential, although it is not the answer to the whole problem. People get so hung up on lorries, which are obviously important, that we sometimes take our eye off the ball in respect of pushing for rail to take more freight. For example, to get to the Highlands, freight could go round by Aberdeen and Inverness if we cannot afford a new Killiecrankie tunnel. I hope that the minister will consider the many opportunities and take them.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Trish Godman): I now move to the wind-up speeches and call Murdo Fraser.

12:18

Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): Thank you, Presiding Officer—you took me a little bit by surprise.

The debate has been wide ranging and a number of points have been raised about the committee's recommendations. It is perhaps not surprising that most of the debate has been about roads, given that 70 per cent of freight travels by road and that road haulage was very much the focus of the report.

As my colleagues David McLetchie and David Davidson said, the fact is that in Scotland today we are still living with the legacy of the decision by the incoming Labour Government in 1997 to freeze the roads budget and put a moratorium on projects at that time. If one drives along the A90 to the Forth road bridge, one sees that work is now starting on the A8000. That road should have been completed many years ago, but the decision was taken not to proceed with the upgrade. Scotland has paid the price for that decision over the past nine years.

Bruce Crawford: I am not always one to stand up for the Executive, but Murdo Fraser is being a

little bit shallow if he accepts that argument alone. It is likely that the squeeze that was put on local government capital expenditure during the Tory years squeezed more out of local roads budgets than anything that the Executive has done since it came to office. Let us bring some truth and reality into the debate.

Murdo Fraser: I utterly disagree with the point. The A8000 upgrade was on the forward plan in 1997. The simple reality is that, due to the incoming Labour Government, it did not proceed.

A growing economy needs good roads because we need to improve journey travel times, tackle congestion and improve road safety. I make no apology for putting the case for better roads. Indeed, members would be surprised if I did not take the opportunity, once again, to make a pitch for improvement of the A9, which needs dualling. The A9 is heavily used by freight. We have seen traffic levels on the A9 grow fivefold since the upgrades of the 70s and early 80s. The expansion in the economy at its north end, around Inverness and in the Highlands more generally, has generated much more freight traffic than existed in the past. The A9 also has a horrific safety record—it has the highest level of fatalities of any road in Scotland. The road is desperately in need of upgrading. The minister knows that; I have raised the issue with him on many previous occasions.

I see no contradiction in saying that we should build new roads, tackle congestion and be environmentally friendly. The fact is that the most popular form of public transport is the bus, and buses need roads on which to travel. Over the past 20 years, there has also been an extraordinary growth in long-distance coach travel—another popular form of public transport that requires roads. Although we should continue to look at public transport alternatives for our cities that also suit other parts of the country, the reality is that we will always need roads. Industry needs roads if it is to transport its goods around the country to market. If we are not prepared to build more roads, we fail in our duty to grow the Scottish economy.

All mainstream parties should be prepared to build more roads. We need to face down the anti-car fanatics. There is a lunatic fringe in bodies such as TRANSform Scotland—by taking an extreme viewpoint against all road building, they do their case no credit. I believe that all mainstream parties should have the courage to stand up to these Talibans of the transport debate and say, “You have simply got it wrong.” In the interest of building our economy, we should be prepared to make the case for more roads.

I turn to the issue of the Forth road bridge, which has been raised throughout the debate—even by

members on the Executive benches. We heard Andrew Arbuckle and Christine May voice their concerns. The report calls on the Executive to make clear what action it proposes to take on the matter. The Forth Estuary Transport Authority has warned that the existing bridge could close to HGVs by 2013—seven years from now—and that the bridge may have to be closed altogether by 2017. If the bridge had to close to HGVs, that would be an utter disaster for the economy not only of Fife, but the whole of the east of Scotland. The bridgemaister has said that it will take 11 years to plan and build a new bridge. We are potentially already out of time. We cannot afford any more feet dragging from the Executive on the issue.

Mark Ballard’s collision with a parked car may have affected his thought processes. It is incredible for him to suggest that, by moving traffic on to rail, we will not need a new bridge. Even if we were able to do that, the state of the current bridge means that we will need to build a replacement. There is no easy, cop-out option. We cannot walk away from the problem by simply choosing the environmental option, as he proposes. We need a new bridge. We must stop putting excuses in the way and get on with the job of building it.

Mark Ballard: Does Murdo Fraser recognise that, given the concerns about the bridge, the proper thing to do is to investigate the level of damage? The Scottish Executive is taking the right approach in investigating the evidence and not simply making a knee-jerk call for a new bridge as a pre-election bribe. Surely that is the correct thing to do.

Murdo Fraser: I see that a new coalition is developing between the Executive and the Greens. We have also witnessed evidence of a potential coalition between the Scottish National Party and the Greens in this lively and interesting debate.

We do not need to wait for more evidence on the bridge; we need to get on with the job of designing and building a new bridge. There has already been far too much dithering.

We broadly support the report’s recommendations on rail freight, which members have mentioned. We would like more freight to move on to rail, because such an approach would tackle congestion and be more environmentally friendly. On a number of occasions, I have asked the Minister for Transport about moving freight on to rail along the A9 corridor. I have discussed the matter with the supermarket companies Safeway and Morrisons, which expressed willingness to consider it, and I understand from the minister that discussions are on-going—if I recall his most recent answer correctly. Safeway used to transfer

goods to Inverness and further north by rail, but when Morrisons took over the company it reverted to road haulage, which was a retrograde step. We should encourage the use of the rail link as much as we can do, not least because of the pressure that would be taken off the A9, given the volume of traffic on and safety record of that road.

I am probably over time. I could talk about many other issues, such as fuel duty and the regulation of foreign competition. The Local Government and Transport Committee produced a serious report and I hope that the Executive will provide a serious response that addresses the issues that the report raises.

12:26

Bruce Crawford (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP): I was a member of the Local Government and Transport Committee when the inquiry into freight transport was initiated and it is a matter of significant regret to me that I was not able to be involved in all the committee's deliberations on a very important matter.

The report addresses many important aspects of the freight industry in Scotland. Like other members, I thank Phil Flanders and the Road Haulage Association for helping to kick off the process. I also thank members of the committee. Fergus Ewing pushed hard for the inquiry, but to be fair to other committee members, I should say that he was pushing at an open door. The committee gathered a considerable amount of evidence and called an impressive number of witnesses to give evidence. Bristow Muldoon did a fair job of summarising the committee's view of the industry's condition and main problems, which are described in paragraph 102 of the report. I think that all members would commend the committee for its work.

I was interested to hear David Davidson make up Tory policy on the hoof. As far as I understood what he said, he made a billion-dollar pledge to connect the whole of the west and north of Scotland to the railway network. That will not leave Murdo Fraser much money for anything else, far less a new Forth road bridge—

Mr Davidson: Will the member give way?

Bruce Crawford: I will give way in a second. The member's body language is giving him away again, just as it did during his speech.

Mr Davidson: I simply referred to Mark Ballard's proposals and asked him whether that was what he wanted to do. I made no claim at all.

Bruce Crawford: David Davidson and Murdo Fraser are shaking their heads. David Davidson has made his point.

David McLetchie said that there should be more joint meetings between MSPs and Westminster MPs, and Paul Martin supported such an approach. However, such meetings have not happened and probably will not happen. If there is no desire for them, why should we push for them? We should get rid of some of the bureaucracy, generate efficiencies and give the Scottish Parliament more of the powers that it needs if it is to do the job properly. By doing things in Scotland, we can avoid unnecessary meetings between politicians to discuss the issues.

Fergus Ewing made good points about the economy. He mentioned that 137,000 jobs depend on the freight industry. Kenny MacAskill also made interesting points in that regard. The issue is highlighted in paragraph 92 of the report, which says that 70 per cent of all freight in Scotland is moved by road. As we all know, and as other members have said, a significant amount of freight is moved daily across the Forth road bridge. I am glad that the committee found time during the inquiry to take evidence on the matter. The committee probably wanted to take more evidence on it, but committees cannot always do everything that they want to do in an inquiry. However, I am glad that the committee took evidence on the issue, faced up to the bridge's uncertain future and acknowledged, as Fergus Ewing said, the paramount importance of the bridge to the Scottish economy.

It comes as no surprise that employers are already considering their exit strategies from Fife. Hugh Balfour, the chief executive of Havelock Europa, which employs 320 people in Dalgety Bay, has said:

"Companies in Fife could be faced with the dilemma in six years' time as to the fact that they cannot operate in Fife. They will have to move south of the bridge because, realistically, you can't expect the road structure to cope with the amount of freight traffic that would be directed to the Kincardine Bridge."

The Fife Chamber of Commerce and Enterprise has said:

"In short, there is almost no business, large or small, within Scotland that would not be affected by the impact of bridge repairs or total closure of the bridge on their workforce, their customers and their supply lines."

The chamber of commerce went further and said clearly that the Scottish Executive's current position is not sustainable, is

"wholly unacceptable to business"

and, if left unchallenged,

"could result in an unfolding of a worst case scenario; giving a timescale which makes it almost impossible to deliver a new bridge before the existing bridge closes."

Every day in which we fail to press the green button to commit to a new crossing across the

Forth leads to more and more businesses, particularly in Fife, Tayside and the north-east, airbrushing out of their business plans any reference to future investment north of the Forth. That is happening now. I read in the national press last week that Gordon Brown intends to lead a task force to help to build up the Fife economy. That is all well and good but, if he does not get behind the campaign to press the green button to start work on a new crossing and if the scheme goes pear shaped, there will not be much of a Fife economy left to build up.

As Christine Grahame and Andrew Arbuckle said—

Christine May: Christine May.

Bruce Crawford: I apologise.

I am glad that Christine May eventually got to the figure of 784,000 vehicle trips and that she and Andrew Arbuckle raised the issue of the Forth bridge, because unless the minister is prepared to give the go-ahead to a new crossing today or at least very soon or immediately—whichever he wishes—he could sleepwalk the Scottish economy into a disaster. In the real world, leadership is about making decisions and doing the job. It is time for the minister to emulate Fergus Ewing and the SNP and commit to a new crossing before it is too late. Otherwise, he will sleepwalk the Scottish economy into a train wreck. All Fife members, even those who are from the Executive parties, can see that clearly. Indeed, the committee's report hints strongly that a new crossing is required.

I thank all those who were involved in producing the report, as they have done a good job. The members of the committee should be applauded for hearing from so many witnesses. Many issues need to be resolved, such as the cost of fuel and the number of foreign operators that operate in the United Kingdom, but a significant start has been made. The minister has serious questions to answer on several issues. Some of the issues are not within his powers, but an early decision on a new Forth crossing—whether a tunnel or a bridge—is within his powers. I hope that he makes that decision soon.

12:34

The Minister for Transport (Tavish Scott): I welcome the opportunity to discuss and debate freight issues, which this country must confront. A range of views have been expressed by members of all parties. I acknowledge Bristow Muldoon's role as the convener of the Local Government and Transport Committee and that of Michael McMahon, the convener of the Public Petitions Committee, who worked with the RHA on the petition that called for an inquiry on freight

transport. The process has been a useful parliamentary exercise, as David McLetchie and other members said. I accept his point about the potential for joint working between the two Parliaments on issues that involve reserved and devolved matters. We can debate independence any other day but today we are dealing with an inquiry report and that was a fair point to make, which I am sure many members sympathised with.

We have chosen to debate our freight transport industry at a time when it is of growing importance to the development of our economy. It is a key industry, whose contribution to the economy—gross value added—is some £4.4 billion per annum. I take the point made by many members that this is not just about road freight. However, although I do not agree with all of Murdo Fraser's analysis, I accept that road freight constitutes the major component of the freight industry in Scotland. I strongly agree with members who have argued that we must do more to encourage the use of rail and sea—David Davidson and other members made that point. Donald Gorrie mentioned the channel tunnel, which is very much an issue on the Executive's radar and is subject to detailed discussions. I have strong feelings about ports and harbours, having spent a lot of time in former lives dealing with ports and their logistical exercises and work. They are an extremely important component of the freight transport industry and one of which I wish to see more.

When we publish the national transport strategy later this year, we will also publish a freight action plan, which will be about action to support the industry. In partnership with the Road Haulage Association and the Freight Transport Association, this Government supports freight transport and has put significant investment into the pool of available drivers and the introduction of state-of-the-art training technologies to the industry. I strongly welcome those initiatives. In addition, I recently endorsed the sector skills agreement for the logistics industry throughout Scotland and, in doing so, made clear our continuing support for tackling the priority skills issues affecting the sector.

I stress that I share the industry's concerns about foreign hauliers. As members have said, fairly, such hauliers should operate on a level playing field and should be subject to the same high standards that are expected of Scotland's haulage industry. I listened carefully to the statistics that Bristow Muldoon mentioned in that regard. Transport Scotland is working closely with the Vehicle and Operator Services Agency to ensure that overweight heavy goods vehicles travelling on Scotland's roads are targeted more effectively. The work that is in hand will allow VOSA to identify overweight vehicles and take enforcement action where appropriate, while

allowing those HGVs that comply with weight limits to travel unhindered. We very much acknowledge the points that members, and of course the industry, have made in that regard.

As members have said, many key policy areas that impact on freight transport are reserved. On speed limits, for example, I recognise the strength of the arguments on both sides. Paul Martin put one side and other members put the other. Other areas, such as drivers' hours, and the working time and cabotage rules and their enforcement, are reserved but are serious issues. In addition, reserved areas are often covered by European legislation.

I welcome the recent meeting between the RHA and the Secretary of State for Transport. Douglas Alexander discussed with the RHA a range of matters for which he is responsible. Some may not like this—I will not make any political observations about one side of the chamber that wants a different constitutional settlement—but it is important to recognise where those responsibilities lie and the role that the RHA and the Parliament play in seeking to ensure that the industry is properly represented in different decision-making forums, whether the Department for Transport in London; the Treasury in London, which is equally important in a number of areas; or the European Commission.

In relation to the DFT's planning review of the United Kingdom's implementation of the European road transport working time directive, we are participating in work to ensure that Scotland's position is fully understood. We recognise the arguments about unfair competition. The RHA and the FTA are both part of the haulage industry task group established by HM Treasury and the DFT and are, appropriately, playing a full role in ensuring that the UK Government is aware of Scotland's concerns.

Fergus Ewing: I understand the minister's argument, but what the haulage industry in Scotland would like to know is really quite simple: does the Scottish Executive believe that the differential—the higher overall tax on diesel—is simply unfair?

Tavish Scott: As Mr Ewing well knows, issues of taxation are matters for the Treasury. The whole reason why the RHA and the FTA are sitting on a working group with the Treasury is that it allows them to make the arguments directly to it. If we had independence and Mr Ewing was Chancellor of the Exchequer, no doubt Phil Flanders could meet him—and Mark Ballard, who would be deputy Chancellor of the Exchequer—to discuss road taxation. Heaven help Phil Flanders in such circumstances. In the real world, the RHA and FTA are on the Treasury working group so that they can meet the individuals responsible for road taxation.

I acknowledge the point about evidence on unfair competition in Scotland. It is important that we have such evidence and we are happy to work with the industry to pull that together and to provide input on the issues to the Department for Transport and the Treasury.

In some reserved areas, Scottish ministers can take further action in relation to their devolved powers, such as over the safe and fuel-efficient driving scheme for HGVs. There are considerable advantages to that, not least of which is the 1,100 new drivers who have gone through the scheme since 2003-04. We want to encourage the industry to take advantage of the training system that is in place, which is part of its future, and minimise the impact of freight on the environment.

An issue that has not been raised this morning is the change to the logistics industry that is being made as a result of the growth in online retailing and the expansion of the service sector. The number of vans under 3.5 tonnes on Scotland's roads is growing almost three times faster than car and lorry traffic. They now account for one eighth of all Scotland's traffic. Given that upward rise, we will take what we have learned from the training regime that is in place for lorry drivers and extend it to the van sector next year. Thus, we hope to reduce the impact of fuel costs, further protect the environment and help the competitiveness of the economy and the freight industry.

I will pick up a couple of other points that have been made. I quite understand the arguments that have been made about the Forth road bridge. I hope that we can be entirely constructive and sensible about it. I say to Mr Crawford that any Government must ensure that it has the adequate information to make a decision of such magnitude. Mr Crawford can be as flippant about it as he likes, but it is potentially the most serious issue to face this or any Government of this country for a considerable time. It will be taken seriously and the decision will be taken properly, not flippantly, which is how Mr Crawford presented the argument earlier. I was disappointed by his attitude, because I thought that he was better than that. It was deeply worrying.

I will be clear about what is happening on the Forth road bridge. HGV traffic across the bridge is 6 per cent of the total bridge traffic. By way of comparison, HGVs account for 18.5 per cent of Kincardine bridge traffic. Those figures come from the Scottish transport statistics of last year.

It is important to acknowledge—I would be happy to listen to Christine May and others on these points—that those statistics show that 9.4 per cent of freight tonnes originating in Fife are destined for Lothian or the Borders; 10.3 per cent for Strathclyde or Dumfries and Galloway; and 7.8 per cent for elsewhere in the UK. Assuming that

destinations from Fife are similar to those from the rest of Scotland, only about one third of the traffic will go via east coast routes; the bulk will go via the A74 and M74.

Christine May: I am grateful for the minister's offer to meet. Does he accept that although Fife accounts for only a small proportion, particular industries are involved that would be particularly badly hit, such as agriculture, which contributes to the uncertainty felt by the economy in Fife?

Tavish Scott: I recognise those points, the industries that Christine May describes and the haulage industry that services those industries. In dealing with the arguments, it is important that we deal with the facts of the situation and the statistics that are available to us. Some may dismiss those things, but we must make decisions based on the facts and information that are available to us. As I said, I would be happy to examine the figures closely to see whether they correlate with those that have been provided by Scottish Enterprise Fife and other organisations in Fife.

It is not the case, as Bruce Crawford tried to say, that nothing has been done on the Forth road bridge. As I said to the Local Government and Transport Committee yesterday, work is under way as part of the strategic projects review. That is the right process to ensure that we can take a proper decision on the matter at the appropriate time.

Mark Ballard: I am grateful to the minister for the balanced approach that he is taking on the issue. Does he share my concern that an increase in road capacity across the Forth would lead to increasing problems of congestion, particularly in parts of west Edinburgh such as the Barnton roundabout? Does he accept that any talk of a multimodal bridge is a red herring as he has no plans to support tramlines going to South Queensferry?

Tavish Scott: We must recognise that HGV traffic accounts for 6 per cent of the total bridge traffic, as I said earlier. The weight of traffic is commuter-car related.

