

MEETING OF THE PARLIAMENT

Wednesday 20 June 2007

Session 3

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Scottish Parliament

Wednesday 20 June 2007

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

Time for Reflection

The Presiding Officer (Alex Fergusson): Good afternoon. The first item of business is time for reflection. I am pleased to welcome as our time for reflection leader Pastor Norman Hill from the Riverside Church in Banff.

Pastor Norman Hill (Riverside Church, Banff): Our little church is celebrating 25 years of existence this week and we are having a big conference, so I thank you, Presiding Officer, for this honour for our church and me.

Jesus Christ was known as the friend of outcasts. His enemies gave him that name—it was intended as an insult, but he wore it as a badge of honour. They once asked him why he was eating with tax collectors and sinners. Jesus's reply was:

"it is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick ... I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners."

As a pastor, I have been thrilled to see that action in our church. For example, one Sunday morning a few months ago, I looked out on our congregation to see two young men standing together: one had been a heroin addict and had just come out of rehabilitation; the other had been his cannabis dealer. They were standing together in grateful worship to God because they had both found the friend of outcasts and their lives had been transformed.

About two weeks ago, several of us were working on the sound system in our church and stopped for tea. When we were sitting chatting, I looked around and joked that we were quite a motley crew to be in a church: sitting round there that night was the same drug dealer whom I mentioned earlier; a former violent hell's angel who used to carry a knife; someone with a record for assault; and a former acid-head—that is, someone who took LSD a lot. Again, I felt the same thrill when I knew that they had met the friend of outcasts and that Jesus was glorified through that motley crew.

I want to tell you a wee bit more about the acid-head. He got involved in the hippie scene when he was a teenager in the 60s—some of you might remember that. He says that, although he was involved in wrong activities, it was for the right reasons because he was looking for something to make sense of life and provide him with some sort of purpose. In fact, he was convinced that by

becoming part of the hippie subculture, which included drugs, he would find the fulfilment that he sought. He refers to it, in fact, as dedicating himself to a cause. He called it the hippie cause. As part of his commitment to that cause, he ended up giving up his job as a trainee civil engineer so that he could be a full-time hippie. He was convinced that LSD was the way to God. Despite the threat of the police, he even used to tell his family—his parents and his brothers—that he had found the answer to the world's problems and that, far from being wrong, what he and his friends were doing would make the world a better place.

In the end, the hippie cause fulfilled none of its promise for that young man. It produced only a catalogue of disasters, including several friends with long-term psychiatric illness and not a few who died. In fact, it demanded everything, but gave nothing.

Perhaps you are wondering how I know so much about this young man. If you have not already guessed, it was me. I, too, discovered that Jesus Christ is the friend of outcasts and that he cared about my pathetic little life. I believe that he still cares about people, especially those who are considered outcasts. While our society often enjoys writing people off, Jesus Christ delights in writing people back on again.

Points of Order

14:34

Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con):
On a point of order, Presiding Officer.

Last Wednesday, I made a point of order in connection with a statement from the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning on higher education, the contents of which had appeared in a number of newspapers the previous weekend, in articles that trailed an Executive announcement on the abolition of the graduate endowment.

I regret that today there seems to have been a repetition of the same offence. Today's edition of *The Herald* carries a story, which is tagged as an exclusive, that there will be an announcement today from the Executive on extra free nursery provision. The article says:

"Fiona Hyslop, the Cabinet Secretary for Education, is expected to unveil the £15m initiative during a debate on education at the Scottish Parliament."

That might be deemed educated guesswork from the journalist, but I suspect that he would have needed clairvoyancy talents akin to those of Mystic Meg to be so right and to be able to tag the story as an exclusive. He goes on to quote the Minister for Children and Early Years, Adam Ingram, as saying that the announcement on free nursery education is a "significant step".

When I made my point of order last week, I pointed out that when members who now occupy the Executive benches were in opposition they complained regularly about the then Executive trailing ministerial announcements in the press before informing the Parliament. There have been three incidents in the past week in which details—on the graduate endowment, on fees for free personal care and on nursery education—have gone into the press before the Parliament was informed about them. That is deeply discourteous to members. The new Executive appears to be a serial offender at a very early stage in the new parliamentary session.

After he was elected, the First Minister told the Parliament:

All of us in the Parliament have a responsibility to conduct ourselves in a way that respects the Parliament that the people have chosen to elect. That will take patience, maturity and leadership on all sides of the chamber. My pledge to the Parliament today is that any Scottish Government that is led by me will respect and include the Parliament in the governance of Scotland over the next four years.—[*Official Report*, 16 May 2007; c 36.]

Those were fine words from the First Minister, but the events of the past two weeks suggest that they have been all too quickly forgotten. Presiding

Officer, will you rule on whether the Executive is in breach of parliamentary procedures in this matter? Should this not be a case of three strikes and you're out?

Karen Whitefield (Airdrie and Shotts) (Lab):
On a point of order on the same matter, Presiding Officer.

I make the Parliament aware that, as the newly appointed convener of the Education, Lifelong Learning and Culture Committee, I received a letter this morning from the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning, which advised me that she intended to make a statement about early years provision and asked that I and other members of the committee treat the letter's contents as confidential until the statement had been made. I am sure that I and committee members were more than happy to do so, but given that the contents of the statement appeared on the front page of *The Herald* this morning and that the committee did not receive the letter until after that newspaper had been published, it would have been rather difficult for us to comply with the cabinet secretary's request on this occasion, no matter how keen we were to oblige her.

In addition, given that during an interview on "Good Morning Scotland" this morning, the cabinet secretary commented on class sizes for primaries 1, 2 and 3, we can expect her to make an announcement on the matter in her speech. However, there was no reference to such an announcement in her letter to me of 19 June.

When Hugh Henry asked the cabinet secretary about probationary teachers, she said that she would make an announcement on the matter before the recess. This is her final opportunity to do that, so it is likely that she will make such an announcement today. However, again, there was no reference to the matter in her letter to me of 19 June. [*Interruption.*]

The Presiding Officer (Alex Fergusson):
Order. The member is making serious points.

Karen Whitefield: It is unfortunate that the cabinet secretary has chosen to ride roughshod over the Parliament and its committees. I seek your guidance on whether that is appropriate conduct for a minister in the Scottish Government.

The Presiding Officer: I point out that members who wish to make a point of order have three minutes in which to do so—that is their inalienable right. I thank Murdo Fraser and Karen Whitefield for giving notice of their point of order.

This is the third occasion in recent weeks on which points of order have been raised regarding an announcement in the Parliament. As on those previous occasions, I refer members to the good practice guidance on Executive announcements,

which I understand has been reissued to all business managers. The purpose of that guidance is to ensure that the Parliament is treated with respect and is properly the place in which major spending and policy announcements are first made. I understand that, as Karen Whitefield pointed out, the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning somewhat belatedly attempted to forewarn the Education, Lifelong Learning and Culture Committee before details of today's announcement appeared in the press. However, I stress to the Executive the importance of adhering to the guidance and ensuring that its terms are followed. I believe that the Executive is sailing slightly close to the wind on the issue and I exhort it to err on the side of caution in future.

George Foulkes (Lothians) (Lab): On a different point of order, Presiding Officer. I draw your attention to reports in the press yesterday that the First Minister has signed an historic pact with Northern Ireland's political leaders. One report stated:

"Details of the joint statement ... include proposals for collaboration on education, transport and tourism. The Scottish and Northern Irish Executives have also agreed to work closely on gaining the right to set their own rates of corporation tax and securing greater fiscal autonomy."

It went on:

"One area where Northern Ireland's politicians want to make quick progress with Scotland is over higher education."

The Scottish Parliament might have expected advance consultation on matters of such importance but, at the very least, there should be a statement to the Parliament. Presiding Officer, I draw your and the Parliament's attention to the statement made by the First Minister in the Parliament on 7 June, when he said:

"matters of such importance will rightly be brought to the chamber—members of the Parliament are entitled to nothing less."—[*Official Report*, 7 June 2007; c 587.]

If that is the case, why are we to have no statement on the agreement with Northern Ireland?

Presiding Officer, I ask you to discuss with the First Minister the possibility of his making a statement later this afternoon. After all, we have questions to ask. Members of the Scottish Parliament rightly want to ask a number of questions on the issue and surely they are entitled to nothing less.

The Presiding Officer: I thank the member for giving me notice of his point of order. However, the First Minister is entirely at liberty to sign agreements with other institutions as he feels fit. Whether he intends to make a statement to the Parliament is a matter for him in the first instance. There will be opportunities during this and next

week's parliamentary debate to put questions to the First Minister.

Margo MacDonald (Lothians) (Ind): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I apologise for making this point, but since George Foulkes has raised the issue of First Ministers taking executive decisions, I would like to know whether the Parliament could also be consulted by the Prime Minister before he signs up to a European constitution by any other name.

The Presiding Officer: You may have a point, Ms MacDonald, but I do not think that it is a point of order for me.

George Foulkes: Further to that point of order, Presiding Officer.

The Presiding Officer: You do not have to take three minutes, by the way.

George Foulkes: I assure my good friend Margo MacDonald that, unlike the First Minister, the Prime Minister is making a statement to Westminster on the issue of the European constitution.

The Presiding Officer: Again, you may have a point, but it is not a point of order.

Smarter Scotland

The Presiding Officer (Alex Fergusson): The next item of business is, I hope, a debate on the Government's objective for a smarter Scotland.

14:44

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning (Fiona Hyslop): I welcome the opportunity to set out for the Parliament how the Government will make its mark to deliver a smarter Scotland. The Government's shared objective is to expand opportunities for Scots to succeed from nurture through to lifelong learning and to ensure higher and more widely shared achievements. People and their potential lie at the heart of creating a smarter Scotland.

The Government will support learning for life, guided by the following key principles: giving children the best start, which is an early start with early intervention; promoting an international perspective that develops self-confident, outward-looking Scots and self-reliant communities; championing an aspirational approach, because learning should stretch and foster ambition; taking an egalitarian approach that embraces the Scottish tradition of the democratic intellect and a belief that education should be based on the ability to learn, not the ability to pay; and creating a sense of community, as education, learning and schools should be at the heart of the community. The final principle is that a child and learner focus in policy is key to responding to individual need and potential.

In my first few weeks in post I have pursued that agenda vigorously, delivering action to nurture children in their early years by trialling free school meals for all primary 1 to primary 3 children in selected schools; action to develop a lifelong skills strategy for Scotland, which will outline our aims, ambitions and plans for making Scotland's skills base truly world class; and action to remove barriers that prevent individuals from accessing higher education, as signalled by our proposal—which is dependent on the agreement of Parliament—to abolish the inefficient graduate endowment fee.

Our education policies will focus on the following: early intervention; supporting vulnerable children and families; improving the learning experience in school; developing skills and lifelong learning; and promoting excellence and innovation in higher education. In connection with that final point, I want to make Scotland a magnet for learners, academics and business and to bring about a step change in translating the output of research into sustainable wealth creation by

tackling both business demand and research supply.

I turn to areas in which the Government can and will make early commitments to progress our education and lifelong learning agenda. On the Government's commitment to early intervention, there was broad agreement during the election campaign on the merits of extending free pre-school education. As a first step towards our manifesto commitment of increasing entitlement by 50 per cent, I am delighted to announce that from autumn 2007, the entitlement for all three and four-year-olds will be increased to 475 hours a year. That will create a solid platform for further expansion by putting provision that covers the school year on a proper statutory and financial footing. It will create a level playing field for children who attend private and voluntary sector centres as partner providers for state nursery provision.

In order to capitalise on that potential and maximise the benefits from investment, I am today launching a process to develop a long-term early years strategy covering child care, development and education that will be published in the summer or autumn of 2008. The strategy will reflect the Government's view that by building self-confidence, social skills and an awareness of one's impact on others, our investment in the early years will create the foundations for good health and positive economic and civic engagement later in life.

Supporting vulnerable children and families will also be at the heart of a smarter Scotland. Providing help when it is needed is both the right thing to do and an investment in our future. The personal, social and economic waste of young people who cannot fulfil their potential and miss out on work, education or training can be resolved for the long term only if we tackle the root causes.

Our children have the right to experience relevant, exciting and inspirational learning. We have to improve the learning experience in schools. To do that, we will build on the curriculum reform programme that was put in place by the previous Administration. Children need the time and attention to flourish. A key policy of the Government is to cut class sizes to 18 in primary 1 to primary 3. We are delivering early steps to drive down class sizes, which is why I am pleased to announce that the Government is providing local authorities with funding to employ from August 2007 an additional 300 teachers—300 new jobs for new teachers after the summer holidays. I know that those extra posts will be welcomed by probationers who are completing their induction year. Those 300 additional posts mean that capable and enthusiastic professionals will stay in

teaching rather than be forced into non-teaching work.

A week ago, Hugh Henry stated on the radio that he would give our proposals to abolish the graduate endowment fee a “fair wind” if we employed extra probationers this year and in future years. Given our good news on both the graduate endowment fee and probationer teachers, I look forward to Hugh Henry’s continued constructive support.