Scott Barrie mentioned the potential for a multimodal link. I emphasise that we are considering all such options; I do not dismiss the suggestion. In fairness to Murdo Fraser, who mentioned the potential for having a tunnel, I should say that that is also being considered. However, it is important that we consider the issue in the context of the multimodal potential. Some of the issues that have been raised might be part of the planning for the capital transport projects that will be undertaken in the period from 2012 to 2020. That will come out during the strategic projects review.

I assure Parliament that we take these issues seriously and will move them forward. That is what is happening and a decision will be taken at the appropriate time.

I welcome the debate and look forward to further discussions and a continuing, positive relationship with the industry as we publish our freight action plan later in the autumn.

12:47

Bristow Muldoon: This has been a good debate on the committee's report, which had widespread support from members of the committee, across the political divides, as has been reflected in the debate. Of course, individuals have made party-political points, but that is acceptable in a debate in the Parliament between political parties.

There is fairly universal agreement that freight transport is of fundamental importance to the Scottish economy, in particular due to Scotland's location on the western and northern edge of the EU. I agree with a number of members, including Andrew Arbuckle and Kenny MacAskill, that our geography should be not a handicap to transport but an opportunity, particularly in stimulating the growth of water-borne freight transport and the creation of hubs for container shipments at Hunterston and Scapa Flow.

I agree with Fergus Ewing that we should seek to increase the proportion of freight that is carried by rail and that credit is due to the rail companies and many road hauliers who have worked in partnership to get intermodal movement of haulage.

I was a bit perplexed by some of Maureen Watt's speech. She seemed to question partnerships that involve successful companies such as supermarkets. Having recently seen a partnership between a major supermarket and the rail industry that is reducing the number of road miles that some of the produce that the supermarket moves to Scotland travels, I do not see any logic in preventing ourselves from working with large and successful companies. In fact, working with large and successful supermarkets would seem to be an appropriate way of reducing the number of road miles that food must travel.

I disagree with Mr Ewing's continued emphasis on fuel duty. He fails to recognise that fuel duty is but one factor in the operational costs to the road haulage industry. I repeat the observation that I made to Mr Ewing earlier: despite the points that he makes about fuel duty, about 95 per cent of road haulage in Scotland is carried by domestic hauliers. I accept that a small percentage of the fuel that they purchase might be brought back into Britain from the continent, but presumably the vast majority of it is bought in the UK.

Fergus Ewing: We disagree about that. I ask Bristow Muldoon what he believes should be done about the problem of foreign drivers using UK roads and paying not a ha'penny for the privilege. The problem has existed for perhaps a decade and, five years ago, Gordon Brown said that it must be dealt with. What should be done about it? The Government dropped lorry road-user charging, having hailed it as the great white hope. Is nothing being done? Even at 5 per cent, it is an extremely serious problem.

Bristow Muldoon: I do not deny that the issue causes problems for some hauliers, but I say to Mr Ewing that there are alternative solutions. I return to the fact that, even with the fuel duty issue that Mr Ewing raises, 95 per cent of road haulage in Scotland is carried by UK domestic hauliers. If we were talking about any other industry, we would be hailing as a huge success story the fact that we had a 95 per cent market share of the industry. Of course we should address the problem, particularly as it impacts on small hauliers, but we should not overestimate its size.

David McLetchie made an important point about the overlaps in responsibility between the Scottish Parliament and Westminster. Although I am sure that there is considerable contact between the Minister for Transport and UK transport ministers, there is a gap, as David McLetchie correctly said. We in the Scottish Parliament do not engage with our colleagues at Westminster as effectively as we perhaps should to ensure that transport issues and the overlaps between our responsibilities are properly addressed.

I am sure that Mr McLetchie would agree that, even with its policy of independence, the SNP would still require to work closely with Westminster. Irrespective of whether Scotland was part of the UK or an independent country, a huge percentage of the haulage that it carried would go through England by rail or by road. The SNP's short cut—"Let's deal with it all here"—is irrelevant. We need to work closely with Westminster to Scotland's benefit.

Paul Martin was correct to say that the evidence that the committee gathered on driver shortages was not as overwhelming as some people suggested. He accurately reflected the evidence that we received. Like other members, he also mentioned the speed limit on single-carriageway roads. I agree that a change should be considered or implemented only when sufficient research has been done to show that safety would not be prejudiced, but I note that strong arguments have been marshalled by people who gave evidence to the committee and by other MSPs. They say that such a move might have environmental benefits, efficiency benefits and perhaps safety benefits, but we should evaluate those carefully. We can look to

examples from other countries, particularly New Zealand, in deciding whether to make such a change.

Among many others, Andrew Arbuckle and Christine May correctly raised the importance of a continued road crossing over the Forth. The committee recognised that that is of paramount economic importance to Scotland and I think that every MSP recognises that. We have different positions on the rate of the action that should take place, but the minister set out a fair position and explained the need, first, to identify the condition of the existing bridge and to evaluate all the options. I am sure that the Parliament and the Executive are fully committed to ensuring that the economy of Fife and the economy of Scotland are protected by a continued road linkage across the Forth.

I am particularly intrigued by the SNP raising the plan for a tunnel under the Forth while ridiculing the idea that we could build a tunnel under the airport. It seems to me that the engineering challenges of building a tunnel under the Forth would be considerably greater than those of a tunnel under the airport.

I welcome Mr Ballard's comments on the role that rail can play in moving freight and his recognition of the contribution that the Executive's policy on freight facilities grants has made in trying to increase the amount of freight moved by rail. However, I would warn him to treat with some caution the SNP's overtures and commitments to use the resources that they would save from scrapping EARL. In Mr Ewing's contribution, he intended to use the resources to build a new Forth bridge. He then promised Mr Ballard that he would use the money to invest in Scotland's network of rail services. He has also promised on other occasions that he will use the money on the A9.

Fergus Ewing: I am enjoying this speech, but does Mr Muldoon realise that the projects that the SNP would scrap—the Edinburgh trams and the Edinburgh airport rail link tunnel project—will cost £1.4 billion, which would be freed up for almost all of the projects that members have mentioned?

Bristow Muldoon: Mr Ewing should be aware that his position is one that, I am sure, neither his predecessor Mr MacAskill in his heart believes in, nor his colleague Mr Crawford, who represents Fife. In fact, SNP members will cheerfully confirm outwith the chamber that the reason behind the party's position is that there are no marginal seats that it thinks it can win in Edinburgh. The position has nothing to do with the transport infrastructure needs of Scotland.

I agree with Kenny MacAskill that we should be trying to ensure that we get the maximum possible from the assets and opportunities that we have in ports.

Christine May correctly identified the importance of skills and training in ensuring the continued supply of drivers for the haulage industry. She was also correct to identify the benefits that would accrue to the economy and environment from the joint initiatives in training and skills undertaken by the Executive and industry.

Donald Gorrie rightly drew attention to the committee's concern about the reduced service between Rosyth and Zeebrugge. The Executive should explore options to see whether we can work with the private sector to enhance Scotland's direct ferry links with northern Europe.

Bruce Crawford correctly identified one weakness in Murdo Fraser's argument, which is that the biggest damage to Scotland's road network was caused by the spending squeeze on Scotland's local authorities. However, I agree with Murdo Fraser that it is important not only for Scotland's economy but for our environment to ensure that our road network is efficient and effective because of the impact not only on public transport but on road haulage industry emissions if vehicles can move around the country efficiently.

In conclusion, the efficient and effective movement of freight is critical to Scotland's economy. To ensure that environmental impacts are minimised, it is important to maximise the usage of rail and water freight. It is also essential that we enable road freight to move around the country efficiently.

I commend the report to the Parliament, and I encourage the Scottish Executive to respond positively to its recommendations.

12:59

Meeting suspended until 14:30.

14:30

On resuming—

Tourist Boards (Scotland) Bill: Stage 3

The Presiding Officer (Mr George Reid): The first item of business this afternoon is a debate on motion S2M-4919, in the name of Patricia Ferguson, that the Tourist Boards (Scotland) Bill be passed.

14:30

The Minister for Tourism, Culture and Sport (Patricia Ferguson): This is a great time for Scottish tourism. It is one of Scotland's real success stories and much of that success is down to the work of VisitScotland. Since its reorganisation, the new VisitScotland network has gone from strength to strength, which is why it is important to put the reorganised network on a proper legal footing. That is what the bill is all about.

As members are probably aware, tourism is worth £4.2 billion to the Scottish economy, and the industry employs 200,000 people in 20,000 diverse businesses throughout Scotland. It supports around 9 per cent of employment in Scotland, rising to 13 per cent of employment in the Highlands. Tourism sustains many of our rural communities.

Last year was a record year. Nearly 2.4 million overseas visitors came to Scotland—an increase of 50 per cent since 2001 and the highest figure ever recorded. That is a fantastic achievement by our tourism industry and by VisitScotland. Also, our overseas visitors are spending more when they are here. Last year they spent £1.2 billion, beating the previous highest amount, which was recorded in 1998. There are increasing numbers of visitors to visitor attractions, and occupancy rates are at a record 10-year high.

It is clear that much of that success is down to the tourism industry, which is raising its game and has responded to the challenge that it has set itself through its ambition of achieving 50 per cent growth. The industry is working in a genuine partnership with local authorities, the enterprise networks and VisitScotland. However, some of the success is down to the Executive's investment in tourism. For example, as a result of our investment in the route development fund, 36 new direct flights to Scotland are currently operating, including 27 international routes, which have played a major role in increasing the number of overseas visitors. In the past financial year, about 1.4 million passengers were carried in and out of Scotland on our supported direct routes. Three years ago the figure was 291,000.

To achieve the massive improvement in Scotland's international connections, we have invested £4 million, which is putting in place the strategic connections that Scotland needs, and bringing significant benefits to Scotland's economy, especially our tourism economy.

Our investment in VisitScotland is also paying dividends. For every £1 that VisitScotland spends on marketing in Europe, £29 is generated. For every £1 that is spent on marketing in the United States of America, £33 is generated. VisitScotland's United Kingdom marketing—including its television and cinema campaigns—generates an incredible £34 for every £1 spent. I am sure that Parliament will agree that that is money well spent. Others think so, too, which is why VisitScotland has won more than 20 awards for its innovative marketing campaigns. and why I am investing a further £800,000 in VisitScotland this year, to allow it to do even more marketing of direct air services to Scotland. I am investing in an organisation that we know produces results—I am investing in success.

The purpose of the bill is to put the new VisitScotland network on a proper legal footing and to ensure that it is fit for purpose, so that it can continue to do the excellent work that it has done to make Scotland's tourism industry the success story that it is today.

Existing legislation requires that there be area tourist boards, but having different strategies for different areas simply does not work in this age of global tourism. VisitScotland has demonstrated that its network approach works. The bill will therefore repeal the requirement for area tourist boards and dissolve the two network tourist boards that were set up temporarily as part of the integration process. That means that VisitScotland can become fully integrated and operate as a single legal entity. The bill also makes provision for the transfer of staff from the network tourist boards to VisitScotland.

Given the broader role that VisitScotland now has, the bill will increase its board from seven members to a maximum of 12. That will ensure that the board has knowledge, expertise and experience in all aspects of VisitScotland's work. Finally, the bill will change the organisation's legal name from the Scottish Tourist Board to VisitScotland—a change that has, for all practical purposes, already taken place. The bill gives us the opportunity to put the new name on a proper legal footing and to confirm VisitScotland as the way forward for Scottish tourism.

As the minister with responsibility for international development, I am delighted that, in addition to the work that VisitScotland does to boost Scottish tourism, VisitScotland will now contribute to our work with Malawi to help to

develop a tourism implementation plan. I understand that we are joined in the gallery today by visitors from the Malawi Ministry of Tourism, National Parks and Wildlife and the Malawi Institute of Tourism. I hope very much that they find this afternoon's debate interesting and that they have a fruitful week with us in Scotland. The success of VisitScotland means that it will have a good deal of advice and experience to share.

The bill is not about changing the way in which VisitScotland works; the organisation is already working well against a backdrop of increasing competition and an ever-changing international market. All the signs are that our growth will continue and I am confident that VisitScotland will continue to lead that growth.

I move,

That the Parliament agrees that the Tourist Boards (Scotland) Bill be passed.

14:37

Brian Adam (Aberdeen North) (SNP): It is right that the minister praises our tourism industry for its successes—indeed, it is currently quite successful. I note, however, that she made scant reference to the Tourist Boards (Scotland) Bill. It is unfortunate that such a bill is necessary, but I am delighted that, as a consequence of the bill, primary legislation will not be required to change the name of the organisation in the future. The minister is to be commended for ensuring at least that that is not something that we will have to revisit.

On a procedural matter, it is unfortunate that we need to have this debate because the matter is decided—there are no amendments. All we have to do now is vote on the motion to pass the bill. Members will undoubtedly take the opportunity to give their views on tourism, the direction that it is taking and the direction that it may take in the future. Nevertheless, the debate is part of the legislative process so I am not sure that it is the place for such speeches. I do not hold the minister to account for that; it is perhaps something that the Procedures Committee should consider.

I turn to the successes that are being achieved. It is great that we are welcoming so many new overseas visitors. The minister is right to say that that is related to the fact that Scotland is now much better connected to the rest of the world than it was a few years ago. The route development fund was supported—if not initiated—by my colleague, Kenny MacAskill. The Executive has adopted it, as has BAA, which contributes more money than the Executive to the fund. The fund has been the main driver in increasing tourist numbers. I am delighted, too, that, as route development has progressed, we

have seen airports other than Edinburgh, Glasgow and Prestwick prosper; Aberdeen airport has prospered, too.

The minister rightly pointed out how crucial tourism is to the Highlands and Islands. I would like to see steps being taken to encourage more direct flights and access to all parts of Scotland, as part of the goal to refine the programmes around the route development fund. That will mean that there is a greater incentive to ensure that all Scotland benefits.

I understand that we have in previous years not gathered information about the final destinations of people arriving in Scotland. That kind of information is very useful in helping airlines to make up their minds about how to develop packages for the future. I hope that we are now in a position to offer such information to help to develop future tourism access to the whole of Scotland.

One disappointing feature of the figures that were produced today—I do not want to berate anyone for this—is that we have not managed to recover our pre-2001 position in the United States. The increase in tourism from Europe has compensated for that, which is directly related to the route development fund. There might be obvious reasons for the changes in tourism from the US, but I am not sure that we have targeted that market as effectively as we might. Perhaps we need to encourage more direct connections between Scotland and the US. If it works for Europe, it should work for the US. It is in that context that I raise that issue.

The Scottish National Party does not have any difficulty with the bill and so will support it. It is just unfortunate that we had to devote so much parliamentary time to a name change—I am glad that we will not have to do so again in the future.

14:42

Mr Jamie McGrigor (Highlands and Islands) (Con): It is my sincere hope, and that of my party, that the changes that will be made by the bill if it is passed will be good for the people who make their living out of tourism, which is, after all, Scotland's largest industry. It is possible that the ATB model that was set up by the Conservatives in 1995 needed some modernisation. However, although I accept that the main players who are now employed by VisitScotland are very professional operators, we are concerned that the integrated model that has been produced by the Executive will result in a loss of local knowledge and leadership.

The hubs and area tourism partnerships have been running since April 2005, despite the fact that only now are they being put on the statute

book, so we can listen to what tourism operators think of their experience of the new model so far. There is no doubt that many of them are not happy—it is precisely because of that that the Conservatives abstained at stage 1. Not much has happened since then to change our minds. I have an example. I was recently rung up by an operator in Oban who said that they could not tell me how frustrating it is to be asked whether they are within walking distance of Stirling town centre when they are based in Oban.

Many doubts were expressed at the Scottish Tourism Forum, which met in Pitlochry two weeks ago. We have severe concerns that the new model is too centralised. As I said at stage 1, I and several of my colleagues have conducted tourism surveys in our areas that suggest a high level of discontent with the new model. Since then, people have told me that the silence between the newly constructed hubs and the tourist operators on the outside of the wheel is deafening; there is not enough dialogue. We should not forget what the Enterprise and Culture Committee said in its report:

“the current local area tourist boards are a repository of a significant amount of skills and knowledge. It will be important that in any new structure for tourism in Scotland, VisitScotland does not lose this local expertise in its drive for increasing professionalism in the sector.”

We are worried about that centralisation. The bill will simply rubber-stamp what already exists, but if Scottish tourism is to improve then tourism growth must be profitable. Public sector support is important for that, but business investment and efficiency of Government and regulation are indispensable.

The new structure is overcentralised. Although it has improved some aspects of VisitScotland's marketing and, I admit, contains some good elements such as EventScotland and EatScotland—Scotland tastes delicious—the overcentralised nature of the new structure risks alienating the smaller tourism businesses that are the lifeblood of our more rural areas. Small tourism businesses make a huge contribution to many communities. The effects of the failure of such businesses are proportionately greater in rural areas than is the case in more populous areas. I am especially concerned that the new structure does not seem to provide a voice for that part of the industry. Time and again, I have heard it said that the restructuring is about the bigger companies in the major cities and offers little to operators in remote areas.

It seems ridiculous to abolish the tried and tested “Scottish Tourist Board” as the legal title, given that the trading name could obviously be changed at any time. I have no objection to the name “VisitScotland”, but I am reminded from

photographs of my youth that trends and fashions pass on. "VisitScotland", with its grammatical oddity, may look outdated all too soon.

I have no concern about the increase in the size of the board as long as the board members are the best that we can get and have professional knowledge that will benefit the industry. I hope that the minister will listen to the industry when it calls, for example, for the dualling of the A9 between Perth and Inverness—which my colleague Murdo Fraser and others in my party have also have called for—and the need for profitable growth. We also need training schemes for employees in the tourism industry and for tourism students so that what is now our biggest industry can grow even bigger.

Scotland will always sell itself well, but the Scottish Executive must also do its best to bring that about.

14:47

Mr Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): The minister was quite right to point out the success in recent times of Scotland's tourism industry. When my wife and I were in north-west Sutherland last week during some terrible weather, it was a great pleasure to see that the Kinlochbervie Hotel and the Mackay's Rooms and Restaurant in Durness—both of which Mr McGrigor will be acquainted with—were full of not just Scots but international tourists. We hear that tourism supports 9 per cent of Scotland's economy and 13 per cent of the Highland economy; those figures are true and I believe that they are rising. Our investment certainly seems to be bearing fruit.