We are sorting out the problems caused by the previous Government and are happy to do so.

Jeremy Purvis (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD): Is the cabinet secretary able to say to the Parliament today that no class in primary 1 to primary 3 in Scotland will have more than 18 pupils at the end of this term?

Fiona Hyslop: At the end of the term, we will ensure that we have in place the resources to drive forward that agenda. Smaller class sizes are most important for children from deprived areas, which is why we will ensure that our intention to deliver classes of 18 concentrates on children from deprived areas first.

I will explain more about our new job announcements. We can target the 300 new posts first on pre-school education and then on reducing class sizes in P1 to P3. We want councils to focus the additional resources on deprived areas, where international research evidence indicates that they will produce the greatest benefits.

We want the resources that are freed up by declining school rolls to be redeployed in schools to reduce class sizes for younger children. We must deliver that major undertaking while continuing to improve the preparedness and quality of new teachers and while addressing the rising retirement levels that we will shortly see in Scottish schools.

Mary Mulligan (Linlithgow) (Lab): The minister referred to being able to reduce class sizes where school rolls are falling. That might not be so easy in areas such as West Lothian, where class sizes and school rolls continue to increase. How will she address that, and will she ensure that capital moneys are made available to provide additional classrooms?

Fiona Hyslop: I will address those points later in my speech. However, like Mary Mulligan, I know the issues in West Lothian very well indeed. Particular time and attention must be paid to such areas. I spoke to West Lothian Council’s director of education on precisely that point only yesterday.

As well as providing 300 extra teachers this August, we are setting out our ambitious programme to increase radically the numbers who go through teacher training. Today—this is the first

step—I can announce two additional measures: an immediate increase of at least 250 places in postgraduate teacher training next session, which starts this autumn; and an increase in this year’s intakes to the bachelor of education degree, increasing BEd intakes to their highest level in at least a decade. The universities will respond positively and enthusiastically.

With 300 new teachers in jobs and 250 additional student teachers, we will inject 550 additional teachers into our education system. After only a month in office, we are already working to meet other parties’ demands for 1,000 new teachers.

The increases in the number entering teacher training are only the beginning of the progress that we need to make. Following the autumn workforce planning exercise, I will announce still further increases in intakes for the one-year teacher training programme.

Robin Harper (Lothians) (Green): Will the minister give way?

Fiona Hyslop: I am sorry, but I need to move on.

We will also announce significant growth for the first time in recent years in the number of primary teachers who will qualify via the BEd. For two decades or more, changes to initial teacher education for primary teachers have come through the one-year route. However, the teaching profession is clear that the four-year route allows newly qualifying teachers to make a more confident start in the profession. In truth, the one-year and four-year routes attract different types of high-quality teacher and it is important that each is kept as a healthy and stimulating route into the profession. However, we need to return them to a better balance than they have had over the past few years.

Therefore, we will look to increase significantly the number of places on BEd courses throughout Scotland from 2008-09, building on the more modest increases that we will be able to achieve in a few weeks, when the next academic session begins. Alongside innovations in degree content—such as those developed by the University of Aberdeen in its Scottish teachers for a new era programme—I want provision in initial teacher education to diversify, with more specialisms in science, expressive arts and early years learning.

To deliver smaller class sizes, we need not only more teachers but more space. That is why, last week, I released an extra £40 million of capital to enable councils to bring forward spending, creating space in later years for the necessary changes to accommodation to meet class-size reductions—a point that was raised earlier.

The cost of the early years package, the additional nursery hours, the 300 extra teachers and the 250 extra student teachers that I announced today is £25 million this year. We are making those investments because we believe that education has the power to transform life chances and that creating a smarter Scotland has the power to transform the country's prospects. If we get it right, we will energise an entire generation to care about healthy lifestyles, to be proud of its heritage, to be outward looking, ambitious and able to contribute economically, to think about its impact on the environment and, overall, to increase its chances of making a positive contribution to a modern Scotland.

At nursery or school, in community-based education or in further and higher education, learning must give people the skills that they need for life and work. The modern Scottish workforce must be dynamic, responsive, creative and innovative. All our young people should have the opportunity to develop an awareness of the world of work and of the practical and attitudinal skills that they will need to succeed in it. I plan to ensure that all children have opportunities in school to learn and develop those skills, and I plan to release the great potential of school and college links to make those opportunities a reality. We will ensure that it is never too late to help people gain the skills and receive the high-quality advice and guidance that are needed to unlock their potential, through supporting opportunities for adults to re-engage with education in colleges and universities and through community and work-based learning.

As our skills strategy will set out, the lifelong learning agenda is key to achieving a smarter, wealthier, greener, healthier and safer Scotland. A smarter Scotland will promote excellence and innovation. We want to make a step change in translating our research ideas into economic output. We need to make more of the excellence in our colleges and universities, creating connections and incentives that will turn highly skilled people and innovative research into economic productivity for Scotland. We will maintain a competitive learning system that generates ideas in education, science and research that will make Scotland a magnet for economic growth, putting science to work to underpin our health, wealth and well-being as a nation.

Learning is a powerful good in its own right, and it is a necessary driver of self-development. It is also a powerful enabler of much of what the Government wants to achieve. Learning allows individuals, families and communities to prosper. It can help to reduce inequalities and to enhance responsible and active citizenship. Learning will create a smarter Scotland. That means training the public sector and the wider workforce to

support a fairer and safer Scotland, meeting green challenges and developing a healthier and safer Scotland where people take responsibility for their own and one another's health and well-being.

The Government's smarter Scotland objective is about making the most of Scotland's great people potential. The challenges are significant, but so is the prize. I relish the opportunity that the Government has to ensure that Scotland is renowned as a smart, learning nation that is built on firm foundations, that is freeing up its talent and ambition and that is creating opportunities for all its people to flourish and excel.

14:57

Hugh Henry (Paisley South) (Lab): I do not think that anyone could dispute what Fiona Hyslop says about the significance of education for the future of our country; nor could anyone dispute the fact that we need to concentrate resources on the areas in which there is most need and on children who are suffering relative disadvantage. I struggle, however, with Fiona Hyslop's outline of what she intends to do. Despite the soundbites and throwaway remarks, there is no focus on disadvantage. After all the spinning that was done and following discussion with people from the Scottish National Party, *The Herald's* conclusion was that much of what the SNP proposed would benefit the middle classes rather than concentrate on disadvantage, as Fiona Hyslop has said.