I listened to Jamie McGrigor's speech with great interest. He made some strong points, to which I will come in a second, but if the situation is as bad as people have been telling him, why is the industry doing rather better than it was? That is a difficult question.

Mr McGrigor: I am delighted that the figures that we were published yesterday show an increase in visitor numbers, especially from America. However, I point out that most of those bookings would have been made when the old area tourist boards were still in place, so the figures are not a strong argument for the bill. Furthermore, I have heard recently that tourism bookings for this year may be considerably down.

Mr Stone: Perhaps the people who want to book a holiday in Stoer lighthouse need to book two years in advance, but VisitScotland has been around for considerably longer than Mr McGrigor suggests. I assure him that his point does not apply to the bookings that were made for Durness.

However, Mr McGrigor made a fair point about how crucial training is, especially for students of

tourism. I differ from Mr McGrigor in that I believe that we are building on a sure foundation, although I accept that we can build more on it.

As the minister and Brian Adam have mentioned, the bill will also change the official name of the Scottish Tourist Board. I take issue with Mr McGrigor, as I did with Murdo Fraser, about that. Perhaps being a trendy Lib Dem—or perhaps not, some of my colleagues might say—I believe that "VisitScotland" is an apt and snappy title. The Conservatives perhaps prefer to cherish the things of the past but, in fairness, the title "Scottish Tourist Board" is outdated. We are each entitled to our opinions about that.

On the connections between Scotland and the rest of the world, Brian Adam made the plea that other parts of Scotland should also be connected. I will come to his point about the United States in a moment, but there is something in what he said and the Executive is working on the issue. The point is fair. I am not talking about sending huge aeroplanes into the smaller airports that are scattered about the Highlands, but surely it is desirable to increase the number of flights into some of them. After all, Mr McGrigor knows Ackergill Tower as well as I do, and increasing the number of flights into Wick will help such businesses.

Chris Ballance (South of Scotland) (Green): Does the suggestion to increase the number of flights accord with the Liberal Democrats' stance on the environment?

Mr Stone: I think that it does. However, to be honest, the question is more pertinent for the Scottish nationalists—after all, it was Brian Adam who suggested that there should be extra flights to the United States from different parts of Scotland, although one would have trouble landing a Boeing 747 at Wick airport. In any case, given the singular nature of my constituency and as a back bencher, I reserve the right to take a singular view on my party's policies.

Jamie McGrigor expressed concern that local knowledge will be lost if the bill is passed. At the risk of repeating myself, I believe that what matters to tourists—and, indeed, to the tourism product provider—is not the structure of the tourism sector in any part of Scotland but what they see and the information that they receive in a tourist information centre. In that respect, the situation in my constituency is not bad and is, in fact, getting better. For example, in Wick, there are facilities that we did not previously have.

I do not wish to prolong the debate. I do not think that there is any division on the matter; we are of one accord and can make our comments fair and square. As far as this matter is concerned, I rest my case: this has been a splendid year for

tourism, and it is getting better. The more visitors we can welcome, the better.

I will close with an anecdote. This summer, an American visitor who was holding a map stopped me in Victoria Street to ask the way to “War-wick” Castle. “You mean ‘Warwick’”, I said. “Yes”, she said, “I guess that’s how you pronounce it”. I said, “But you’re in Edinburgh”. All she could say to that was, “Oh.”

14:51

Mr Charlie Gordon (Glasgow Cathcart) (Lab):

In passing the bill, we should do more than simply acknowledge that, since April 2005, a new partnership framework has been distributing Scottish tourism’s strong brands: we should also applaud the proven success that is reflected in the figures that the minister highlighted. There can be no more arguments or doubts about delivery processes—although that is not to say that we cannot or should not raise our game further. For example, a strategic programme of major events such as the 2007 Union of European Football Associations cup final—or, indeed, Scotland’s bid to host the 2014 Commonwealth games in Glasgow—provides strong support to Scotland’s brands and gives potential visitors more reasons to visit the country.

As I have said in previous transport and tourism debates, it is vital that we have direct transport links as the distribution networks for Scotland’s brands. That is why I am delighted with the minister’s decision to give VisitScotland another £800,000 to market direct air links to Scotland. Of course, many such links have been developed with help from the Scottish Executive’s air route development fund.

Nowhere are the new integrated delivery arrangements working more effectively than in the Glasgow city region, where VisitScotland’s increase in leisure visitors has been complemented by Glasgow City Marketing Bureau’s 28.5 per cent increase in conference-delegate days in 2005-06. The Scottish Executive’s city growth fund also supports the marketing of direct air links to Glasgow.

Although the target of increasing tourism by 50 per cent by 2015 is ambitious—rightly so—it is achievable, given our current good progress. Effective partnership, more transport links, a strategic events programme and joined-up funding and Government are delivering success in an industry that employs 200,000 people. Who is to say that the industry will not employ 400,000 by 2015?

I will close on this note. Of course, more infrastructure always helps. As a result, I send a memo not to the minister but to the United

Kingdom Government: put the supercasino in Glasgow and we will deliver even more jobs and revenue.

14:54

Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con):

I echo the support that has been expressed around the chamber for Scotland’s tourism industry—our number 1 industry. Like many other members, I engage regularly with the tourism industry in my parliamentary region, and although I accept that there has been growth and that there are many good news stories, we should also accept that not everything in the garden is rosy and that there are problem areas and concerns in the sector about some of the changes that the bill will entrench.

I would like to make two specific points about the bill. The first is about a subject that Enterprise and Culture Committee members will remember my raising at stage 1 and, again, with an amendment at stage 2: the change of name. I see no possible reason for legislating to change the formal name of what was the Scottish Tourist Board. That name is perfectly adequate and entirely descriptive, and it is obvious to anybody who looks at it what the organisation does. That is not the case with the name “VisitScotland”, which is, I concede, perfectly fine as a trading name. However, if one puts the name VisitScotland on paper, one has then to explain what the organisation is. No doubt it is a trendy name that has been dreamed up by consultants at great public expense. That is fine for trading, but it seems to me that the legal registered name should be something that describes what the organisation does. Of course, there is no requirement for the legal name and the trading name to be the same; they have been different for the past five years, since VisitScotland started trading. There is no earthly reason for the bill and it is, frankly, a waste of parliamentary time. It is unnecessary and pointless.

The more serious point that I want to make is about restructuring. My colleague, Jamie McGrigor, made serious points about industry concerns about the changes that have taken place. The area tourist boards were, I accept, a mixed bag—some were good and others did not work so well. In my parliamentary region, I have experienced the tourist boards in Perthshire, Dundee and Angus, and in Fife. All three worked extremely well and were well regarded by the tourism industry.

Under the old structure, tourism operatives were members of the tourist board and had ownership of the body to which they paid their subs, so they had a direct say in what went on and a vote in the election of the local board members. The new model moves away from that altogether: it is all

about a centralised national structure—albeit, one with satellite offices—that will sell services and packages to the industry. The crucial change is that the industry and the private sector will no longer have a direct say such as they once had. People in the industry will no longer be members of their tourist board; they will now simply buy services from it and will be clients rather than partners. That centralised structure is not necessarily best for the industry. The jury is still out on whether the new structure is the right one.

Like Jamie McGrigor, I have picked up on the great deal of concern from the industry in my area about what is seen as a lack of engagement with the industry in the new structure. Local tourism forums are being established, but at the moment they are not filling the gap and are not performing the role that the area tourist boards previously performed. Edinburgh is now the only European capital without its own tourist body, and we could see more sectoral marketing organisations being established because people are not satisfied with the new structure of VisitScotland. Jamie McGrigor attended a recent event that was organised by the Scottish Tourism Forum. There is no doubt that that body is growing—in numbers and in influence—in response to what the industry sees as a lack of engagement under the new structure, which is unfortunate. There are concerns about the new structure so, for that reason, the Conservatives will not support the bill.

14:59

Alasdair Morgan (South of Scotland) (SNP): Tourism, as has been said, is especially important in rural areas, so I welcome the successes to which the minister alluded. However, it is clear that much of that success is centrally based. I would not gainsay that, because visitors to our major towns and cities are important, but there is tension between the people at one extreme who believe that we need only market Scotland and her centres and leave the trickle-down effect to deal with the rest, and those at the other extreme who feel that what they see as overcentralisation ignores the needs of small providers, particularly in rural areas.

Jamie McGrigor exaggerated the problem and Murdo Fraser spoke in glowing terms about the elections to tourist boards under the previous system, but there were significant problems with that system. I remember that, on one occasion, an aspirant to the post of chair of Dumfries and Galloway Tourist Board became the chair simply by bussing in sufficient numbers of his supporters to the annual general meeting. When a large rural area is involved, that can have a significant effect.

It was always easy to see the problems, but it was not quite as easy to see the solution. That is

why the Executive took some considerable months, if not years, to produce the revised structure. We must ensure that the new system maintains good communications between the centre and small local providers. In some areas, the sense is that that may be missing. That will have to continue to be monitored, because it is important not to lose local input to tourism decisions.

In that context, I mention visitscotland.com, which is the private company that runs the website and takes bookings for many of our providers. It needs to be much more responsive to our small providers and not to be driven totally—as some fear it is—by simply pushing its profit margins.

I return to the bill that we are meant to be discussing. It may be a first—it will become the first act of the Scottish Parliament of which I am aware that refers to the Victoria and Albert Museum. The bill refers to it in the paragraph that will amend the Race Relations Act 1976, which is on a matter that is reserved to Westminster. The bill will also amend the Greater London Authority Act 1999, which is reserved to Westminster.

Brian Adam raised the point briefly in the stage 1 debate; I was not particularly convinced by the minister's response that, somehow, an order made under section 104 of the Scotland Act 1998 would cure the problem. She will have adequate time in her summing-up, so will the minister explain the mechanisms—which I am sure exist, because we in Parliament and, certainly, the Executive would not do anything that was amiss—by which an act of this Parliament can amend legislation on matters that are reserved to Westminster? That is curious and I am sure that we can spend the next 13 minutes happily discussing the question.

15:02

Patricia Ferguson: It is gratifying that my parliamentary colleagues recognise the importance of tourism to Scotland and to their areas and that they are as determined as I am that we get the system right. However, several issues—mainly raised by the Conservatives—still require to be clarified.

I will start with Mr Adam's points. Mr MacAskill may have supported the route development fund, but if my memory serves me correctly—I think it does—it was Lewis Macdonald who introduced the fund. Perhaps the fund is not a matter for which the SNP should take too much credit.

We must be realistic about US travellers. Understandably, after 9/11, people from the US did not travel in the way that they used to. However, good examples of joint marketing have taken place. I will mention two joint marketing activities that VisitScotland has undertaken, with

Continental Airlines and with Delta Air Lines on their respective routes to New York and Atlanta. Some \$1 million has been spent on that. I hope and am almost positive that a result of those activities is the 7 per cent increase in the number of visitors to this country from the US in the first six months of this year over the number in the first six months of 2005. I hope that Mr Adam finds that reassuring.

Brian Adam: I am happy to acknowledge the success of the two developments that the minister mentioned. However, does she concede that as America is such a big country and many potential links exist between Scotland and various parts of the US, one way to drive up the numbers coming to Scotland again would be to target the US market more by having more direct links and not just having links through London as usual or with just one or two places in the US?

Patricia Ferguson: I drew attention to only two examples of the work that we are doing; I was not suggesting that that was the limit of what we are doing in the US—far from it. We will continue to work with our colleagues on that issue as time progresses.

I am afraid that, a bit like Mr McGrigor's memories, the name "Scottish Tourist Board" belongs in the past. I also have to say to him that training is one of the key priorities that we have identified. Interestingly—in the light of one of his other points—we have jointly with the Scottish Tourism Forum and VisitScotland identified training as an issue that we must all address.

As recently as yesterday, when I attended the national tourism convention in Perth, I helped to launch a project called the Perth discovery trail. Young school pupils are encouraged to learn more about tourism in a fun and innovative way in order to give them a positive view of the tourism industry and to encourage them to go into it.

Mr McGrigor is wrong to say that the bookings to which he referred would have been made under the previous regime. Increasingly—I am sure that many members in the chamber can bear this out from their own experience—people who want to travel are more inclined than they were in the past to book close to the date of travel. We must recognise that trend.

Charlie Gordon is correct to identify the events strategy as a major plank in our work. Our events strategy is about encouraging international visitors to come to big events such as the ones that he mentioned, including, I hope, the 2014 Commonwealth games. I think also of events such as the Heineken cup final and the rowing championships at Strathclyde park, each of which netted about £12 million for the local economy. Such events are vital, but so are the small regional

events programmes, which are also funded, in part at least, by EventScotland. For example, the number of visitors who go to Wigtown is increasing all the time because of the help that it has been given to market itself as Scotland's national book town. That is an important part of what we are trying to do and we will continue with that work.

Murdo Fraser has a glowing view of the old system, but I am afraid that the whole reason why this debate is taking place and why VisitScotland has come about is that that system was beginning to fail us and was not working to best effect.

When I left Peter Lederer, the chair of VisitScotland, in Perth yesterday, he was about to embark on the latest leg of his chair's tour. He and members of the board go out regularly and talk to accommodation providers and to visitor attraction owners and operators around the country. They have the opportunity to hear at first hand what people are saying. The feedback that is coming through the industry is increasingly very positive about VisitScotland. Its success and satisfaction ratings are incredibly high, which is a good thing.

I am afraid that the Scottish Tourism Forum's view is not as jaundiced as Mr McGrigor might think. We work closely with the forum. Earlier this year, having worked on the document for some time, the forum and I launched our latest strategy to ensure that we can achieve our ambitions for tourism. A joint document was produced by the Government, the public sector and the tourism industry about the way forward for tourism in Scotland.

I was interested that Alasdair Morgan wanted to talk about the section 104 order. I suppose that we would expect a nationalist to make any debate one about the constitution. The section 104 order will go ahead and will be laid shortly. Such orders make consequential amendments to United Kingdom Government acts; for example, the order will change references from "the Scottish Tourist Board" to "VisitScotland". It is a straightforward administrative action that happens from time to time.

I am confident that this is the right way forward for Scottish tourism. Our industry is moving forward, working in partnership with VisitScotland, and moving towards the joint ambition to increase tourism revenues by 50 per cent by 2015.

Let me repeat, because it bears repeating, that 50 per cent more overseas visitors came to Scotland last year than came in 2001. Therefore, the industry is making excellent progress towards achieving its ambition. However, it can do that only if we have a national tourism organisation with the right structures to support it. The bill ensures that we have exactly that. It will put the seal on VisitScotland's restructuring and allow it to continue its world-class, award-winning work.

I take this opportunity to thank the board, management team and staff of VisitScotland for their contribution to making Scottish tourism the success that it is today. I also thank members of the Enterprise and Culture Committee for their consideration of the bill over the past few months. I ask the Parliament to support the bill.

Scotland International

The Presiding Officer (Mr George Reid): The next item of business is an independents group debate on Scotland international.

15:10

Dr Jean Turner (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (Ind): Internationally, Scotland is recognised for exporting its talented people over centuries. Some Scots decided to feed their own desire to travel and explore, as well as to help others; Dr Livingstone was one such Scot. Others left because they saw better opportunities of progressing their careers outwith Scotland. Sadly, others left against their will to make a new life in the colonies. The saddest feature of our time is the fact that we train young Scots who then cannot be employed in their own country because we have no jobs for them.

For some time, I have been intrigued to find out about the international persona or internationally perceived character of Scotland and the Scots. In 1959, I was first made aware of how Scotland is perceived when I travelled in Germany with three friends before going to university. One day, I decided to visit Heidelberg Castle on my own. During the visit, I was befriended by a couple and their son. When Herr Witte knew that I came from Scotland, he astonished me by saying, "Oh, you are Scottish. I was a prisoner of war in Scotland. I have such good memories of the Scottish people."

On another occasion, we arrived at a large youth hostel in Cologne where we had booked beds only to be told that we had not. However, as the manager glanced at our youth hostel cards before returning them, he saw our Loch Lomond youth hostel stamp and said, "Oh, Loch Lomond! Are you Scottish? I was a prisoner of war there. Come with me." He gave us the privilege of brushing out some rooms and found us four beds in the centre of a huge dormitory. We were so grateful to him; it was the end of our holiday and we had very little money and no bed. It was a good job that the Scottish people treated him well or our outcome would have been very different.

If we are to maintain our international character, we need to be careful about the way in which we treat and deal with people from other countries, just as we should with one another at home. We should also preserve our home-grown skills. Our talented people are needed to enable Scotland to grow as a nation. Until now, we have managed that quite well.

A few weeks ago, I attended a retiral lunch for one of the consultants at Stobhill hospital. I was surprised to find that he had an east African connection. From the 1980s, with other

professionals, he pioneered a musculo-skeletal unit in which all forms of arthritis, backache and chronic pain were treated. The unit made use of training nurses and physiotherapists, as specialists in the field, to work as a team alongside specialist physicians and radiologists. All worked within walking distance of one another. That made things easier for patients, who were seen more quickly and treated better as a result. That consultant rheumatologist was responsible for setting up the first musculo-skeletal unit in east Africa and for training people there, thereby exporting Scottish skills. Many of my colleagues worked in parts of Africa, including Malawi, doing their electives. Some of them even examined for the royal colleges.

In general, Scottish-trained doctors and nurses are held in high regard all over the world just as, for example, our teachers and engineers are. Many Scottish teachers generously give five to six weeks of their time to work with teachers and pupils in Malawi. Some retire to Malawi; for example, Janet Chesney has retired there to work in a school and work towards funding and building her own school. Our churches work in all countries, but the Church of Scotland congregations alone give about £100,000 to Malawi every year.

Every time we go on holiday we are ambassadors for our country. The tartan army of football supporters is welcome wherever it goes.

Scotland has a proud tradition in its Scottish regiments. Our soldiers have fought and died for their country all over the world and their sacrifice has been acknowledged. I recently learned that the Flemish Government wants to erect a monument to the Scottish soldiers who died on Flemish soil but is having difficulty raising funds for the project, which is sad.

We must not forget the Territorial Army. A field hospital from Glasgow was the first to be sent out to Iraq in the 90-day war. The health visitor in my practice was an officer and while she was looking after soldiers the loss of expertise in the practice was brought home to me. I also realised the danger that she was in.

On a lighter note, a friend who is an artist is doing his bit for Scotland international with an exhibition of his work entitled, "Around the world in 80 pictures". He invited ambassadors of the countries to attend the exhibition and received an excellent response. The Peruvian ambassador wants him to go to London to show his pictures of Peru. If they have time, members will be able to see the pictures in Gourrock, where the exhibition will run for a month from next weekend.

Apart from being internationally known for our expertise in various fields, we are particularly

known for our friendliness, fair play, generosity and ability to get on with all nationalities. Many people have become Scottish—

Margo MacDonald (Lothians) (Ind): Does the member agree that we are also known for our modesty?

Dr Turner: Some of us are.

How do we nurture the international character—modesty and all—that is so valuable to us? Whether we are talking about a country, a school, a hospital or a business, the whole is made up of individual people. That reminds me of my patients, who used to tell me, "Other hospitals treat us well, but Stobhill treats us like people and not medical cases."

Last night on television, I watched children from Our Lady of the Missions primary school in Thornliebank in East Renfrewshire being interviewed, after their school had been named the best in Scotland. Some children were beaming and holding up their gold stars and others were full of joy to be at school. They loved their teachers and playground friends—no fear of bullying there, I hope. The school's excellent character oozed out of the screen and left us in no doubt.

If we want to retain our international image and hold on to our gold star, we should treat one another as we would like to be treated. That includes how employers and Governments treat their people. We need to maintain standards in our country if we are to help others and we should work hard to block the drain of young and fresh talent. On the front page of today's edition of *The Herald*, we are all glad to see the headline about tourism and the picture of the child with the gold star, but we do not like the headline "Trained physios left without jobs as NHS waiting lists hit 28,000".

15:18

The Minister for Finance and Public Service Reform (Mr Tom McCabe): I thank colleagues in the independents group for promoting a debate that helps us to explore and celebrate Scotland's international links and reputation.

Not only has devolution raised Scotland's international profile; it has given Scotland the opportunity to seek out engagement with other countries around the world. Our devolved Government has seized that opportunity, not only because it is right to respond positively when the hand of friendship is extended but because it is essential in the globalised, interconnected world in which we live.

Scotland has much to offer the world. We have much to share and much to learn. We are a modern and vibrant country and we lead the way

internationally in important areas such as the life sciences and new technologies. Our life sciences sector employs 30,000 people in 600 organisations throughout the country and has attracted inward investment from around the globe. It is a true success story for Scotland.

I will set out some of our other initiatives that may lead to further success. The importance of a fast-changing China in a fast-changing world is not in doubt. When the First Minister paid his first visit to China in 2004, he realised that establishing the right relationship with China was crucial to Scotland's continuing prosperity. We have since established a Scottish affairs office in Beijing and Scottish Development International has expanded its team in the area. During my most recent visit, in August, I launched our strategy for stronger engagement with China and signed a long-term co-operation and friendship agreement with the province of Shandong. Those are concrete steps to deepen and broaden Scotland's relationship with China. Only last week, the Deputy First Minister was in China to develop the countries' collaboration on renewable energy.

During tartan week each year, we celebrate a long relationship and historic ties with the United States, which is the world's foremost economy. As with China, but for different reasons and with a different historical context, the United States will be pivotal to our prosperity in the years to come. The First Minister launched our strategy for stronger engagement with the US last week during a visit to Los Angeles. The document sets out strategic objectives towards which we will work with stakeholders. I hope that the Parliament, which is a prominent part of Scotland's modern international identity, will play a full part in that task. Alongside our activities in China and the United States, we will shortly launch our Germany plan, which will show how we will build on our relations with Europe's most populous country and Scotland's major trading partner.

Those initiatives say a lot about Scotland, as does our fresh talent initiative, which says that we are ambitious and welcoming and that we want people to succeed. More than 12,000 customers from about 160 countries have registered with the relocation advisory service since it was established in 2004 and more than 2,300 overseas students from about 80 countries have chosen to stay in Scotland after graduation because of the fresh talent: working in Scotland scheme. The policy is working and it has tremendous potential to assist our worldwide economic engagement. A classic example of that is how it can assist Scottish companies to develop their financial services joint ventures in China.

Margo MacDonald: I am absolutely supportive of the fresh talent initiative but, if the recent talk in

Westminster of extending the scheme to areas in England or all of England—I am not sure which—is realised, would we have any advantage from the devolved Government creating a policy that suits our particular needs in Scotland?

Mr McCabe: That is a relevant point and I am glad to confirm that we have the advantage because, although the scheme that has been launched south of the border is similar to ours, it involves only a one-year permission to stay rather than the two-year permission in the Scottish scheme.

Our universities and colleges continue to attract students from overseas to study in Scotland. The number has increased by more than 50 per cent in the past five years. A recent i-graduate—International Graduate Insight Group—survey that was funded by the Scottish Executive and the British Council Scotland gave positive messages about Scottish further and higher education. Nine out of 10 international students rated Scotland as a good place to be and 83 per cent said that they would recommend Scotland to others as a place to study.

Scotland has a responsibility to play its part in meeting the global challenges that the international community faces, which is why we have developed our support for the work of Scottish organisations in the field of international development, particularly through the co-operation agreement that is based on our historic relationship with Malawi.

I hope that the Parliament will agree that, since devolution, Scotland has made huge progress internationally. With the unstinting support of the United Kingdom Government and its embassies and consulates throughout the world, we have promoted Scotland successfully as a place to visit, live, learn and work. We will continue to do exactly that, to provide lasting benefit for Scotland and its people and to ensure their long-term prosperity.

15:25

Stewart Stevenson (Banff and Buchan) (SNP): The minister referred to the unstinting support from United Kingdom embassies and consulates around the world. I hope that, at a later stage in the debate, he can tell us how many Scottish events—say in the past 12 months—have been organised in those embassies. I suspect that the answer will be rather disappointing.

Mr McCabe: I cannot give a specific number at the moment, but I can tell the member that our embassies and consulates promote Scotland at every opportunity. From my experience of travelling on behalf of the Executive, I know that this country receives tremendous and enthusiastic support from the embassies and consulates

throughout the world. In a few weeks' time, I will travel to Poland, in conjunction with our embassy, to help to celebrate St Andrew's day.

Stewart Stevenson: I thank the minister and hope that at a later stage we will get the figures that he does not currently have. I am sure that they will inform a continuing debate on the subject.

I begin by making an obvious remark, which is that Scotland touches the world and the world touches Scotland. Indeed, six days ago, a family in my constituency feared that it had lost one of its number to Nigerian bandits. Thankfully, today that family is complete again. However, the two Banff and Buchan oilmen who were held hostage knew that while Scotland touches the world—which, with the world's largest offshore oil base at Peterhead in my constituency, it frequently does—the world's touch on Scotland is not always a comfortable one. It is an interesting place out there, in all possible senses of the word. Of course, the difficulties that are experienced from time to time by individuals and by initiatives should in no sense discourage us from persisting.

To my certain knowledge and experience, Scotland has been engaged with the world for at least a millennium—more or less from the point at which Scotland became an identifiable country in its own right. As others have done—and as I am sure later speakers will too—I draw on some personal experience. During a visit to the west bank town of Hebron, I found a firm echo of Scotland's engagement with the world. A thousand years ago, the Scots crusaders travelled to the holy land to fight for their faith, rather like Scotland's football supporters make forays to countries throughout the world today. Some of those football supporters like it so much that they do not bother to come home. So it was with the crusaders in the middle east. As one walks down the street in Hebron, if one looks carefully enough, one will be struck by the number of red-haired, freckle-faced Muslim Arabs striding the streets of that west bank town. The reason is of course that the Scottish genes continue to survive a thousand years after our uninvited visit to another land.

A personal interest of mine is family history, so I find that example of the persistence of a connection that is based on genealogy and genes fascinating. I have about 2,000 names in my family tree and they perfectly illustrate—as will be the case for other families—the diaspora that is Scotland. I have hundreds of relatives in Canada and the United States of America. I have others in Australia, New Zealand and South Africa, and I have one or two in each of France, Belgium, the Netherlands, Denmark, Sweden, Italy, Lebanon, Egypt and India. One of my cousins died in China. Politically, I find connections as well. I have a cousin who was an MP in the New South Wales

Parliament, another cousin who was a senator in Canada and even—I say this with some hesitation—an English cousin who is a member of the House of Lords.

I want to do something slightly unusual in this debate without a motion, which means that we do not have to divide the Parliament or the people in it, and congratulate a Government agency—the General Registers of Scotland. The GROS is an important administrative part of the Government, which looks after records that go back to the middle of the 17th century. Its record keeping is some of the best in the world. It, more than any other agency or department of the Scottish Government, is most closely engaged with the Scottish diaspora—nowadays via the internet. It provides excellent services for genealogists across the globe. Such people are so committed to being engaged with Scotland that they pay for the privilege; we are not having to lay out our money to pay them. We should perhaps consider upping the ante with people who are interested in Scotland and persuade them to visit us and represent us wherever they are.

My calculation based on information from the Executive's website is that there are 58 consuls in Scotland. We have a strong brand, which is recognised throughout the world. We must be careful to reinforce it and not devalue it. Show anyone in the world a kilt and they will pretty certainly recognise it as being from Scotland. Show them a bottle of whisky from Scotland and we have a friend.

Scotland is a country with a terrific international reputation, but it does not have the position in the world that many other countries have and is limited in the way in which it can engage with the world. We are doing decent work in Malawi and other countries, which my colleagues and I support. However, it is time that we joined the family of nations. SNP members will continue to strive to achieve that.

15:32

John Swinburne (Central Scotland) (SSCUP):

I do not doubt that the "Here's tae us, wha's like us" or shortbread-tin image of Scots abroad will be painted as the debate goes on. The harsh reality is that, in many cases, that image could not be further from the truth. I will highlight a couple of examples.

Many Scots have succeeded abroad because they have displayed a ruthless streak that would not have been tolerated back home. The world-renowned philanthropist Andrew Carnegie was a ruthless, hard-nosed capitalist whose only god was money. He certainly knew how to capitalise

on his ruthless streak as he relentlessly pursued his money-making goal.

Carnegie was even responsible for hiring 300 mercenaries to act as strikebreakers, who were used to great effect in the day-long battle at Homestead, when 10 men were killed and more than 60 were wounded before the Pennsylvania state governor obtained order by declaring martial law. That is all part of American industrial folklore. The blame for that was laid originally at the door of his partner, Henry Frick, but Carnegie, as controlling owner, took overall responsibility for the disastrous action, which was enough to make his name a hated by-word for years.

Carnegie eventually sold the Carnegie company to J Pierpont Morgan for \$500 million in 1901, which gave him a personal fortune of \$225 million. About that time, he realised that there were no pockets in a shroud and that he could not take his money with him. He then built up a reputation as one of the world's greatest philanthropists. The truth is that he was determined that the more indolently inclined members of his family would not enjoy the fruits of all his labours. Some 3,000 libraries were built, of which 300 were in the UK, and 10,000 organs were put into churches. Those were typically generous gestures from the erstwhile ruthless steel magnate.

Another Scot who went to the United States and made a huge impact, as well as a fortune, was the son of a Glasgow policeman. His father was crippled during a riot and in 1842, at the age of 23, Alan Pinkerton emigrated to America. He founded the Pinkerton agency in 1851 and became the head of intelligence for the union during the American civil war. He controlled the railway security network and undertook the duty of escorting strikebreakers during disputes. His agency's logo has been immortalised by the expression "private eye", as the logo was an eye with the message, "We never sleep".

The slave trade was a great earner for Scots and many proud families at home and abroad owe their prosperity to embracing this sickening trade in the 18th and 19th centuries. We Scots have much to be proud of in our heritage but, in a fair number of cases, there is a deep-rooted shame. We should recognise that.

To this day, Scots go abroad to seek and—in some cases—make their fortunes. There is no disputing the fact that there are at least 25 million first and second-generation Scots living abroad. The vast majority of them are a credit to our country, but we should stop the sentimental rubbish that is often poured out in relation to this topic. Never forget the harsh realities that have given some Scots abroad an image that they by and large neither want nor deserve.

Whenever I hear the words "Scotland international", my thoughts instinctively turn to great football matches, particularly at Wembley. My first international was at Hampden in 1945, when Scotland beat Switzerland 6-1—I say that from memory, but I am sure that that was the score. The great Tommy Walker of Hearts was picked up at the docks as he returned to Scotland from the far east on a troop ship—how is that for pre-match training?—and he starred at inside left and played a great game. Jimmy Cowan's game in 1949 was another memorable international. I also remember suffering through the nine-goal debacle against England, which is known as Frank Haffey's game.

Margo MacDonald: That was a bad game.

John Swinburne: Yes, but with 20 minutes to go, the score was still 3-2, so it was not as bad then as it turned out to be.

In 1980, Scots were banned from going to Wembley by the English Football Association. Ted Croker was the official who took most of the criticism from the Scots for that decision. I got my ticket from a West Ham United fan as I could not get one in Scotland. When we got to Wembley, the Scots had filled the ground and there was not an Englishman to be seen. The chant was, "You tried to ban us, Mr Croker". Wee John Robertson scored with a deserved penalty kick in the 72nd minute and the final result was a 1-0 hammering for our English opponents.

I often wish that I had bitten the bullet and emigrated to New Zealand in the 1950s—no doubt quite a few other people wish that I had done so, too. If I had done that, I would probably have found myself, in 2006, happily retired with an excellent citizens pension. New Zealand can be proud of its treatment of the elderly. We cannot say that about the UK. Those of us who stayed at home have still to achieve a good pension. However, that is no problem: grey power will eventually win through. We will get better treatment soon.

The person who is most responsible for promoting Scotland's international image is, without question, our national bard, Rabbie Burns. The only place where he fails to get the credit that is due to him is right here in Holyrood, which should have a prominently placed statue of Burns at its main entrance. Many of the stark, bare concrete walls would be brought to life if they were covered with some of the magnificent mural masterpieces by Alexander Goudie, which immortalise that epic poem, "Tam o' Shanter". Unfortunately, our bard will continue to be revered abroad and ignored in Holyrood until such time as those who are responsible acknowledge that, for £431 million, there should have been room for such an essential item as a statue of Burns. That

would have been far better than some of the money-wasting embellishments that were instituted and which will never create as much interest as a proper tribute to Robert Burns would have done.

Could somebody please pass the shortbread?

15:39

Phil Gallie (South of Scotland) (Con): As I follow John Swinburne, who started off in rather a negative fashion, I intend to be fairly positive. As a Dunfermline lad, I must defend Andrew Carnegie. Perhaps it could be said that he saw the light. Believe me, in Dunfermline, he is very much appreciated, certainly by my generation.

I note John Swinburne's comments on Scotland and the slave trade, but I point out that, after the union of the Crowns, many Scots backed William Wilberforce, an Englishman, in ending that terrible trade. There were Scots who could take some credit for that.

I agree with everything that John Swinburne said about Robert Burns, so I will not add to it.

When we consider Scotland and its international image, we must recognise that Scotland starts with a huge advantage over many other countries throughout the world. Our history is virtually second to none. We are looked upon with respect in the field of battle from the past, and in more recent times Scots have more than held their own under the British banner. In the field of invention—roads, bridges, railway engineering, ships from the Clyde, heavy engineering—Scots have been seen as a world force. We should all cherish that. The telephone and the television were born here in Scotland.

Stewart Stevenson talked about the brand—tartan, the bagpipes, whisky. We should never forget those things. We should use them to the maximum. They are a public relations man's dream because we can use them to promote our country. Few other businesses or countries have such things. We have hills and castles, rivers and glens. Others have those, but, once again, our history is built in to them.

In the past, we perhaps had a justice system that was regarded as second to none, but in my perception it has suffered in recent times. I will say more about that later. Jean Turner mentioned education in her excellent opening speech. She mentioned physiotherapists, who have been on site today. We must take on board and recognise the fact that our education system is good, but it needs to have a real purpose. It is pointless to educate people only for them to end up disappointed at the end of the trail.

When we consider Scotland's generosity and

the support that it provides worldwide, we have much to be proud of. Jean Turner mentioned the Church of Scotland and its international involvement, and Stewart Stevenson spoke of Hebron. I visited St Andrew's church in Jerusalem a few years ago and saw the Scottish Christian presence there. When we consider Scotland's Christian heritage and think of Livingstone and Slessor, who went out across the world, and Eric Liddell in China, we realise that Scotland, once again, has much to boast of and much to build on in the future. We should never forget those elements of our culture. We should promote them in the future.

There has certainly been change. The fields of glory are perhaps diminished, but they are not totally lost. Tom McCabe mentioned our experience in the life sciences. Yesterday, in the European and External Relations Committee, we met people who work in the biosciences in Dundee. We can build on our experience in the life sciences; Scotland has been involved at an early stage and we can lead in that area. It is not easy to find a niche in the global economy.

In thinking about the global economy and Scotland's potential, I compliment the Executive. The slogan "a smart, successful Scotland" and the detail that is built within the programme of that name have much to offer. I only wish that the Executive would ditch the silly statement that Scotland is the best wee country in the world. That is rather demeaning, but "a smart, successful Scotland" has a meaning, and the words that lie behind that slogan give us hope for the future.

Looking at Scotland in an international sense and at Scotland's ability to look after its own affairs, I recognise that the Tories long opposed devolution, but the fact is that it has happened and we must accept and embrace that. The mission must now be to make devolution work to the best advantages of our citizens and those beyond our borders. To that extent, I find it a little strange that Labour, the Liberals and the Scottish National Party are so enthusiastic about Europe and that they wanted to sign up to the European constitution. In recent times, Scotland has achieved the powers to legislate on its home affairs to a large extent. If we were to go down the line of the European constitution, we would sell out those powers.

The same would be the case if we were to join the euro. I remember the nationalists claiming not so long ago that if a nation cannot control its own economic affairs, it is not a nation. The nationalists are keen to join the euro and give away to Brussels all the economic powers that Scotland and the United Kingdom have. That does not make sense. I am delighted that a Chancellor of the Exchequer who comes from Scotland and

looks after the UK's economic affairs has placed a block on the folly of joining the euro.

It may be somewhat ironic, but when we talk about Europe and I think about John Swinburne's comments on Scottish football, I believe that there is a message. Under a European manager, the Scotland team was a manifest shambles. It failed totally. But where is Scotland today, under a Scottish manager? We are up there and rising, boys. Let us remember that when we look at Scotland in Europe and internationally.

15:47

Des McNulty (Clydebank and Milngavie) (Lab): A number of members have referred to their family history, and I will start by referring to mine.