There is much in Fiona Hyslop's speech that I welcome. No one could dispute the need for new teachers and the fact that they will make a significant improvement in the quality of learning opportunity for our children. However, if we listen to what Fiona Hyslop said today—frankly, it was lacking in detail in many respects and, to some extent, in substance—we find that it contrasts completely with the promises that were made to people all over Scotland during the election campaign. It bears very little resemblance to what was promised by the SNP.

I will start with what Fiona Hyslop said in relation to early years. I believe in its significance and I support what is being done in early years education. In its manifesto, Labour promised an extension in the number of hours of provision per week and in the number of weeks' provision per year. The SNP, which was specific during the campaign, got many families to vote for it on the back of a clear promise—not an extra 75 hours a year, but an extra 200 hours per year. No mention has been made of when that 200 hours of provision per year will be available.

Let us analyse what the SNP says in relation to those promises on early years. It mentions an increase in the number of weeks of nursery

provision per year—although there will be no change for those children who are already attending public sector nurseries. Furthermore, as *The Herald* accepted yesterday, only a quarter of children outwith the public sector would benefit. There will be no increase in the number of weeks per year for those children and there was very little indication of what would happen to the number of hours. If we add together all the figures, we can see that even if the SNP were to meet its manifesto commitment, which the minister has not mentioned, there would still be a gap of something like 42.5 hours per year. The SNP has announced a very small move in the direction of what its manifesto said, which is a lot less than Labour would have delivered had we been able to do so.

I do not know what Fiona Hyslop is doing with the resources for early years that we left at the SNP's disposal. Perhaps we will find out eventually what John Swinney intends to do with them.

Fiona Hyslop failed to mention other issues when she talked about early intervention. I agree fully that the early years of a child's life are a critical developmental stage. However, Fiona Hyslop said nothing about continuing the progress that Robert Brown and I were making on changing the nature of primary 1, considering purposeful play and changing completely the way in which a child learns in the early years, which is critical for children in areas of disadvantage in particular. It is sad that she has not taken up the opportunity to put a qualified early years worker into every primary 1 class in areas of greatest social disadvantage and lowest attainment; come August, that would have changed fundamentally at a stroke the way in which children learn. That is a wasted opportunity.

On class sizes, Fiona Hyslop has again moved far away from the SNP manifesto, which talked explicitly about class sizes of 18 or fewer for primary 1 to primary 3. There were no ifs or buts and it was clear that there would be no staging and no flexibility—the commitment would be delivered. However, what do we have from Fiona Hyslop and the SNP Administration? We have a plan but no end point; no target for meeting the commitment; no details of the costs involved in delivering that promise; and no details of the structure. To be frank, there is no detail whatsoever.

Perhaps Fiona Hyslop is listening to wiser counsel when it comes to that ill-thought-through policy. I think that most people would agree generally that a reduction in class sizes can make a significant contribution, but there is a debate to be had about whether crude reductions in class sizes deliver the appropriate increase in educational attainment for the money. The

international research shows that there are question marks over whether swingeing and crude cuts in class sizes deliver such increases and whether they offer value for money. Perhaps Fiona Hyslop is now resiling from the SNP's manifesto commitment.

Other questions need to be asked about the SNP's crude policy. We introduced a plan to limit primary 1 class sizes to 25. What would happen to children whose parents cannot get them into the school of their choice? That problem will increase in intensity if and when the SNP moves to limit class sizes to 18. Will families have to be split up?

Fiona Hyslop: We are keen to learn from experience of some of the issues around reducing class sizes to 25 in primary 1. Can I count on Hugh Henry's support in amending future regulations to help protect and promote future provision in limiting class sizes to the current proposal of 25, to which he alludes, or 18, which is the policy that we intend to deliver?

Hugh Henry: We will consider any proposal that improves the quality of Scottish education. Fiona Hyslop has not said what will happen to the children who do not get into the school that their parents desire. After eight years of the previous Administration improving the quality of schools and delivering new schools, will we see a rash of portakabins through Scotland as the SNP moves to deliver an ill-thought-out policy?

Margo MacDonald (Lothians) (Ind): Will the Opposition be flexible and support the idea that headteachers should work with local authorities to determine the best mix of class sizes for the area? As we heard, some areas in Scotland have growing populations, although not many. Most areas have declining populations. There are different remedies for different areas. Does the Opposition agree that local authorities should be allowed to play a much bigger part?

Hugh Henry: If Margo MacDonald thinks back and reflects on Labour's manifesto, she will recall that we made significant play of giving headteachers more flexibility and more power. Indeed, Fiona Hyslop and her colleagues criticised the previous Administration for promising to give headteachers flexibility in relation to class sizes for maths and English. I regret that Fiona Hyslop does not want to do that. When it comes to primary 1, we need to exercise caution. I am attracted to the idea of flexibility, but it might not work in some parts of Scotland.

Fiona Hyslop has wasted an opportunity to consider the value that is added by support staff such as teacher aides and classroom assistants. International research proves that they make a significant difference, particularly in early years education and for children who suffer from

disadvantage. We need a further debate on how to improve the quality of education.

I turn to Fiona Hyslop's comments on the numbers of teachers and probationers. I welcome her announcement that there will be an additional 300 teachers from August 2007, but I contrast that with what Peter Peacock did during the past year. Before the budget last year, he put in enough money for an extra 600 teachers, so 300 is meagre by comparison. After the budget, he put in enough money for an additional 400 teachers. Again, the increase that Fiona Hyslop mentioned is meagre by comparison. Is the extra funding on top of the extra money that was given last year? If so, I welcome that, but it is only a small step in the right direction.

Fiona Hyslop mentioned my comment on the graduate endowment fee, but my point was that the money that is there for abolishing the fee—and for other things—could employ 1,000 extra teachers. Indeed, the money is there to employ all the teachers who are coming to the end of their probationary year. There is no reason not to employ them, and I hope that Fiona Hyslop will guarantee that jobs will be found for them in August.

The Administration has overpromised and will underdeliver. We will be left with a lot of disappointed people throughout Scotland. What has been announced today is but a small step. It is welcome as far as it goes, but there is much more to be done.

15:08

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

As the recently appointed Conservative spokesman on education and lifelong learning, I welcome this opportunity to debate education, lifelong learning and skills. It is perhaps disappointing that there was a delay in holding this subject debate and that all the other cabinet secretaries held debates on their subjects first, but I am glad that we are now having the debate.

I was interested to hear the new Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning's priorities for education and I genuinely hope that there is a lot of common ground between the parties. For example, the SNP is keen to promote smaller class sizes and early intervention, and we in the Conservative party are happy to support those two principles. As a general rule, we are sympathetic to smaller class sizes, but they should not be thought of as the be-all and end-all of education policy. Many teachers would rather teach a class of 30 well-behaved youngsters than a class of 20 pupils, two or three of whom are poorly behaved. All sorts of other issues are thrown up by the policy, some of which the

minister and Hugh Henry mentioned in their speeches.