My father had four brothers. All were born in Ireland and moved to the UK in the 1930s and 1940s. Of them, two went to the United States, and another brother—my Uncle Desmond, as it turns out—went to Australia. He lived there for the rest of his life, coming back two or three times. I will always remember asking him when he came back in the 1970s whether he considered himself to be Irish, where he had been born, English, where he had lived for a considerable period of his youth, or Australian, where he had lived for the previous 20 or 25 years. His response was that he saw himself as a citizen of the world. He thought that national identity was something to be proud of on one level, but that it should not be used to create barriers or enmity between different groups of people. In our approach to how we are seen in the world, we need a positive view of how we want to project ourselves, especially in the context of a changing and more globalised environment.

Some of the growth in national sentiment and identity must be seen in the context of a growth in people's religious, ethnic and cultural identity. Even a country such as Scotland is a mix of cultures, religions and identities far more than it was 20 or 30 years ago. We are much more diverse now. In that sense, national identity and how we project ourselves should not be antagonistic, resentful or something that is based on girning. In this world, we can earn respect rather than gurn for it.

The perspective of our younger people—those who are going through primary and secondary schools—is fundamentally changing because of the people they meet in schools. Their awareness of different cultures, values and languages is greater than it was in the past. It seems to me that the idea of global citizenship and having a multilayered identity—of individuals being proud of being from Clydebank or Glasgow, but also of being Scottish, Muslim, European and whatever

other identity they wish to attach themselves to—is not contradictory and that different identities can be combined. Scottish identity need not set a boundary between us and other people, but can be an expression of what we have become.

What Scotland offers to people in the future will not be just shortbread tins, whisky and the other things that are traditionally associated with Scotland. Look at the food and traditions that our ethnic minority populations are creating and at the increasing religious diversity in Scotland. In recent weeks I went to a terrific celebration in Glasgow of the Hindu religion that is based in the southern part of India, which has a different set of rituals from Hinduism in northern India. It is a minority tradition within Indian culture and our Indian population, but it is nevertheless represented by a significant population within our culture. Scotland now has the richness of a different mix and broader range of identities and values than existed in the past. We need to build on that. We should see it not as a problem but as an opportunity that creates links between us and other places. The south Indian group to which I referred has a shared identity with similar groups in other parts of the UK and Europe. Its historic identity, which comes from its religion and ethnicity, has been translated both to our country and to other countries.

Identity is no longer singular. In most countries in Europe, there is a significant variety of cultures and identities, which we must recognise and celebrate. National identity is not what it once was.

Margo MacDonald: I find the member's speech fascinating. However, it occurs to me that, if we take his argument to its logical conclusion, people who have come from the subcontinent, for example, to many different countries in Europe and who retain much of their culture will create in all those countries a homogeneous society and identity. Is the member happy about the loss and diminution of the different national identities that already exist?

Des McNulty: It is not a question of whether I am happy or unhappy about it. Rather, we must recognise what is happening and embrace it. If we assert a single national identity, based on what is proper for Scotland or anywhere else in the world, and say that it is frozen, fixed and rigid and that we must protect and preserve it, we are acting rather like King Canute, trying to stop the tide coming in. Our country is changing because of the people who make it up, how they see themselves and the way in which they want to develop.

The interconnection between our country and other parts of the world is increasing exponentially. The degree of political connectedness between Scotland and other countries has increased and will continue to increase. I do not think that trying

to stop the clock or halt the tide is an option for us. Scotland in the world must project what is good about Scotland but recognise that it is part of the rest of the world. We are not in opposition to the rest of the world—the changes that are taking place here are part of changes that are taking place in Europe and throughout the world. In that sense, we are connected to what is happening. We are not an island unto ourselves, but are part of global change that is happening rapidly. Our national identity is all the richer for that.

15:55

Colin Fox (Lothians) (SSP): I congratulate the independents on offering the opportunity to debate without a motion Scotland's international image. I am sorry if, unlike other members, I have to strike a discordant note, but there is a need for an honest appraisal of Scotland's reputation at all times. If we are honest, the one issue with Scottish involvement in the wider world today that towers over all others is the war in Iraq. The involvement of Scottish soldiers in Scotland's name, spending Scotland's money—billions of pounds of it—on the invasion and brutal suppression of another nation militarily and without legal or moral authority, degrading a people who did not want us to be there and who are now desperate and determined to see us driven out: that is our international reputation, at least in part, and it is one of which we should be ashamed.

We, in Scotland, are involved in a conflict that had no justification and which is now losing support even among its previously most steadfast supporters. We were told that we had been invited into Iraq by the Iraqi people to help to topple the hated tyrant Saddam Hussein. Of course, that was bunkum. The war in Iraq was America's revenge for 9/11. If Tony Blair and George Bush were motivated by the desires and wishes of the Iraqi people, why do we so despise their wishes now? Plainly, the same Iraqi people are expressing the clear wish to see us leave. Where is the consistency? Where is the respect for democracy, which is part of Scotland's tradition and international reputation? It is not only the powerless Iraqi people who want us out; in recent weeks, the political and military strategy and tactics that are being employed have been attacked not just by those in the stop-the-war movements across the world in their millions, but by British military chiefs of staff. British and American army and air force generals recognise the supreme folly of their presence in Iraq.

Phil Gallie: I recognise much truth in what Colin Fox says, particularly on the misinformation that lay behind the Iraq war. However, is it not the case that the people in Iraq turned out en masse for a democratically held election? Did they not elect

the Government that they wished to govern them, and has not that Government asked our troops to stay, whether or not they will? I am not sure that it is wise for them to stay there, but did not the Iraqi people democratically determine that our troops should stay?

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Trish Godman): Mr Fox, I appreciate that there is no motion to speak to, but I ask you to remember that the debate is about Scotland international, not the UK. Please keep that in mind.

Colin Fox: Indeed. I will bear that in mind throughout my speech, Presiding Officer.

I say to Phil Gallie that, as a democrat, I respect the wishes of the people of Scotland and abroad. Like the Conservatives, I have lost a damn sight more elections than I have ever won, and I have learned about democracy since I was knee high. The democratic wishes of the Iraqi people are plain and clear to us all.

It is important to recognise that the sands are shifting. Given the remarks of the military chiefs of staff—perhaps some members in the chamber have military experience—we can only guess at the much sharper and more frustrated attitude that is prevalent in the lower ranks when the generals are forced to speak out and, in essence, abandon their policy. I feel for Scottish troops. I listened to the "Today" programme with John Humphrys, on which the Scottish troops in Basra made clear the abject failure of the policy and the difficulties that they face. They told of how troop movements can take place only at night, with Scottish soldiers moving around in armoured personnel carriers, whereas in Basra—in the supposedly safe south of Iraq—top military personnel have not left their palace headquarters compound in months.

Most important, it is clear that the population at large in Scotland has given up on the war. The mood is the same in America. John Swinburne talked about Andrew Carnegie, Pinkerton and all those other great émigrés. Members of my family live in Ohio, New York State and New Jersey, and I am in contact with them every Christmas. I extend my best wishes to them and to other Scots abroad.

The anti-war movement and sentiment in America have produced a remarkable set of circumstances whereby, in the next few weeks, George Bush's Republican party is expected to lose control of the Senate and the House of Representatives, largely as a consequence of the war in Iraq. John Swinburne depressed me by speaking about the legendary strikebreakers and slave traders in America, so it might comfort him to know that on 7 November, America is expected to elect its first socialist to the Senate. A man called Bernard Sanders is standing in Vermont and is

well ahead in the polls. He was previously a Congressman for that state and I am sure that all progressive members of the Parliament, including Phil Gallie, will hope that Bernard Sanders is elected and that the US Senate receives its first socialist. We can but hope.

As this Parliament well knows, the Scottish Socialist Party opposed the indefensible, illegal military aggression in Iraq from the beginning. We did not accept the opinion that Saddam Hussein was responsible for 9/11; that was bogus. We did not accept that weapons of mass destruction existed in Iraq; that was bogus. They exist on the Clyde—that is a fact—but they did not exist in Iraq. Of course, the links between Saddam Hussein and al-Qa'ida that were much heralded in the chamber were bogus then but, ironically, al-Qa'ida is now prevalent and running much of Iraq as a consequence of the invasion. The devastating political disaster for Iraq has seen the deaths of 655,000 people in excess of those who would have died since 2003. One hundred people are being murdered every day in a sectarian bloodbath; that is the equivalent of 36,500 people annually. That is nine times the number of people who died in the 9/11 attacks.

That is the reality of what Scottish soldiers and the Scottish nation are associated with. Almost 3,000 American soldiers have died in that war and 120 British soldiers, too many of whom were Scots. That is part of the reputation that Scotland has inherited. I firmly believe that if this Parliament had had the opportunity to make such decisions, we would not have decided to send Scottish troops to Iraq. The Iraqis do not want us there; the majority of the people of Scotland do not want us to be there, and their voices will be heard on the matter in due course.

16:02

Ms Sandra White (Glasgow) (SNP): I thank the independents group for choosing today's debate—Scotland international—although I am tempted to rename it Scotland international plc, which has a nice ring to it. I will not rename the debate, but perhaps we can think about that in the future.

I also thank the minister for attending and responding to the debate. We seldom get a minister for such debates, and I am pleased that he is here. I take on board what he said about devolution, but how can Scotland be international if it is not independent? From my introduction, members will sense that I will talk about independence, which is closely linked with internationalism.

Tomorrow morning, Parliament is going to be lobbied by people who are against dawn raids and the destitution faced by asylum seekers in

Scotland. If Scotland were truly international, would we be dragging people out of their homes at 6 o'clock in the morning, in some cases handcuffing them, taking away their medicines, and terrifying their children and locking them up in Dungavel detention centre? That would not happen in an independent international Scotland. We would have our own immigration and asylum legislation. The First Minister would not be sitting waiting for instructions from Westminster under his much-vaunted protocol, because we would have our own protocol. That is what I call true internationalism.

Would an international Scotland have taken part in an illegal war in Iraq? I do not think so. Would we be following America blindly and be her wagging tail? I do not think so. An independent Scotland could have played a role in the international community and been a voice of reason and justice against the scaremongering and warmongering that was perpetrated by Bush and Blair.

Would Scotland, as an international country, have allowed her airports to be used by rendition flights taking people to other countries to be tortured? Would we have allowed our airports to be used to refuel planes that were carrying to Lebanon the cluster bombs that killed a young child as recently as Monday? I think not. An international Scotland would not have put up with that at all.

I returned from Lebanon on Sunday. The warmth expressed to us there was absolutely overwhelming. Wherever we went, no matter whether we were speaking to the media, meeting people in the streets or speaking to Government officials, we were referred to and introduced as a Scottish delegation.

To pick up on Des McNulty's point about identity, he said that we are how we are seen in the world and we should not be antagonistic. It might not be the case in a British context, but in a Scottish context we are seen as being against antagonism. I am proud to have visited Lebanon as part of a Scottish delegation. We need to play to our Scottish identity. Scottish people are welcomed throughout the world regardless of what happens on the international stage. If we were truly independent, we could go forward on the international stage. I am sorry that Des McNulty is no longer present in the chamber, but we have nothing to be ashamed of in saying that we have an identity. We may all be internationalists, but until we put forward the case for an independent Scotland, we will not be able to be so in the international arena.

I am reminded of the debate that I saw on Monday between—I am sorry to take people's names in vain when they are not in the chamber—

Jim Mather and Wendy Alexander. In the debate, which took place in a television studio, we were told by the interviewer that an independent Scotland would have no say anywhere as it would be outwith any international community. Why is it assumed that if Scotland became independent, England would take over all the powers of Great Britain? Is it not the case that England also would need to renegotiate as an international body within the international community? We should bear that in mind.

Scotland has always had a reputation as an international, outward-looking country. One reason why I have always harboured a desire for an independent Scotland is that we could do things internationally and help other people. We could promote our Scottish values, which are very much valued throughout the world, to other countries, without being part of a British state that simply props up America. Scotland could promote its values very well.

As I mentioned, when I was in Lebanon I saw some horrific sights, but I also met some very interesting and fantastic people. The resilience of the Lebanese people was overwhelming. Within 24 hours, people returned to bombed-out houses, looked into the abyss that had once been their house and scabbled in the rubble for school books and family pictures. They were resilient because they want to have their own country. They want the freedom to make their own decisions without the interference of America, Israel and, to a certain extent, Britain.

I was honoured to visit Lebanon—I thank all those who organised our visit and took us to meet so many people—but I was ashamed when I saw the destruction that had taken place. It has now been proven that the plane that refuelled at Prestwick airport had cluster bombs, which are the bombs that killed that young boy on Monday afternoon. I am ashamed of that, but I was glad that I could say that an independent Scotland, as part of the international community, would have taken no part in that whatsoever.

I saw the excessive destruction that Israel caused in Lebanon, the economy of which is in tatters. Israel blew up bridges so that the north of Lebanon could not get supplies through to any part of the south. Cluster bombs were dropped on the banana plantations and olive groves from which the Lebanese make their money. An oil refinery was blown up, so two thirds of the beaches are now covered in oil and are unusable—although they are being cleaned up with help, I might add, from the European Union.

Women and children were killed. A particularly poignant incident occurred in Cana, which has suffered greatly over the past 20 years. A nine-month-old baby and all the members of its family

were massacred by Israeli bombs. However, we heard not one word from our so-called Prime Minister Blair about the need for an immediate ceasefire or about the excessive force that Israel used. I find it insulting to be part of a so-called British community whose Government has issued not one word of apology to the people of Lebanon and the children of Cana.

Scotland has always had an international outlook, but until we achieve independence we cannot get it on the international stage.

16:09

Dennis Canavan (Falkirk West) (Ind):

Scotland's international reputation is very much influenced by the way in which we treat people from other countries. I strongly support the Scottish Executive's fresh talent initiative, which encourages people from other countries to come here to live and work. However, the Government's treatment of refugees and asylum seekers tends to undermine that initiative. Some refugees and asylum seekers have fled some of the most oppressive regimes in the world, but instead of being welcomed with open arms, in some cases they are incarcerated in places such as Dungavel or, in others, they live with their families in fear of dawn raids by immigration officials.

It is ironic that some refugees and asylum seekers have the very talents that are needed to build a smart, successful Scotland but, because they are denied the right to work, they do not have the opportunity to use them. Over the years, economic migrants have come to Scotland from many places, such as Ireland, Italy and the Indian subcontinent. Some, such as the Polish immigrants of the 1940s, came because of the upheaval of war; others, such as Chilean refugees fleeing from the brutal Pinochet regime and the Ugandan Asians fleeing from the barbaric regime of Idi Amin, came seeking refuge.

Half a century ago, some refugees came to Scotland after the unsuccessful revolution in Hungary. I recall meeting some of them when they arrived in my then home town—the mining community of Cowdenbeath. Some Hungarian refugees worked in the mining industry and made an important economic contribution. They also made an important political contribution by making many people rethink their attitude to Soviet communism. After the Soviet tanks invaded Hungary, I could not imagine how anyone could possibly join the communists—or, as they came to be known, the tankies.

However, some people—for example, our current Home Secretary—like tanks. I remember John Reid when he was a revolutionary communist berating Harold Wilson for allegedly

being a right-wing extremist. Well, Wilson was not perfect but, when he was Prime Minister, he had the guts to stand up to the President of the United States and repeatedly refuse American requests to send British troops to Vietnam. I wish only that Blair, Reid and other Cabinet ministers had made a similar stand against Bush over the war in Iraq. If they had done so, many innocent lives would have been saved, including the lives of some of our own people in the armed forces.

We now have a Government that is waging war not only in other countries but against multiculturalism in this country. For example, young women face criticism and dismissal for daring to wear a veil. Moreover, our Home Secretary is still trying—as he tried so many years ago—to defend the indefensible. Yesterday, he announced his decision to impose severe restrictions on the number of Bulgarian and Romanian workers coming into the country, which could have damaging consequences for Scotland's fresh talent initiative.

The workers from the states that joined the European Union in the previous enlargement, particularly the young people from Poland, have been a great asset to Scotland, and I see no reason why workers from Bulgaria and Romania cannot be a similar asset when the countries become full members of the European family of nations. One of the EU's founding principles was freedom of movement of labour, and John Reid's proposal breaches that. As a result, I hope that the Scottish Parliament and the Scottish Executive will tell Comrade Reid to think again.

We should not be thinking negatively about how we can keep people out; we should be thinking positively about how we can bring people in and welcome them, so that they can help us to achieve the aim of an international Scotland where people of different ethnic backgrounds, cultures and faiths can live peacefully together as equals and can work together to build a modern, 21st century Scotland with an international vision that is summed up in the immortal words:

"For a' that, and a' that,
Its comin yet for a' that,
That Man to Man the world o'er,
Shall brothers be for a' that."

16:15

Bill Aitken (Glasgow) (Con): I have to say that the debate has been decidedly downbeat. As Margo MacDonald quite properly pointed out in an early intervention on Jean Turner's speech, we Scots have a good conceit of ourselves, and rightly so, but I found it a little disappointing that speaker after speaker sold Scotland and Scotland's historical contribution short. For example, John Swinburne's criticism of Andrew

Carnegie must surely be the first time that anyone has been criticised in the Parliament for giving away £205 million for philanthropic causes. It is true, I accept, that Mr Carnegie did perhaps demonstrate a degree of ruthlessness in his business career, and it is also true that companies such as Jardine Matheson, which dominated far eastern trade, were involved in the opium trade during the 19th century, but the bottom line is that the Scottish contribution to the world and to humanity in general has been constructive and positive.

Businesses have been built up all over the world—not just in the United States or in the far east, but everywhere—as a result of Scottish enterprise and Scottish input. We should be proud of that and should be trumpeting it from the rooftops, rather than doing as we have done today and speaking about incidents in the past that were regrettable, to say the least. Every nation has in its history some episodes that are embarrassing and some episodes that are downright shameful, but Scotland stands up to fair comparison with any nation in that respect.

Margo MacDonald: I cede to no one in my pride in Scotland or in my love for Scotland, but it was a contemporary Scotland, not all that long ago, that helped to nurture a number of people who went on to become successful African dictators. There are still one or two chinks in our armour.

Bill Aitken: I do not for one moment seek to deny that, but they are the exceptions rather than the rule. If Margo MacDonald looks at the history of colonial Britain, which compares favourably with that of any other nation, she will see that Scots contributed to that history—of course they did—but they did so largely in a positive manner.

Margo MacDonald: Will Bill Aitken give way on that point?

Bill Aitken: I must make progress.