There is a question about the school estate. If we force through a programme of smaller class sizes, we will have to create more classrooms, which means having to build more classrooms or putting huts in the school estate. Alternatively, it means capping the size of the school roll, which takes away parental choice. Generally speaking, parents will not favour smaller class sizes if they mean restricting their choice and not letting them get their youngsters into the schools that they want. Parents would rather have their children taught in the school of their choice, even if it meant larger class sizes, than in a second-choice school. I would welcome some reassurance from the minister that parental choice will be safeguarded in that respect.

In pursuing the agenda of smaller classes, we need to safeguard against the growth of composite classes, which are not popular with parents or teachers. If the price of smaller class sizes was more composite classes, it would not be a price that many would be happy to pay. There are many issues that need to be addressed by the Executive, although I welcome its general direction of travel. We look forward to hearing much more from it on the subject.

Another issue that relates to smaller class sizes is the lack of employment for new teachers who complete their probationary period; I was pleased to hear the minister address that issue. I should declare an interest, as I am married to just such a teacher, who gave up a successful and rather lucrative career in accountancy to retrain as a teacher, so drawn was she by the promises made by the previous Administration on the attractions of a career in teaching. My wife does not regret that decision for one moment, and indeed she is one of the lucky ones because she has already been offered employment for the coming year.

Sadly, far too many of my wife's peer group face unemployment or, at best, an uncertain future. I understand that, in the Perth and Kinross Council area alone, there have been 160 applications for a mere dozen vacancies. Some newly qualified teachers are even talking about having to return to their previous professions. After sacrificing a great deal to retrain—taking a year off work, going to university to do the postgraduate qualification, perhaps having to borrow money, and then going through a probationary year—they have found themselves without employment.

Hugh Henry: Does Murdo Fraser agree that it is unfortunate to say the least that a number of local authorities, possibly for cost-saving reasons, appear to be filling vacancies with nothing but probationary teachers? That is not part of a planned Executive strategy, but a choice that has

been made at local level. Should we not be looking at that to ensure that local authorities are not abusing the situation and denying people the jobs to which they are entitled?

Murdo Fraser: I would not like to accuse Mr Henry of passing the buck to the local authorities when he was the Minister for Education and Young People, but if he is aware of an issue, it is something that the cabinet secretary should look into.

I welcome the cabinet secretary's announcement of an extra 300 jobs across Scotland. That will go some way towards addressing the problems, but not all the way. I was also interested to hear her say that she will create 250 extra places for trainee teachers, which in some ways may exacerbate the problem if we do not create the vacancies in the profession after training. We need a rounded and well-thought-out approach. If the cabinet secretary wanted to intervene, I would welcome that.

Fiona Hyslop: It is clear that to deliver class sizes of 18 we will have to employ thousands more new teachers. However, a great number of teachers are retiring and we will need to ensure that we balance the number of new and quality-educated teachers who are going into the system with the number of those who are leaving through retirement. We must reflect on that balance.

Murdo Fraser: I welcome that assurance, but the difficulty will lie in getting it right. We must ensure that those who have gone into teaching as a profession—particularly those who have given up another career to do so—do not lose out due to expectations and promises that were made to them.

In the brief time remaining to me, I will set out a few thoughts on the Conservative agenda on education. We propose three key principles in relation to our schools.

First, we want greater devolution of power to headteachers, to school boards or parent councils and to schools themselves. We regret the decision that was taken by the previous Executive to scrap school boards and replace them with parent councils. We believe that the way to raise standards in education is to put greater trust in the management at school level. As a general principle, decisions should be taken as close as possible to parents, teachers and pupils, rather than by distant education authorities or, worse still, by a distant education minister.

Secondly, a serious approach must be taken to discipline—my colleague Elizabeth Smith will say a little more about that. We know that the indiscipline problem in Scotland's schools is growing. The way in which to tackle that problem

and to turn it around is to return to headteachers and schools control over discipline.

Thirdly, we support greater school diversity. We do not believe in a one-size-fits-all approach. We want schools to develop specialisms, whether they be in sports, music, the arts, science, languages or whatever. That is why we have supported calls for skills academies and have suggested a pilot scheme for a city academy in Glasgow, which would give youngsters there a different type of education. Of course, we have called for vocational training from the age of 14 to be expanded. We believe that every youngster should have the opportunity to access such training from that age through school-college links.

All the parties have much common ground on education issues. Some of what the new minister plans to do will find favour with us and, when it does, we will be happy to provide support. However, when we see a failure to address serious issues, we will not hesitate to hold ministers to account. I hope that, in that way, we can all contribute to bringing about a better education system for all Scotland's children.

15:16

Jeremy Purvis (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD): No party or member would not share the joint ambition for Scotland to have the world's best education system. We are proud of the distinctiveness of our strong approach and of Scotland's education record. No one would dissent from wanting the secondary and tertiary sectors to work together for academic and vocational excellence, to support our local economies. Support should be unanimous for investment in our higher education system and for reducing student hardship.

I am afraid that education has been down the new Government's list for debates and list of priorities. We have today another debate with announcements and a theme but no motion or vote at decision time. That is deeply disappointing.

We have heard piecemeal announcements but no legislative programme. Some government has been done by the Administration's cherry picking of issues that it wants to present to Parliament in the first few weeks before the summer, as we have heard. Little mention has been made of academic leadership in our schools or of the position and role of our children's hearings system and children's services. There has been nothing on support for the voluntary youth work sector or the social work review and only a little on the skills review.

Those are all legacy issues that the new Government inherited from the previous Administration and on which it has not given a

clear direction for its approach. The Government's approach has been piecemeal and characterised by well-trailed announcements—today's debate provides another example of that.

I am glad that the new Education, Lifelong Learning and Culture Committee agreed unanimously this morning to invite the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning and the Minister for Europe, External Affairs and Culture to attend our meeting next week. That will give the cabinet secretary the opportunity to outline her priorities, to which we will listen attentively.

Liberal Democrats place learning from the cradle to the grave at the heart of our philosophy as a political party. We cannot have a free democracy and a free economy without education and without our workers and citizens having skills and an entrepreneurial spirit. As the cabinet secretary said, learning and education are of value in themselves, as well as for public service and economic development.

An alive, free and challenging democracy needs an alive, free and innovative education system. That is a concept of the enlightenment, which is one of our greatest contributions to the world. How we develop it is the SNP's responsibility in the Parliament. We will work with the new Government and challenge it. There is no contradiction between the two aspects.

I hope that Liberal Democrats and the SNP will have common ground on moving towards empowering young people more. Too often, young people have been misrepresented and not given the place that they should have in decision-making processes in society.

The Minister for Schools and Skills (Maureen Watt): Is it not true that we in the SNP have done precisely what the member suggested? Four SNP councillors on Aberdeen City Council are under 26. We involved them in the democratic process, they stood for election, they won and they are playing their full part. We act rather than just talk.

Jeremy Purvis: I pay tribute to the minister's colleagues in Aberdeen. We will hold the new Executive to account on exactly those actions in Aberdeen and in Parliament.

We have heard much about staging in some SNP policies. There has been a move from clear manifesto commitments that are based on eight years of promises to staged policies. Why are they staged?

Fiona Hyslop: One of the problems with the previous Government was that it had a big bang solution for class sizes of 25 after four years, and that was an end to the process instead of a start being made year by year. We are trying to avoid

that problem and to ensure that we can deliver properly.

Jeremy Purvis: The cabinet secretary simply cannot get away with coming to the Parliament without targets. Simply staging in an ambition is no alternative to having targets for which the new Government can be held to account. For example, a spending pledge has been given today, but the cabinet secretary did not tell the Parliament that the existing budget in Scotland, which the Parliament agreed under the previous Administration, would increase the schools budget from 2006-07, from £93.6 million to £173 million, which would free up considerable resources. She will not be forgiven for double accounting, as the previous Administration would not have been. We need clarity about whether the funds that she has announced are additional to the education budget that was outlined for 2007-08 and whether they will continue until the end of the parliamentary session in 2011.

A staged process is not acceptable, and if there are no targets for class sizes of 18 for P1 to P3, higher education funding or student debt, the SNP cannot be held to account on its progress towards reaching those targets. I often heard the SNP make such criticisms of the previous Administration. All that we want is to be able to hold the Government to account on its pledges.

Let us look in detail at the pledges that the SNP has already made. Last night, I browsed Fiona Hyslop's website—fionahyslop.com. I had to do so at home because the Parliament's security system blocked my attempt to enter it, perhaps because it contained untrustworthy material. Her website states:

"An SNP administration will assume debt repayments for Scottish domiciled and resident graduates, which will benefit more than 300,000 individuals in Scotland."

For Scotland-domiciled and resident graduates who are covered by the SNP's pledge to write off their debts, a total of £1.73 billion will be owed to the Student Loans Company—that figure was given to me in an answer to a parliamentary question by the cabinet secretary on 14 June. Do we detect backtracking? The SNP's manifesto clearly pledged

"We will remove the burden of debt repayments",

but last week, it was stated that the SNP would relieve the burden of debt payments. The Administration is indeed backtracking.

More questions about the Administration's piecemeal announcements need to be answered. I am delighted that the cabinet secretary will attend next week's meeting of the Education, Lifelong Learning and Culture Committee, but I suspect that, if we are to get more clarity, regular diary appointments will have to be made for her to go to

that committee to answer for the SNP's pledges. The SNP has no targets or costs and little ability to implement its pledges.

15:23

Christopher Harvie (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP): Do we want a smart or a wise Scotland? Being smart can mean being adaptable, but it can also mean being slick and plausible. It does not seem automatically to imply having culture or even knowledge—it could be self-deceiving. Burns, who tends to be read on ceremonial occasions and not much otherwise, was referring to Adam Smith's "Theory of the Moral Sentiments" when he said:

"O wad some Pow'r the giftie gie us
To see oursels as others see us!
It wad frae monie a blunder free us
An' foolish notion."

That ought to be above every schoolroom in Scotland, because the values that it represents are as strong now as they were in the 18th century.

When we consider Scotland and the intellect, we must quote James Bridie, our great playwright. He said, unhelpfully, that no language was as good as Scots for rendering insults about intellect. "Glaikit", "doitit", "donnert" and "daft" are all qualifications for being a bampot or—more recently—a numpty. However, what Burns said was what Walt Whitman, who was a great popular educationist and the great poet of American democracy, considered a way of thinking, a way in which we conduct ourselves and a way in which education and culture enmesh.

So, culturally, should we follow Whitman's America or Europe? If we look at a Scottish crowd in the streets, from the tip of its baseball cap to the heel of its trainers, America seems to have taken over. Is that wise? Does one still think of Walt Whitman or of Homer Simpson?

Gordon Brown has no doubt about role models. We can look at "Moving Britain Forward"—I wonder how many people have—and seek references to Europe. There are none; it is the forgotten continent. Europe is only 100 miles from London, but Gordon Brown never looks there. Ditto that strange ideological soup that is Wendy Alexander's "New Wealth for Old Nations", in which the only people who can prescribe the future of Scotland are American economists.

The United States is an odd country but is it, on balance, educational? Has it improved since Whitman's day? Amazingly, it can ban Darwin while making social Darwinism compulsory. Is that intelligent design? It is probably as near to it as George Walker Bush can get.

George Foulkes (Lothians) (Lab): Does my dear friend Professor Harvie know which country

has produced more Nobel prize winners than any other?

Christopher Harvie: Is the member alluding to Britain or to America?

George Foulkes: It is the United States, closely followed by the United Kingdom.

Christopher Harvie: Yes, but at the same time the United States's particular commitment to a petrol-driven economy will soon land it in considerable trouble.

In Wendy Alexander's symposium, Ed Glaeser said that the car is the future when looking at the planning of central Scotland. That was in the day of the one-dollar gallon, and that day is long gone.

We are condemned to Europe and we have to survive there. We have fostered consumers and not Smith's citizens. We have piled up £1.3 trillion in debt, which is 16.5 per cent of our gross national product; 60 per cent of that has come about under new Labour and has been financed by a car boot sale of UK assets.

We have to test our social development and look at its detailed outcomes. For instance, Gordon Brown applauds increases in US productivity, but they have been gained by squeezing retail—what has been called walmartyrdom. We are always told that massive retail developments create hundreds of jobs, but what do they do to education? What sort of jobs do they create? What happens to the kids leaving our schools and to the higher-value parts of our local economy? They are being replaced by shelf stacking and cold calling. The demolition of the shipyards in Port Glasgow was succeeded by the building of five call centres. That was a contribution to the knowledge economy. What happens to the local small and medium-sized enterprises that generate much of our training and growth? What happens to the schools themselves?