We have heard some other interesting speeches. Tom McCabe was right to bring a more contemporary aspect to the debate by talking about what we need to do. We need to recognise that Scotland has a role to play in the world, and Scotland must recognise in turn that old alliances are breaking down and that there will have to be change. We must look to the future with regard to China, and we must consider the way in which the world economic power blocs are changing. The Executive has been quite correct to make progress in that respect. The Executive has also made progress in respect of the fresh talent initiative, but Tom McCabe conveniently forgot to mention the quite disgraceful level of retention of Scots graduates in certain areas. We must address that.

There was one aspect of John Swinburne's speech with which I agreed. He made it quite clear

that Scotland cannot be some sort of latter-day Brigadoon, with the tablet box, the whisky bottle and all the rest of it. We have to come into the modern world, and we will do that only by recognising that the Scottish economy as it is run at the moment is not all that attractive to people who have the get up and go to make a success of their lives and to contribute to the lives of others. We must consider that.

I contrast some of the speeches that have been made with the positive speech by Phil Gallie, who highlighted exactly what the way forward should be.

It was interesting to hear about the Scottish genes in the middle east and, as ever, to learn of Stewart Stevenson's family tree. He has living proof that what his colleagues tell me—that he traces his ancestry all the way back to his mother—is not true.

We must take a more positive approach. Des McNulty's uncle Desmond said that he was a citizen of the world. That is a profound, if not original, statement. Scots have always recognised that we are citizens of the world and we have always rejoiced in internationalism and diversity. Scotland has a pretty good record of accepting people who have come from oppression. As Dennis Canavan said, that started many years ago, and has included Jewish people fleeing the pogroms, people from Poland and other countries that fell under the yoke of Nazism in the 1930s, and people from countries that fell under the even more terrible yoke of communism in the 1950s and 1960s. We have welcomed such people and absorbed them in our population. By and large, they have been a success. They would not have been a success if Scottish people had not been prepared to allow them to adapt to our way of life and to absorb in our way of life all that they have brought to us and the diversity in which most people in the chamber rejoice.

I listened to Colin Fox's speech with some dismay, because he missed the point. I often enjoy listening to his speeches, but he did not argue his case on the proper lines today. I note with some amusement that, as he said, one Bernard Sanders might be the first socialist to be elected to the US Senate. He will have a peaceful life, because if there is only one socialist the socialists cannot fall out.

Sandra White was a little more outward looking and discussed asylum seekers again. The fact is that none of us here is responsible for the issues that have arisen in Iraq and we should not beat ourselves about the head too much because of them.

Let us see what we can do. Let us continue to do what we have done in Malawi, which has been

welcome. We go along with the Executive on that. We might prefer the Executive to do more to ensure that Malawi's systems are more appropriate to a modern-day democracy, but we applaud what has been done. We in this country welcome genuine asylum seekers and we welcome those who come to work. That experience has been successful, as the Poles have shown.

Let us look outward. Let us stop beating ourselves about the head because of one or two episodes in Scotland's history that are not particularly welcome. In dealing with all issues, let us be more internationalist in our outlook. Let us attract people to Scotland and let us build on Scotland's reputation in the world.

16:23

Chris Ballance (South of Scotland) (Green): I thank the independents for the opportunity to have as wide ranging a debate as we want without a motion.

The image that Scotland presents to the world is vital. It is crucial to our culture, economy, exports, tourism and good will. It is a matter of the people whom we export, as Jean Turner said, how we treat people and how we behave towards foreigners here and abroad. However, it is also a matter of exporting ideas. I will take matters forward and consider how we can use the Scottish Parliament to promote some of those ideas. We have heard a lot today about the downside and about the problems. We have heard about the Iraq war and the questions that rack our consciences—they might not rack Bill Aitken's conscience, but they certainly rack the consciences of most of us in the chamber.

We face the question whether we want Scotland to be seen internationally as the dirty man of Europe or whether we want it to be seen as a country leading the world in the technologies that are capable of addressing climate change.

Phil Gallie: I would hate for Scotland to be branded as "the dirty man of Europe." Is it not the case that, per head of population, Scotland's CO₂ and noxious gas emissions are the lowest in Europe?

Chris Ballance: Phil Gallie fails to recognise the fact that we have outsourced so much of our heavy industry to other countries that the CO₂ that was being put out by the steel plant that used Hunterston is now being put into the atmosphere by companies in India and China. We are buying in products ready made, with the carbon having been emitted elsewhere in the world.

Phil Gallie: Will the member give way?

Chris Ballance: Not again, Phil.

The UK has been known for a long time as the dirty man of Europe, not only because the Irish sea is the most radioactive in the world because of nuclear emissions and because our carbon emissions damage Scandinavia, but because we have not looked towards the future and invested in renewables technologies. We have not examined the alternatives to landfill for waste and we have not developed zero-waste policies. However, I want to address other issues and not dwell too long on those matters today.

Do we want Scotland to be seen as a multicultural country of justice and fairness that is embracing the world, or do we want to be seen as the country of Dungavel and as inward looking and bigoted? I hope that we all agree on focusing Scotland on the former. Despite the fact that we have no foreign affairs remit, the Scottish Parliament has a role in promoting the issues that are relevant to foreign affairs.

I particularly want to focus on nuclear disarmament, which I think I am right in saying is espoused by every member. Phil Gallie and I may disagree about whether there should be multilateral disarmament or unilateral disarmament, but we all agree that nuclear weapons are a grave danger and that we should be working to rid the world of them. We all support the nuclear non-proliferation treaty and its measures to ensure that the nuclear countries of the world reduce and eliminate their arsenals and the non-nuclear countries of the world are not enticed to go nuclear.

Within the Scottish Parliament, without a remit for foreign affairs, we have a forum in which we can consider such issues and engage with them away from party politics and away from the pressures of having a foreign policy that we must project to the world. The Scottish Parliament could play a role in taking forward the objectives of the nuclear non-proliferation treaty. Over the past two years, Hans Blix, who we know from weapons inspections in Iraq, but who is also a former director general of the International Atomic Energy Agency, has been examining precisely those objectives in Stockholm with the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute. A commission was set up to take the matter forward. It reported in June and proposed a series of measures.

There is a forum within the Scottish Parliament to take that work forward—Scotland's futures forum. I want the forum to engage with the discussion that has emerged from the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute and with the work that Hans Blix has done on how to move the world towards the goal that we all share of eliminating nuclear weapons.

On 29 January, as a step towards that, I will be hosting in the Parliament a United Nations

Association of Great Britain and Northern Ireland conference. I invite all members in the chamber to take part in the proceedings. The conference will be a high-powered discussion on the elimination of nuclear weapons by people such as Professor Michael Clarke, from the centre for defence studies at King's College London, and internationally renowned defence experts. I hope that we can involve the Parliament's futures forum. I ask the Presiding Officers and their officials to consider supporting that as a future initiative for the forum.

The conference is a way in which the Scottish Parliament can get involved in projecting a positive image of Scotland to the world. Sweden is renowned as a world peacemaker. Let Scotland follow and join with it. Let that be the great image that we present to the world. That is well within the remit of the Parliament.

16:31

Irene Oldfather (Cunninghame South) (Lab): I agree with Bill Aitken: at the outset, the debate was upbeat, with speeches from Jean Turner and the minister. However, the tone has become somewhat downbeat since then. I think of myself as quite an optimistic person. This is a debate in which we should be talking up Scotland. We have heard today about the key role that Scotland plays on the international stage. It is always welcome to celebrate Scotland's international links. I have absolutely no doubt that those links have been progressed since the advent of devolution.

The minister and other members spoke about the role of our consulates and embassies in promoting Scotland. I want to speak about different kinds of ambassadors; people who we might not think of immediately in a debate such as this, but who represent different aspects of Scotland nonetheless. I am thinking of not only our culture, history, traditions and economic development but our generosity of spirit and commitment to social justice. I speak of the communities of Scotland—the ordinary people of Scotland—and in particular the young people of Scotland.

Through European Commission projects such as Comenius and Erasmus, young people can participate in bilateral school and university exchanges. Those links with their European counterparts not only promote language learning and cultural diversity but lay the foundations of a society that is anchored in understanding and tolerance. I am sure that members will agree that that could not be more relevant.

All members will know of projects in their own areas. I draw members' attention to Scotland beneath the kilt, a project by students at St

Michael's academy in Kilwinning. By way of the project, which runs over three years, the students aim to promote Scottish tourism by producing and circulating printed materials, food and music to their counterparts in six schools across Europe.

Their endeavours have resulted in books of Scottish songs and recipes, which have been printed and circulated in regions of Portugal, Italy, Germany and Sweden, to name but a few. In putting together the materials, our young people have learned about their own history and culture in a positive and practical way, to say nothing of their promotion and marketing of Scotland.

The title of the project—Scotland beneath the kilt—is particularly clever. The young people thought it up themselves. I am sure that it will be a real talking point in whatever language it is discussed by their Portuguese, Italian, German and Swedish peers.

I spoke earlier about the sterling work of the communities of Scotland. I am particularly proud of the example that Irvine Seagate Rotary has set. With Rotary International, members of Irvine Seagate Rotary teamed up with young people from my area and travelled to the village of Galamala in Malawi, where they worked to set up a clean water supply for the villagers. After fundraising to provide a water pump and basic tools such as wheelbarrows, spades and drills, the Rotarians and young people visited the village to help to bring to fruition a project that will save lives.

There are other ambassadors for Scotland, such as the young students of St Michael's academy, which is twinned with St Peter's secondary school in Mzuzu. Members of the Parliament who have been to Mzuzu and visited the school know that the school is blessed with magnificent staff and keen and diligent students. The students have to pay for their education and some of them walk miles to attend school. Some have been to Scotland and visited the Parliament, through the exchange programme.

There is an abundance of good will at St Peter's secondary school, but the school has limited facilities. It has no electricity and few classrooms. Pupils share desks and sometimes lessons are held in the open air on the netball pitch—the pupils have nothing that we would recognise from the Scottish education system. I am proud to say that the young people from St Michael's academy have supplied St Peter's with a new double classroom and toilet block. The classrooms are furnished with desks and chairs that were built by local craftsmen, which generated much-needed work and income for the local economy. As well as sponsoring the building programme, the young people of St Michael's academy sponsor 25 orphans to enable them to attend school. Without

that sponsorship, those orphans would not be able to pay for education and would never have the opportunity to attend school. It is important that we use this debate to talk up the commendable work of ambassadors such as the young people of St Michael's academy.

When I taught at the University of Arizona in Tucson—that was not yesterday, but it was not a very long time ago—people used to ask me whether we had electricity in Scotland. Now the small town of Sierra Vista, which is south of Tucson, has an annual Burns supper and Tucson has a Gaelic institute. I think that students at the university would acknowledge the Scottish literary talent of J K Rowling, the sporting achievements of double world champion cyclist Graeme Obree, the flying Scotsman, and the way in which events such as the MTV awards and T in the park have placed Scotland on the world music map.

In a debate such as this, in the people's Parliament of Scotland, it is important that we reflect on the contribution of our community ambassadors, our Scottish charities, our Scottish churches, our Rotary clubs and incorporated trade groups and especially our young people to ensuring that Scotland is a forward and outward-looking country that makes its mark on the international stage and, in the true Scottish spirit, helps those who need it most.

16:38

Mr Kenny MacAskill (Lothians) (SNP): I apologise for missing the opening speeches. I was attending a media engagement, which unfortunately ran on.

The debate has been wide ranging, but I want to focus on the Scottish diaspora. Members of the Scottish Parliament should remember that the Parliament is not just for Scots who live in Scotland but for Scots outwith Scotland. Indeed, we have a responsibility to people who might never have lived in Scotland but who claim some form of Scottish identity—perhaps it has been passed down through their genes or perhaps they just want to be identified with Scotland in some way. There is a huge opportunity for us in that regard.

We live in a strange world. In the global economy, people have never been closer to one another. When we travel around the world, we find a Starbucks coffee shop in every major city. We are struck by the uniformity of much of the culture across the globe. We can watch episodes of "Prison Break" or "Law and Order" whether we are in the United States of America, Europe or Australia. We live on a shrinking planet, but the irony is that more and more people want an individual identity. The more the world shrinks and

people become the same as one another, the more people want to identify themselves as being unique and distinct. That ties in with Des McNulty's comments about a multilayered identity.

People want to be identified with Scotland. There is a cachet in being Scottish, which is felt not just by people who originate from Scotland and are proud of that but by people in many parts of the world, such as Australia or the USA, who seek an identity that is deeper than that of the modern society in which they live.

Being Scottish has a bit of kudos, which is a great advantage for us and provides opportunities. We are but a small nation of 5 million people on the periphery of Europe, as we discussed earlier in the debate on freight transport, but we can lay claim to the 40 million to 80 million people around the globe who identify with us, many of whom wish to contribute to our country. A few years ago, I travelled with other parliamentarians to a meeting in Ireland, where I spoke to Irish politicians. Many TDs talked about how they envied Scotland because we were so much better connected than Ireland was in the United States and Australia. I was extremely sceptical about that; given the plethora of Irish bars in the world and the size of the Irish diaspora, which is bigger than ours, I could not believe that Ireland would view itself as less well connected than we are. However, an investigation of the Scottish diaspora shows that we are better connected than the Irish are, certainly in the United States and Australia. Many people from Scotland who went there were literate and educated and, whether Protestant or Catholic, were driven by a Protestant work ethic. They are now embedded in those countries and present a huge opportunity.

Scotland has always had a schizophrenic view of emigration and the diaspora. As members have emphasised, we take great pride in the achievements of our countrymen and compatriots. We correctly acclaim people such as Carnegie and Pinkerton, although Pinkerton has an unsung history. He was born where the Glasgow mosque is now situated and in his latter years was involved in anti-union activity, although he was earlier involved in the underground railway that brought Negro prisoners from the south of the States. Many people in Scotland are disparaging about our expatriate community and think, "Who are they to comment on what is happening here?" We have a love-hate relationship with that community, which is often demonstrated in the attacks on Sean Connery. People ask, "Who is he to comment on Scotland?", but why should he not comment on Scotland? He is Scottish and is entitled to contribute.

We cannot have it both ways. We cannot claim that all expatriate Scots are wonderful and that we

are proud of people such as Andrew Carnegie and then, when somebody who has left Scotland expresses a view about it, say that they have no right to comment. We must get over that problem, which is ours, not theirs. We must acknowledge that Scotland is their country, too, even if they choose not to live here. We have the privilege of voting in elections, the dubious privilege of paying taxation and the benefit of living here, but we have no right to say that we are Scottish and they are not. They are equally Scottish, even though they may not live here.

The phenomenon is relevant, because one of the great features of the world today is migration. As members have said, people are coming to Scotland today, as they have come over the years, from Poland, Lithuania, Afghanistan and Iraq, and we will make them welcome. Equally, Scots are going from here south of the border, to the United States and to other countries. They move on because that is the way of the modern world. There is a great likelihood that my children and those of other parliamentarians will move abroad for employment or out of some other interest. We hope that they will return and we must ensure that they have the opportunity to do so, but we must see those who remain abroad as an asset. We must get rid of the chip on our shoulder and acknowledge that this is their Parliament, too. They have a right to comment and we should take pride in them.

Phil Gallie: I agree with the member's comments. Is he aware that those who have emigrated from this country to other parts of the world can still vote in the Scottish parliamentary elections for, I think, more than 15 years?

Mr MacAskill: We must encourage participation at all levels.

The story of Simon Fraser reminds us that people do not have to be born in Scotland to have a perception of being Scottish. Simon Fraser is lauded in Canada as being the man who discovered the mighty Fraser river. He travelled from Ontario, where he grew up, down it to the Pacific, before Lewis and Clark had gone down the Columbia river to the Pacific, south of the 49th parallel. He is seen as an intrepid Scottish explorer. The irony is that he was not born in Scotland, but was born to Scottish parents in Vermont in what was then British North America. As many Scots did, his parents took the losing side in the American revolution and then moved north of the 49th parallel. He was brought up in a Scottish family and with the perception that he was Scottish. When he came down through the mighty mountains in northern British Columbia, he actually thought that that was what Scotland looked like. He had never visited Scotland, but he had been told about a land of mighty rivers and

majestic mountains. That is why northern British Columbia was called New Caledonia, which gave a synergy with Nova Scotia, which had already been discovered. That shows that someone does not have to be born in Scotland to have a perception that this is their homeland or of shared identity with it.

Sandra White made a good point about values. Soon I will be speaking in Chicago at a conference of expat Scottish communities. They ask, "When you get to the fourth or fifth generation, how do you retain a Scottish identity? How, when you're married to an Hispanic or a Filipino, do you retain that identity, apart from the blood link?" What they are focusing on is values. Whether they went to Canada, North America or Australia, the Scottish communities were driven by values: a belief in education that saw us contribute to the enlightenment; a belief in decency and integrity that made us hard-working, honest people; and a Protestant work ethic that even in Australia, I have discovered, applied as much to those who arrived in the convict ships as to those who went as free-travelling labourers or farmers. There is not just a Scottish identity or a Scottish ethnicity; there is such a thing as Scottish values, to which we should lay claim.

There is a huge opportunity out there for us to turn ourselves from a nation of 5 million to a nation of 40 million to 80 million people who claim some identity and will offer some support. It is up to us to give those people respect and to recognise that they do not speak with funny accents. We should not laugh at them or knock their perceptions of us as being dressed garishly in kilts. They are our people, and we should recognise and respect them.

16:46

Margo MacDonald (Lothians) (Ind): I am pleased to be in this somewhat elite company, in which all the brains of the Parliament are gathered together.

*"O wad some Pow'r the giftie gie us
To see oursel's as others see us!"*

I am happy to say that in my colleague Jean Turner's contribution, part of that wish was fulfilled, because everybody loves the Scots. Even the folk who were locked up during the war and kept in jail love us. We can take it that we are popular. In Kenny MacAskill's excellent speech he suggested that there was some cachet in being associated with Scotland. Once again, people seem to love us. I wonder whether they know what it is that they love.

That brings me to Sandra White's speech, in which she talked about going to the Lebanon. Much as I appreciate and admire the sincerity of

people who have been to the Lebanon, it does not prove the case that Scotland stands tall on the international stage when someone in the Lebanon kindly tells the Lebanese that we are Scottish. I have been in a similar situation in the past. I have been introduced to people in other countries as Scottish, to be met by a blank look.

We have had lots of looking back, so I was happy to hear that the minister is looking forward. That is excellent, because that is what the independent members were hoping to find when we chose "Scotland International" as the debate title. However, it worried me when he said that of the students who were asked whether they would recommend Scotland to others as a place in which to study, only 83 per cent said that they would. What about the other 17 per cent? I hate to be pui-moothered about it but, after all, we are being very Scottish this afternoon.