If we complain that a deskilled and unmotivated society is depreciating the value of education, we have to look at the size of the Scottish black economy. Drug use, for example, is three times larger, proportionally, than it is in Germany. If we continue along our current road, will those proportions not become larger?

We do not face an easy ride to get out of this situation. We face what Robert Louis Stevenson called climbing the great staircase of our duty. However, if we get culture and civics right, and if we relate them to our flagging energy resource, we can succeed and become a wise country.

Finally, members should think of the mass of well-produced public relations bumf that descends on us and, all too often, goes straight into our wastepaper basket. Were that material to be changed into well-edited, competitive journals of

report, on which we could have a civic debate about educational and social goals, and were it to become the Scots equivalent of *Le Monde* or *Die Zeit*, that would be something to think of as the crown of our educational system.

15:29

Karen Whitefield (Airdrie and Shotts) (Lab):

Just as the new Scottish Executive departments appear to be all-encompassing, it seems that we have had a series of debates in the chamber that might as well have been on life, the universe and everything. Chris Harvie's contribution suggests that he took that literally. Today's all-encompassing debate title at least allows—if not necessitates—a wide-ranging approach to the subject. In the new spirit of consensus, I will embrace the opportunity to paint with a broad brush.

I am sure that we all agree that creating a smarter, more skilled Scotland is central to the economic and social development of our country. It is not just that we need to improve the skills of our workforce because it can no longer compete in low-paid, low-skills manufacturing industries. Increasingly, our workers will be competing in a global market for highly skilled jobs. We need only consider the emergence of India as an offshore base for all sorts of telecommunications services; jobs there are being taken by university graduates who are working for a fraction of the cost of providing an equivalent service in the United Kingdom.

I am sure that most of us do not want to try to compete with such countries by reducing the salaries and the terms and conditions of our workforce, so the only way in which we can compete is by continually improving the skills of our workforce. That is why education and training, in all their many facets, are so important for our country; why we must expand and enhance our pre-school provision to ensure that all our toddlers get the best possible start to their educational adventure; and why we must continue the drive to improve the learning environments of our schoolchildren.

The school building programme must continue, so that no child is left with a second-rate learning environment compared with that of the neighbouring school. Such a situation is a recipe for disaster and, unless we address it, it will result in massive pressures on school rolls and on the educational viability of many of our old and unrefurbished schools. On that point, it is important that the minister seeks to weigh the relative merits of pursuing an agenda of reducing class sizes—with all the associated resource implications—against the benefits that could be

accrued by completing the school building programme.

Although I welcome the minister's announcement that she has added £40 million to the capital for the school building programme, I am sure that she is well aware that in North Lanarkshire alone—a part of which I represent—we estimate that £500 million-worth of work still has to be done to bring our school estate up to modern standards. Will she give a commitment to provide sufficient resources to North Lanarkshire Council to enable it to complete the school building and refurbishment programme? If the programme is to be funded through the proposed Scottish futures trust, will she say when the details of the trust will be brought before Parliament? She will appreciate that this is a matter of great urgency for many of our schools, not only in North Lanarkshire but throughout Scotland. I am sure that, when she met directors of education yesterday, many of them will have raised the issue with her.

We must ensure the continued development of programmes that are aimed at developing the skills of those who will not go on to higher education. There is a need for skilled tradesmen, not only in Scotland but throughout the UK and, indeed, Europe. We must do everything that we can to help young people into trades, so that they can access those employment opportunities. Not only is that morally the right thing to do, it is economically sensible.

We must also ensure that our universities continue to be centres of excellence that lead the way in the research and development of new drugs, new technologies and new ways of understanding our universe. Of course, that requires money and it is a key challenge for the new Executive. Our universities must be able to compete with the best universities elsewhere in the UK and around the world. Many of those universities will enjoy much higher levels of funding—whether it is through the state, through charges or through partnerships with the private sector. We must face up to that challenge if our universities in Scotland are to do more than merely live off the reputation of the enlightenment.

Finally, we must ensure that education and learning are really seen as a lifelong process. In the 1960s, the Labour junior minister for the arts, Jennie Lee, developed Lord Taylor's idea of a university of the air. She transformed that concept into what we now know as the Open University—a bold, innovative approach to opening up university education to a much wider group of people. That approach was not appreciated by all; the Tory MP Iain Macleod infamously described the Open University as “blithering nonsense”. I mention the OU not because I think that we must replicate its

approach to further and higher education but because we should seek to learn from the spirit of invention and ambition that led to its creation.

The need to change and enhance skill sets throughout life has never been greater than it is now. Rapid technological advances mean that employment is much less secure and employees must be prepared to be much more flexible and ready to adapt to change. Adult education, both formal and informal, has a major role to play in supporting our workforce and ensuring that it is up to the challenge. As the new convener of the Education, Lifelong Learning and Culture Committee, I look forward to facing the many challenges that exist and to engaging with all those with a stake in the development and delivery of education in Scotland.

15:36

Bill Kidd (Glasgow) (SNP): I welcome the announcements that the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning has made and thank her for outlining the Scottish Government's further proposals to develop a smarter Scotland. Some of the speeches by members from other political parties suggested that, after only five weeks, the cabinet secretary ought to have solved all the problems that the previous Executive failed to solve in eight years.

Education is a lifelong process. A firm foundation, based on an increase in free nursery education provision, will set our children, especially those from deprived backgrounds, on course for future successes. For that reason, I welcome the announcement of a greater entitlement of hours of nursery provision for all three and four-year-olds. It is the duty of any responsible Government to ensure that fully qualified nursery teachers are provided in sufficient numbers and are suitably recognised and rewarded as professionals.

Hugh Henry: Bill Kidd mentioned the increase in hours of provision for all nursery-age children that has been announced. Will that include an increase in hours for those children who attend nurseries that are provided by Glasgow City Council?

Bill Kidd: I was coming to that point. The member will have to hold on, as I want to deal with the issues in order.

During the cutback in nursery teacher numbers in Glasgow in 2005, it became clear that, in its haste to balance the city's budget, the Labour-led council had failed to recognise the necessary contribution to children's long-term development that is made during the three and four-year-old stage. One senior elected official in the Labour group advised that playing with weans in the sand

all day did not qualify as teaching. On the contrary—the holders of posts in nursery education have qualified as teachers and have gone on to gain additional qualifications that enable them to work with very young children. They do not just play with children all day; they educate, train young minds and produce children who are ready to attend school, where they are able to participate more fully than they otherwise would. Many parents to whom I have spoken have expressed eternal gratitude to qualified teachers in nursery education who have identified in their youngsters a wide range of learning and behavioural problems at the three and four-year-old stage. That meant that effective interventions were made, from which children, their families and the wider community all benefited.