I am happy to say that not once in the debate have we heard that Scotland punches above its weight because it is part of the United Kingdom. Presumably, that would mean that we have more influence than, say, Merseyside or Tyneside in influencing and determining UK Government policy. Colin Fox's contribution put paid to that. We cannot claim more influence than any of the other regions of the UK, so we do not punch above our weight in that way. With all due respect to Irene Oldfather, who would like to punch it all herself, I do not believe that we punch above our weight in the European Union as far as policies are concerned. Irene is not old enough to remember this as vividly as I do, but I remember the carve-up over whisky. Just before Edward Heath signed up to Europe, the grape producers in Europe brought together an alcohol alliance to ensure that the grain producers—the Scots producers—were carved out of the industry.

I also saw the carve-up in steel, which meant that we had no representation and no special weight to punch in the UK negotiating stance. We lost out in steel and tomatoes and we will soon lose out in energy policy, unless we take full responsibility and do not leave decisions to those who have sold us short in the past.

Could this punching above our weight mean that we get favours that other regions do not get? We did not get any favours as regards the Poles, Bulgarians and Romanians who have the right to come here. The First Minister is to be congratulated, as are other members of the Cabinet, on trying to ensure that there was a distinctively Scottish response to that movement of people and that a welcome was given. However, it has been hard going and it is arguable just how much of a favour we have been done.

What about promoting Scotland abroad? Do we have more influence inside the United Kingdom

than we would have as an independent country such as Ireland? I am not at all sure that we do. Phil Gallie talked about how our shipbuilding was greatly admired abroad and people knew about us. The Koreans and the Japanese knew about us, but they just went on and built ships. I do not think that Phil Gallie proved the case that he was trying to prove. He said that Eric Liddell had done great missionary work in China. That he may have done, but I doubt whether we could find three Chinese who could tell us his name now.

What about coping with global developments? I happen to think that for a country the size of ours it is better to be nippy than weighty. The global economy is moving and changing so fast, and it is much easier to turn a wee tug boat than it is to turn the Queen Mary, if I may use that analogy. We could do rather well for ourselves, nipping in and out in the way that the smaller countries do in the big global movements of industrial and commercial change.

What is so great about punching above our weight anyway if we are hidden inside the United Kingdom, as I believe that we are? Chris Ballance came up with the only advantage of punching above our weight. He said that Scotland could be the dirty man of Europe, but nobody would know—thank goodness—because it is the United Kingdom's CO₂ emissions that are measured, not the Scottish ones. That is one advantage; we can hide behind the United Kingdom.

There is another advantage that we could exploit—Chris Ballance touched on this in his speech. Some time ago, during the cold war, an organisation called the Edinburgh Conversations was set up, of which I was part. It was a back channel for negotiation on arms reduction, believe it or not, and we could rehearse all the arguments in complete safety. Really top-level people came to the private meetings in Edinburgh or Moscow and we could do so because we were Scottish and could pretend that we were not British. I experienced that and when I have more time I will share some great stories with members. Chris Ballance is right that we could use the futures forum in a similar way. We could somehow pretend that we are not British, so no face would be lost.

Do small countries like us envy us our political influence? Do the Nordic states long for the chance to be told what to do by America? I do not think so. They are quite happy that they were able to do what they did during the Icelandic cod war to preserve their interests and economy. Iceland played one of the few cards that it had as a small country and shut the base at Reykjavik and said to the American Government, "Get these trawlers out of our economic zone and our fishing grounds. The base stays shut until you do it." It happened.

If countries are adept, imaginative and bold, it is possible for them not to depend on the bigger power. They can do their own thing in the world. I would very much like us to do that, because it is good for countries to meet other countries eye to eye, knowing that they see each other as equals. At the moment, they might see us as a very nice place to visit, but they do not see us as an equal.

Business Motions

16:55

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Murray Tosh):

The next item of business is consideration of business motions S2M-5000, S2M-5001, S2M-5002 and S2M-5003, in the name of Margaret Curran, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau.

Motions moved,

That the Parliament agrees under Rule 11.2.4 of the Standing Orders that Decision Time on Thursday 2 November 2006 shall begin at 5.30 pm.

That the Parliament agrees the following programme of business—

Wednesday 1 November 2006

2.30 pm Time for Reflection
followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions
followed by European and External Relations Committee Debate: 4th Report 2006, Inquiry into the Scottish Executive's plans for future structural funds programmes 2007-13
followed by Business Motion
followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions
 5.00 pm Decision Time
followed by Members' Business

Thursday 2 November 2006

9.15 am Parliamentary Bureau Motions
followed by Scottish National Party Business
 11.40 am General Question Time
 12 noon First Minister's Question Time
 2.15 pm Themed Question Time—Enterprise, Transport and Lifelong Learning; Justice and Law Officers;
 2.55 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions
followed by Stage 3 Proceedings: Scottish Commissioner for Human Rights Bill
followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions
 5.30 pm Decision Time
followed by Members' Business

Wednesday 8 November 2006

2.30 pm Time for Reflection
followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions
followed by Executive Business
followed by Business Motion
followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions
 5.00 pm Decision Time
followed by Members' Business

Thursday 9 November 2006

9.15 am Parliamentary Bureau Motions
followed by Executive Business
 11.40 am General Question Time
 12 noon First Minister's Question Time
 2.15 pm Themed Question Time—Education and Young People, Tourism, Culture and Sport; Finance and Public Services and Communities;
 2.55 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions
followed by Executive Business
followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions
 5.00 pm Decision Time
followed by Members' Business

That the Parliament agrees that consideration of the Crofting Reform etc. Bill at Stage 2 be completed by 15 December 2006.

That the Parliament agrees that consideration of the Custodial Sentences and Weapons (Scotland) Bill at Stage 1 be completed by 12 January 2007.—[*Ms Margaret Curran.*]

Motions agreed to.

Parliamentary Bureau Motions

16:56

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Murray Tosh): The next item of business is consideration of three Parliamentary Bureau motions. I ask Margaret Curran to move motion S2M-4992, on approval of a statutory instrument, and motions S2M-4993 and S2M-4994, on membership of committees.

Motions moved,

That the Parliament agrees that the draft Animal Health and Welfare (Scotland) Act 2006 (Consequential Provisions) Order 2006 be approved.

That the Parliament agrees that Mr Jamie Stone be appointed to replace Euan Robson on the Communities Committee.

That the Parliament agrees that Euan Robson be appointed to replace Mr Jamie Stone on the Subordinate Legislation Committee.—[*Ms Margaret Curran.*]

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The questions on those motions will be put at decision time, which will take place at 5 o'clock.

16:57

Meeting suspended.

17:00

On resuming—

Decision Time

The Presiding Officer (Mr George Reid): There are five questions to be put as a result of today's business.

The first question is, that motion S2M-4931, in the name of Iain Smith, on the Education Committee's seventh report of 2006, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to.

That the Parliament notes the conclusions and recommendations contained in the Education Committee's 7th Report, 2006 (Session 2): *Early Years* (SP Paper 596).

The Presiding Officer: The second question is, that motion S2M-4926, in the name of Bristow Muldoon, on the Local Government and Transport Committee's 10th report of 2006, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to.

That the Parliament notes the conclusions and recommendations contained in the Local Government and Transport Committee's 10th Report, 2006 (Session 2): *Report on Inquiry into Freight Transport in Scotland* (SP Paper 619).

The Presiding Officer: The third question is, that motion S2M-4919, in the name of Patricia Ferguson, that the Tourist Boards (Scotland) Bill be passed, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

FOR

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)
 Ballance, Chris (South of Scotland) (Green)
 Ballard, Mark (Lothians) (Green)
 Barrie, Scott (Dunfermline West) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Edinburgh Central) (Lab)
 Brown, Robert (Glasgow) (LD)
 Butler, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (Lab)
 Byrne, Ms Rosemary (South of Scotland) (Sol)
 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)
 Deacon, Susan (Edinburgh East and Musselburgh) (Lab)
 Eadie, Helen (Dunfermline East) (Lab)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness East, Nairn and Lochaber) (SNP)
 Fabiani, Linda (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Ferguson, Patricia (Glasgow Maryhill) (Lab)
 Finnie, Ross (West of Scotland) (LD)
 Fox, Colin (Lothians) (SSP)
 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)
 Kerr, Mr Andy (East Kilbride) (Lab)
 Lamont, Johann (Glasgow Pollok) (Lab)
 Leckie, Carolyn (Central Scotland) (SSP)
 Livingstone, Marilyn (Kirkcaldy) (Lab)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 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, Campbell (West of Scotland) (Ind)
 Martin, Paul (Glasgow Springburn) (Lab)
 Marwick, Tricia (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP)
 Mather, Jim (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Maxwell, Mr Stewart (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 May, Christine (Central Fife) (Lab)
 McCabe, Mr Tom (Hamilton South) (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)
 Ruskell, Mr Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
 Scott, Eleanor (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
 Scott, Tavish (Shetland) (LD)
 Smith, Elaine (Coatbridge and Chryston) (Lab)
 Smith, Iain (North East Fife) (LD)
 Stevenson, Stewart (Banff and Buchan) (SNP)
 Stone, Mr Jamie (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Swinburne, John (Central Scotland) (SSCUP)
 Swinney, Mr John (North Tayside) (SNP)
 Turner, Dr Jean (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (Ind)
 Wallace, Mr Jim (Orkney) (LD)
 Watt, Ms Maureen (North East Scotland) (SNP)
 Welsh, Mr Andrew (Angus) (SNP)
 White, Ms Sandra (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Whitefield, Karen (Airdrie and Shotts) (Lab)
 Wilson, Allan (Cunninghame North) (Lab)

AGAINST

Canavan, Dennis (Falkirk West) (Ind)

Monteith, Mr Brian (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Ind)

ABSTENTIONS

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)
 Scott, John (Ayr) (Con)
 Tosh, Murray (West of Scotland) (Con)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 96, Against 2, Abstentions 15.

Motion agreed to.

That the Parliament agrees that the Tourist Boards (Scotland) Bill be passed.

The Presiding Officer: The fourth question is, that motion S2M-4992, in the name of Margaret Curran, on approval of a Scottish statutory instrument, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to.

That the Parliament agrees that the draft Animal Health and Welfare (Scotland) Act 2006 (Consequential Provisions) Order 2006 be approved.

The Presiding Officer: The final question is, that motions S2M-4993 and S2M-4994, in the name of Margaret Curran, on membership of committees, be agreed to.

Motions agreed to.

That the Parliament agrees that Mr Jamie Stone be appointed to replace Euan Robson on the Communities Committee.

That the Parliament agrees that Euan Robson be appointed to replace Mr Jamie Stone on the Subordinate Legislation Committee.

Caithness Economy

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Trish Godman): The final item of business today is a members' business debate on motion S2M-4888, in the name of Jamie Stone, on the Caithness economy post-Dounreay. The debate will be concluded without any question being put.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament notes the severe economic and social challenges for the far north presented by the accelerated run-down and decommissioning at Dounreay and considers that the Scottish Executive should work with the UK Government and other key players to ensure that a costed and funded strategy is put in place as soon as possible so that suitable replacement industries and jobs can be established for the years to come.

17:03

Mr Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): I thank all those colleagues who were good enough to sign the motion.

Before the mid-1950s, when the nuclear industry first came to Caithness, the far north had witnessed the dismal story of continual depopulation. The young were steadily leaving their homeland to seek employment and homes far away to the south. Depopulation was a wretched curse on Caithness and other parts of the Highlands that previous generations had come wearily to accept. Indeed, over the years, my own family steadily moved away. I can remember my father telling me that it was better for me to get up and go, as there would be nothing at home for me.

Dounreay changed all that for Caithness and much of Sutherland. One has only to visit communities such as Thurso, Halkirk and Castletown in Caithness and Melvich, Bettyhill and the crofts in Strath Halladale in Sutherland to see how Dounreay enabled local indigenous people to stay and prosper in the places where they were born. It was a change that succeeding generations have come to bless. In more ways than one, Dounreay kept the lights on.

Now, however, decommissioning is upon us, and the site is being taken apart. Today, approximately 2,000 work at Dounreay on a daily basis, and a large number of people outwith the site have jobs that would not exist were it not for Dounreay. When we consider that a base impact study found that Dounreay made purchases in Caithness and Sutherland of some £68 million in 2005-06, we can see the force of the argument.

It has been calculated that, were it not for Dounreay—if it had never existed—about 790 of the current United Kingdom Atomic Energy Authority employees would not be living and working in Caithness and Sutherland. That figure

represents no fewer than 714 households, 390 working spouses and partners and 450 children. Assuming that no alternative industries had come to the area in the past 50 years, the population of Caithness and Sutherland would have been around 1,821 lower than at present. Thank God that that did not happen. Thank God that the people who make up such vibrant communities in the far north stayed. That is why people in the far north are not swift to criticise Dounreay.

However, as I say, decommissioning is upon us. I have a graph to hand that shows that the job numbers are dropping already, and recently we have even seen an acceleration in the trend. People are leaving the area now—drawn by other industries that are perceived to have better long-term prospects and because of uncertainty about the future economic situation in Caithness. By the mid-2020s, essentially all the 2,000 jobs at Dounreay will be gone. We see the possibility that a terrible shadow could yet revisit present and future generations. That is the backdrop to my motion.

People are working hard on the problem. Sitting in the public gallery today are Councillor David Flear, chairman of the Caithness area committee, and Willie Swanson and John Crowden, who represent the trade unions at Dounreay. They and others have done a power of work to achieve the study—and its recommendations—that I have in my hand. It is a deliberately positively-titled document called "A Socio-Economic Study: Opportunities Arising from the Decommissioning of Dounreay". It pulled together the key players, including UKAEA and the Nuclear Decommissioning Authority, and I deliberately bring it to the attention of colleagues this evening because it is, in my opinion, an accurate and detailed assessment of where we are. More important, it contains closely argued pointers as to what we should all do.

The danger is this: worthy words, worthy dialogue and worthy consideration are one thing, but people now expect to see action. By that, I mean hard cash and a visible effort in the marketing and building—in a bricks-and-mortar sense—of infrastructure and facilities that will attract employers and businesses that could utilise the skills that we already have in the area. People hope and trust that they will see that action with their own eyes. Accordingly, I welcome Highlands and Islands Enterprise's recent announcements. Some £12 million has been put on the table, along with four people—a dedicated staff. However, that is just a beginning.

I should make one point. In the study's recommendations, it is pointed out that there is still some work to be done on the exact structure at the top of the organisation that I expect to see in

place to take things forward. Councillor David Flear has told me that he believes that the Scottish Executive has a crucial role, not least because organisations such as Highland Council and HIE are ultimately accountable to it. I agree with him, and for that reason I trust that the Deputy Minister for Enterprise and Lifelong Learning will closely examine the study and recommendations. Perhaps he might even consider coming north and contributing to the conference that will arise from the document. By way of encouragement, I should tell him that some approaches have already been made to his colleagues in Westminster. He would be very welcome.

In the document, there are many worthy pointers as to how we can create replacement jobs, but I wish to flag up two possibilities in particular.

It is no flight of fancy to say that Dounreay has the potential to become the university of decommissioning—a world centre as important to the nuclear industry as other universities are in their own fields. At Janetstown and in Thurso, we can see what has already been done—cutting-edge research and technology that is way out in front. By building on that and developing other associated skills such as robotics, which I have mentioned previously, why should not Dounreay reach out far beyond Caithness?

I am also deliberately bidding for the proposed national energies technology institute that is the brainchild of the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Gordon Brown. The institute, or part of it, could and should be located at Dounreay. Its proximity to oilfields, to the nuclear site and to renewable energy resources gives it a geographical ace of spades. I know that this is a matter close to the heart of my friend and colleague Richard Baker, but I do not see why our cases should be mutually exclusive. I believe that we could work together for the betterment of both our constituencies. There is enormous potential arising from the tidal resources in the Pentland firth. I will leave it to my good friend and colleague Maureen Macmillan to expand on that in her speech.

I say to members tonight that I would not have stayed in the north, worked in the north and brought up my children in the north if I had not been employed for some years at the Nigg yard. Twenty years after Dounreay, Nigg, Kishorn, Sullom Voe and the smelter at Invergordon did the same for other parts of the Highlands as Dounreay did for Caithness. It took a leap of faith by a previous generation and by politicians and industry at the time to make those things happen. I do not deny that some industries came and went, but it was nevertheless an act of courage and of the highest motives to attract and support those industries in order to protect and enhance the fragile economy of the Highlands. It was a high-

minded act of faith then, and that is what we need now, if we are to head off a return to the bleakness of the past. We can do it. Good work is being done, and it is time for all of us to get moving. I thank my colleagues.

17:10

Rob Gibson (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): I back to the hilt the Caithness and north Sutherland socioeconomic strategy. Calls for a supremo to drive forward the vision in the document have yet to be accepted, but as Jamie Stone—whom we thank for securing this debate—said, we really must sort out the issue. Although the strategy has been chaired by John Thurso MP, it needs a leader with the powers to order the partners to deliver. The Scottish National Party sees the strategy as having a far greater impact on Caithness than the closure of Ravenscraig had on Lanarkshire, for example. That is how important it is.

I venture to say that the Scottish ministers should take on the supremo role in promoting plans for the sustainable future of the far north. At present the split between the powers of the Scottish Government and those of the London Government is a definite hindrance. Nevertheless, the Scottish ministers cannot escape their ultimate responsibility to help the far north to flourish. In the short time that is available to me, I will suggest three immediate priorities that could help us along and could form the basis of a very public campaign. All those issues could be decided here in Scotland right now.

First, we need a highly vocal campaign to upgrade our transport services to and from the far north. We need a 21st century railway, including realistic costings for a Dornoch link—such costings have yet to be established independently. There must be an end to the divisions at all levels in the community south of Golspie and in the Highlands and Islands strategic transport partnership, and there must be a positive commitment from Government. The age of climate change in which we live is also the age of the train. The four-hour journey to Inverness is the longest and slowest in the UK, on the poorest rolling stock. It is a modern disgrace. An upgraded railway is needed alongside various programmed road improvements, such as improvements in the Berriedale braes—not one or the other.

Secondly, we need a commitment from HIE and from the Minister for Enterprise and Lifelong Learning to back a centre of excellence based in Caithness. The SNP has long believed that we should be able to export nuclear decommissioning skills and to co-operate with the European Marine Energy Centre in Orkney to promote wave and tidal power in the Pentland firth. North Highland

College in Thurso is well placed to do that work. I welcome what Jamie Stone said about sharing the potential with Aberdeen.

Thirdly, we need to campaign for enhanced local powers to make decisions in Caithness. Indeed, when the new multimember wards are set up, we will need decisions to be made in Caithness, with some budget allocated to the local government structure. We should be aiming for that.

Dornoch and Golspie need commuters on the rail service, and it would be an act of faith if the Nuclear Decommissioning Authority and UKAEA made some small but tangible gesture of their corporate social responsibility. The Dornoch link action group has secured £5,000 to commission a study by rail consultants that will examine the link's potential. All that we need is another £5,000. Surely, those big bodies can find that for us. That is a small challenge with which to end my speech.

We need a Caithness strategy that thinks big. I believe that members from all parties want that to happen, and I await with interest the ministerial response to these suggestions.

17:16

Maureen Macmillan (Highlands and Islands) (Lab): I congratulate Jamie Stone on securing the debate and I welcome the chance to discuss the future of the Caithness economy, which, as we know, has been heavily reliant on Dounreay. I had cousins who went to Dounreay in the 1950s, and their children and grandchildren are still in Caithness. They have worked in Dounreay and are now working on the decommissioning.

The accelerating rate of decommissioning, which was unexpected, means that within 20 years a workforce of thousands will have dropped to a handful. Well before that date, we must have high-calibre alternative employment available to make use of the highly skilled and talented workforce. We must give a commitment that the engineering and scientific skills that have been built up over the past 50 years will not be lost but will be used to regenerate the Caithness economy, building up through North Highland College world-beating expertise in decommissioning that we can export—something that Jamie Stone mentioned. That should be our top priority.

There has, of course, already been diversification. ABSL Power Solutions Ltd, the battery plant, employs 78 people. It was opened around five years ago—by the Deputy Minister for Enterprise and Lifelong Learning himself—and recently won a \$5 million contract with the United States Government. That success could be replicated in other industries that depend on the same sort of skills. The criticism was made—not least by the Labour party locally—that not enough

attention was being paid to the seriousness of the situation and that significant investment and commitment were needed from government at local, Scottish and United Kingdom levels to attract new industry. I believe that we now have that investment in the £12 million that will come through HIE. It is important that that money is invested wisely, with all stakeholders working together. We must be assured that there is sufficient capacity and expertise locally, as well as sound leadership, to take matters forward. In the past, there was rivalry between agencies, which did Caithness no good. That must not happen again.

I note that that investment is being spoken of as an initial contribution and that there will be further investment as appropriate. I hope that some of that investment will be in renewable energy. Caithness is in a prime position to benefit from both wind and marine energy. We need only think about the power of the Pentland firth to see what is possible. Whether that benefit comes from generation, manufacture or research, there are enough enthusiasts in Caithness to make it happen. Maximum community benefit is paramount; indeed, community ownership of renewables would generate funds that could be reinvested in the local economy. I recommend heavy investment in such renewables schemes.

We must try to create as broad an employment base as we can. I recommend investment also in the environmental research institute in Thurso. It is beginning to see the commercial application of its research and is an excellent institution. There was a report in the *John O'Groat Journal* last week about the initiative to promote Caithness archaeology. I believe that the archaeology of Caithness is a match for the famous sites in the northern isles and could prove as much of a tourist attraction. In addition, I make a plea for recognition of the fossil heritage of Caithness, which surely merits its own museum and interpretation centre.

Others have spoken of transport needs, but no amount of straightening of the roads or railway lines will cut journey times significantly. We need frequent, low-cost flights from Wick to Scotland's major cities, including—and especially—Aberdeen. If the aspiration to be part of the proposed energy institute is to be realised, Caithness must build strong links with Aberdeen.

The best businesses, however, are home-grown. I note the consultation that has already taken place with local people to seek out innovative ideas either from private individuals or community groups. The regeneration project cannot be a top-down operation; it must engage the grass roots. It is important to build self-confidence in Caithness communities. At present, they are fearful of the future, but they have the

skills, abilities and perseverance to build a good future, and I am sure that with proper support they will do just that.

17:20

Mr Jamie McGrigor (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I, too, congratulate Jamie Stone on bringing the debate to the chamber. It is a subject of enormous importance in the far north. One in five jobs in Caithness depends in some way on Dounreay, and Dounreay creates 10 per cent of the economic output of the north Highlands area. It generates £80 million for the local economy, so it is still a very big player in the Scottish economy.

I have visited Dounreay on different occasions in the past and have often been sent briefings by the company. The Scottish Executive must not be ostrich-like; it must face up to the fact that there will be significant job losses in future. In this case, the Executive has the advantage of time to plan for alternative industries and employment sources. That would not be the case if some private company went bankrupt and shut down. In the case of Dounreay, the future is visible on the horizon and can be planned for. It does not, however, give me great confidence to hear that Caithness and Sutherland had the worst record in the HIE area for new business start-ups in 2004-05.

We must ask whether HIE is the right vehicle through which to pass the many millions of pounds that will be needed to reinforce Caithness's economic infrastructure. Small and growing businesses will need direct help. Has the minister considered approaching the chancellor to see whether it would be possible to institute tax breaks in this sort of situation? Perhaps he could remove some of his 84 stealth taxes. There is no reason why Caithness should not prosper; it already has a highly skilled and professional workforce. There are two deepwater ports that have not yet been exploited to their full potential. There is the North Highland College and there is still a strong agricultural industry, if it is allowed to survive. Thurso is also famous for its veterinary skills and services.

There are also good engineering companies such as Dunbeath Engineering Ltd, which makes a range of workholding products for the world market. That company is growing at 15 to 20 per cent per annum. It exports goods to China and 30 per cent of its business goes to local subcontractors. It is a high-tech company that fulfils a need for high-tech precision engineering.

Kongsberg Simrad in Wick makes underwater cameras, sonar systems, and echo sounders. In Castleton, Iceltech Freezers Ltd specialises in low-cost refrigeration. We should not forget JGC

Engineering, the experts in decommissioning work whose experience at Dounreay will hopefully lead to sales of its technology to other firms in other parts of the world.

On 10 October, HRH Princess Anne opened Britain's first purpose-built nuclear clean-up testing, training and research centre at Dounreay, and that is an exciting development. The decommissioning of Dounreay should breed experts who will have the potential to make this country a world leader in decommissioning. That could be one silver lining in the cloud, mentioned by Jamie Stone, that might hang over Dounreay.

Like many other companies all over rural Scotland, those companies need a good infrastructure to let them prosper and grow. Dualling the A9 from Perth to Inverness and improving the rest of the A9 to the far north would help dramatically, as would the removal of business red tape and a reduction in business rates.

With its links to Orkney, Caithness is a beautiful, clean area and a wonderful place in which to live. It has good business and tourism potential, and great amenity through its rich trout and salmon fisheries. It is environmentally a hugely important area with much flora and fauna, and it has the ability to produce good food from some very rich land. However, to continue to attract people of the calibre that currently live and work there, it is vital that there are good health services, including a hospital with a maternity unit, and good schools, good roads and decent air services.

17:24

Eleanor Scott (Highlands and Islands) (Green): I am delighted to get the chance to speak in this debate, which I very much welcome. I am glad that its tone has been relatively positive and not too depressing. Caithness has a great deal going for it. Tonight's debate should be seen not as a cry for help for a place that is suffering, but as a recognition that the area has a great deal to offer.

As "A Strategy for Caithness and North Sutherland" points out, it is clear that the Government's decision many years ago to site the fast reactor at Dounreay fundamentally changed the area's socioeconomic make-up for ever.

I speak as one who has been critical of Dounreay. I was critical not of the skilled and committed workforce but of the philosophy of nuclear power—although that is a debate for another time—and, sometimes, of the management and practices at Dounreay. Fortunately, I do not need to be critical now, as Dounreay is now a beacon of excellence in

decommissioning and is recognised probably worldwide as such.

Other parts of the Highlands and Islands have similar experience of big developments that have changed the area for ever, but the difference with Dounreay is that the reactor was purely the result of deliberate Government policy and was not simply a commercial decision. Hence, Government has a responsibility to see the thing through, up to and including the exit strategy and beyond that. To ask for Government funding to help Caithness post Dounreay is entirely reasonable, given that the problem was instigated by the Government in the first place.

According to current figures, we have 30 years until the number of Dounreay employees is reduced to a handful. The time involved may even be less than 30 years, but that is much longer than we normally get to plug the hole that is left when a major employer in the north closes down.

Any economic development strategy that relies heavily on attracting inward investment will always be vulnerable to the possibility that another big hole will be left if that major employer closed down. Therefore, I am glad to see that the Caithness and north Sutherland strategy does not focus solely on attracting new inward investment but refers to the need to grow local businesses, some of which have been mentioned by other members.

Talking about growing businesses that have roots in the area, we know that the local agricultural sector is still thriving. Value is being added to agricultural processes through developments such as the Mey selections brand and the forthcoming reopening of the Wick abattoir. We also know that the area has potential for renewables developments, such as in biomass and the district heating system that has been proposed for Wick. That system could become a model for other areas to adopt.

Inevitably, tourism should be mentioned. Maureen Macmillan referred to her favourite fossils and I want to mention my favourite flow country. Once the area receives its much deserved accolade as a world heritage site, its status will increase as one of the string of pearls that brings visitors to Caithness to see what it has to offer.

I agree with Maureen Macmillan and others that we need as broad a base as possible for the future Caithness economy, but I am surprised that—despite the fact that this is mentioned in the strategy and that everyone could sign up to it—nobody else has mentioned the possibility of relocating Government jobs to Caithness. Part of Government's obligation is to ensure that, where it is possible to do so, it locates its own jobs there. I

am not talking about relocating personnel, which can be disruptive and has proved controversial in other cases. The personnel with the skills are already in Caithness; we simply need to relocate jobs or locate new Government jobs in the area. Caithness has the people with the necessary skills to do those jobs.

In the short time remaining, I want to mention that the UHI Millennium Institute—the university of the Highlands and Islands—should have links with Dounreay's centre of expertise and excellence in Janetstown, which I have visited. The skills that are developed there will be needed worldwide. Despite the recent minor setback, the institute is expected to gain full university status shortly. The centre of excellence should become part of the university's network of centres of learning across the north. I also agree with other speakers on the need to focus on renewable energy, for which there is huge potential in Caithness.

Finally, communication links are obviously needed everywhere, but they are a live issue in more peripheral areas—although the people of Caithness might not see it that way. We need to look at modern methods. To rely on air travel is not admissible in this age of climate change. We should invest in genuinely modern communication methods, such as videoconferencing and improved telecommunications, so that people can communicate with the rest of the world without having to fly elsewhere for face-to-face meetings. We need to invest in that sort of technology, although I agree that we also need to improve the rail link.

17:29

Jim Mather (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): I, too, congratulate Jamie Stone on securing the debate, and I back the Caithness and north Sutherland socioeconomic strategy. It is a sound strategy, in that it can be summarised in the nicely concise and straightforward objective of increasing the number of working age people who work in

“the Dounreay travel to work area”.

Its three strands—developing new and existing businesses, maintaining and enhancing public services and ensuring that the Nuclear Decommissioning Authority plays a full and responsible role—are all sound.

We all agree that Caithness's future could be very much brighter. Given that it is on the same latitude as prosperous Denmark and Finland and is further south than prosperous Norway and Sweden, we should ask ourselves what is different about its situation. That leads me to the strategic solution that we must level the playing field not only between Scotland and the rest of the United

Kingdom but between Caithness and the rest of Scotland.

However, we live in the real world and must come up now with the tactical solutions for which our people are impatient. The Government must lead on and take ownership of the issue; for example, it should press ahead with boosting the travel infrastructure and sharpen its pencil in respect of matters such as business rates, which would allow the creation of more of the indigenous businesses that many members have been calling for.

Moreover, the Government should consider its approach to civil service relocation. Although, historically, such relocations have been triggered only when leases have come up for renewal, we should follow Ireland's brave example and look for volunteers who want to live in the north of Scotland, move them there and create the infrastructure around them. Perhaps foreign direct investment could be skewed towards areas such as Caithness, where the skills already exist, in order to attract other people to the area. Caithness should also be made a priority area for high-speed broadband in order to encourage more people who work remotely to live in that neck of the woods.

The north could also be made a priority area for research and development—Finland has been very successful with such an approach. It has been able to educate talented staff in the north of the country, retain that intellectual component and use quality-of-life arguments to attract many more people to the area.

In asking the Government to take leadership of the issue, I am keen that all assets—including renewables and the impressive list that Jamie McGrigor set out—be reviewed, recorded and leveraged in to ensure that we have a community-based recovery that plays to the area's undoubtedly huge strengths.

Maureen Macmillan and I have just got back from Donegal, where there are many lessons for us to learn. For example, we could follow its lead by skipping investment in industrial parks and moving straight to service parks. By doing so, we could match the quality of staff that is on offer there, achieve the lower staff turnover that has been achieved in Donegal and, because of that quality and continuity of staff, ensure that work can be transferred to the area from other places and parts of the world. Indeed, we might even see phenomena such as community-owned nursing homes and tourism businesses.

Let me make a practical suggestion. In a previous life, I worked at IBM UK with Sir Anthony Cleaver, who is the chairman of the Nuclear Decommissioning Authority. I have contacted him

and he has expressed his willingness to meet. I ask Jamie Stone and the minister to join me in inviting him north to Parliament to address the matter and find out what is needed to make real the vision of a university of decommissioning and to turn it into a centre of excellence.

As Maureen Macmillan pointed out, in the long term we need a broadly based and diverse economy, because a diverse economy is a prerequisite for a strong economy and a strong society. Of course, that was said in 1776 by none other than Alexander Hamilton, the first United States Secretary of the Treasury. He was right then and his words are right now. We should get behind Caithness in making that possible.

17:34

The Deputy Minister for Enterprise and Lifelong Learning (Allan Wilson): I thank Jamie Stone for the opportunity to discuss yet again the development of the Caithness and Sutherland economy. In my time in this job, I have taken a particular interest in the area and have listened with interest to, and noted the views of, the members who have taken part in the debate.

I fully acknowledge the significant challenges that face the local economy as a result of Dounreay's decommissioning—I am familiar with such challenges in my own neck of the woods. The challenges also bring with them opportunities for diversifying, developing and growing an economy that has been reliant on the nuclear industry for some years, as Jamie Stone pointed out. I firmly believe that those challenges must be met head on, with all the relevant bodies working closely together to ensure that everything possible is done, not only to support the on-going decommissioning process but to provide the necessary guidance and support for the establishment of replacement economic development and the associated employment that will come with it, so that it can be part of a vibrant and sustainable economy for the current population and for future generations in Caithness and Sutherland. That is a goal to which everyone in the chamber can subscribe, and I hope that we can all join forces, irrespective of party political affiliation or differences in policy direction, to commit ourselves fully to achieving that goal.

Evidence of that commitment, which was welcomed by Jamie Stone and Maureen Macmillan, came with Thursday's announcement by Highlands and Islands Enterprise that it is to invest an extra £12 million in the area. That is a 50 per cent increase—not insubstantial, as I am sure members will agree—on the current budget allocation, which will be used over the next three years to help to address the considerable

challenges to which I have referred. That is something that we can all welcome.

Government at all levels, its agencies, the private sector and the local community have a duty to work closely together to counter the effects of decommissioning. It is vital that we have in place as a prerequisite a clear and agreed strategy that is focused and informed, and that we have a vision for the economic future of the area. I therefore take the opportunity that this debate gives me to thank the Caithness socioeconomic strategy group for the work that it has put into "A Strategy for Caithness and North Sutherland", which it published on Monday. It is self-evident from the document that the group has put a lot of effort into engaging the local community in developing the strategy. There was a lot of consultation and involvement, which is fundamental to finding solutions to the challenges that I mentioned.

The strategy, which I and my officials will study closely, is a sound beginning and the partnership approach that it advocates is clearly sensible. I am confident that the HIE network, working with the NDA, the Highland Council and other partners, will now develop and undertake the action plan that is required to take the strategy forward.

Jim Mather: I have a simple question. Has the minister met Sir Anthony Cleaver or any other representatives of the Nuclear Decommissioning Authority, or does he have plans to meet them?

Allan Wilson: I met representatives of the NDA in connection with my previous responsibilities under the environment and rural development portfolio, within which sponsorship of the issue arose. I shall go on in my conclusion to address the issue that Mr Mather raises.

There is no doubt that the Dounreay decommissioning process will provide major and diverse opportunities for innovation and employment. The objective to which I have referred is to provide a basis for sustainable growth, which will help to deliver the vision of a post-Dounreay economy that includes good-quality employment, a stable population and good public services—three aims to which all members can subscribe. That objective will include improving productivity and competitiveness through innovation and effective development and deployment of skills.

To attract new industries and jobs to Caithness, the workforce requires the necessary skills to enter new industries. The UHI Millennium Institute and its academic partner North Highland College, to which Jamie Stone and others referred, are at the forefront of delivering the training opportunities that will provide people with the skills that they need to realise their full potential and to play their part in Caithness and Sutherland's future.

Jamie Stone invited me to Caithness which, as he knows, I have visited three times in the past 18 months or thereabouts. I am always glad to go there. The last time I was there, I was—happily—a spectator of, rather than a participant in, a game of knotty, which I think could be called a local sport. If my visiting would help, I am happy to assist.

I have always said—and I agree with it—that our vision for Dounreay should be that of a world-renowned nuclear centre of excellence. Unlike some members, I do not one believe that the nuclear industry's future lies behind it. As members are aware, I am a well-known exponent of the industry and of the vital role that I think it will continue to play, not least in combating climate change, which has been mentioned over the piece.

Our main challenge is to ensure that we have in place a focused, effective and robust socioeconomic plan for Caithness. That will involve the centre of excellence. The NDA adopts a hub-and-spoke model for higher education: the hub is in north-west England and the Scottish spoke is in Thurso.

Maureen Macmillan talked about renewable energy. The NDA hosted a recent meeting on tidal power and we have planned a meeting with the NDA soon to consider how to bring the two sides together.

Everybody must work together. If having an Executive representative directly involved would help, I would fully support that, and I stand ready to help. HIE has committed resources, as Jamie Stone and others said. Other parties also stand ready to make such a contribution. I assure members that I stand ready to do anything I can to assist in achieving the objective.

Rob Gibson: Is the £12 million that HIE is to invest new money or money from within its budget that was to be used elsewhere?

Allan Wilson: It is new money.

Meeting closed at 17:42.

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