Hugh Henry: Will the member answer the question that I posed earlier?

Bill Kidd: I am certain that Glasgow City Council is addressing the mistakes that were made in 2005 by the previous Labour administration.

The development of a flexible, dedicated early years development teaching degree will progress the first vital step in lifelong education and ensure that additional support funding is directed towards improving services for children with conditions such as dyslexia and autism. That will be warmly welcomed by parents in Glasgow and throughout Scotland.

During the recent election campaign, when the previous Executive was in power, I frequently met newly qualified primary school teachers. They were nearing the end of their one-year probationary placements but were unable to find continuing work in schools because they were to be replaced by the following year's probationers. I was told by them often that they would be happy to take a further course that would lead to work with children with learning difficulties or in nursery schools but that the opportunities to do so were not available. I am certain that those newly qualified teachers will welcome the cabinet secretary's announcement of additional teachers as a considerable improvement on what has gone before.

The cabinet secretary made an announcement about the reduction of class sizes in primaries 1, 2 and 3. I attended primary school at a time when it was typical to have 40 in a class. Although there were many dedicated and accomplished teachers, a large number of classmates, many of whom were demonstrably intelligent, fell through the academic net. Others, who required specialist education that would have been identified in a smaller class, were simply left aside because they were too difficult or too wilful to spend extra time on. It is self-evident that having smaller classes in

the early stages of schooling is vital to allow for the identification of children with problems, but it is also important in enabling all those children who are among the majority to gain an appreciation of learning that will benefit them later in life.

As a Glaswegian and a Glasgow MSP, I commend the previous Executive on the beginnings of joint-campus education as a progressive and positive step towards the eradication of sectarian attitudes in the west of Scotland. I would be pleased to see the new Scottish Government considering a similar approach and hope that the cabinet secretary will take that on board.

Once again, I thank the cabinet secretary for her welcome announcements and commend her for her strong commitment to deliver.

15:42

John Park (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): I am pleased to see that Bill Kidd has been to the same barber as I have.

We have heard some good speeches. No one in the chamber would argue against giving our children the best start in life. Although we might have different ideas about how to achieve it, there is consensus about that objective. More important, excellence in education is supported outside the chamber and it is very relevant to those who are looking in at what we are agreeing to do.

The school building programme that was undertaken by the previous Executive has provided a generation of school pupils with the next generation of classrooms and facilities. I am always genuinely impressed when visiting new schools. I went to school in the 1980s and remember what it was like to be in classrooms that had suffered chronic underinvestment.

I have found little sentiment with which to disagree so far in the debate and, if I have disagreed with anything, Hugh Henry has highlighted it well. However, I am concerned that few speakers have concentrated on workforce skills and the important role that skills play in driving forward our economy.

Developing new skills has enabled the emancipation of workers at key times in our industrial past. Skills development is as relevant now as it was over a century ago. If we are to meet the challenge from low-wage economies, there needs to be renewed emphasis on workplace skills. I look forward to the new Administration developing a skills strategy.

Central to delivering such a strategy will be support from employers, but the Parliament, too, can show leadership. We must ensure that all employers see vocational training and

development as an investment, not a cost. The success of our economy requires a collaborative approach with business. That is why I urge the Administration to incentivise any reduction in business rates. There is no doubt that reducing business rates will free up finance for employers to invest. Linking that investment to workplace skills and other good business practice initiatives will improve Scottish productivity levels, create jobs and equip our economy for the challenges ahead. It is not just about getting the right framework; it is about investing in our people. That is why I would like an assurance from the minister that an extension of the modern apprenticeship scheme will be part of the strategy to make Scotland smarter. Again, it is not just about creating apprenticeships but about promoting them to employers and to small businesses in particular.

Looking at the workplace more widely, I think that we have witnessed a silent revolution in recent years. Trade union-led lifelong learning projects are transforming the lives of thousands of workers and families throughout Scotland. As a result of the Scottish Executive's Scottish union learning fund, more than 1,800 learning awareness events have been held; 10,000 individual learning needs assessments have been undertaken; 24,000 people have been given advice on learning; 13,000 people have undertaken accredited and non-accredited learning; 2,000 people have taken information and communication technology training; and six workplace learning centres have been opened. Independent research has shown that 97 per cent of people who participate in trade union-led learning want to continue to learn, the most important factor in which is the support that they receive from their trade unions. It is clear that that is an area of significant achievement, and I hope that the minister who makes the closing speech in the debate will give a guarantee that the Executive will support trade union-led lifelong learning and the Scottish union learning fund for the next four years.

It is important that we do not ignore people who are in work, 60 per cent of whom will still be in work in 20 years' time and most of whom will face the prospect of changing their job three or four times over that period. That is why it is important that the SNP Administration produces a skills strategy that recognises that it is not only people who are entering higher or further education for the first time who require support but workers who are looking to move on in their careers. Developing opportunities for all is the smart thing to do to make Scotland smarter.

15:46

Alex Johnstone (North East Scotland) (Con): I do not usually participate in education debates,

but I have considerable pleasure in being able to do so today, particularly when it is so interesting to juxtapose this debate with the one that took place on 8 February. On that day, Fiona Hyslop, who was then the SNP's shadow education minister, moved a motion, in non-Executive time, in which she set out SNP policy on early years education. Although I did not agree with everything that she said that day, I praised her for the vast majority of her proposals. It is interesting to observe the change that takes place when a party moves from opposition into government, when the instantly achievable priorities of opposition become a long four or eight-year haul in government. I give the cabinet secretary credit for the fact that she has made that transition very quickly.

In the debate back in February, most of us agreed that early years education was essential to the well-being of our young people and to their development as citizens. The importance of early years education, it was said, was that it provided the basis for young people to take appropriate advantage of education right through the scale and that it produced better citizens. That is an important part of what we must do, but although the proposal that the minister has made today is not quite as extreme as the one that she made on 8 February, it is nonetheless just as broad and bland as the one that she made then.

My concern is that an allocation of additional hours to three and four-year-olds will simply be an across-the-board addition. On 8 February, we argued that there had to be prioritisation to ensure that those who had the most to lose would gain the most from the allocation of additional resources.

I am also concerned about the fairly arbitrary nature of the Executive's proposals on class sizes. Given my background, I tend to compare the proposals of the present Executive—as I did with those of previous Executives—with my experience when I was in primary school. Although it makes good sense to set an arbitrary maximum class size of 18 in some urban areas, that is virtually unachievable in many rural areas. The introduction of such an arbitrary maximum class size may mean that if a class had just one or two extra pupils, the need would arise for an extra teacher, an extra classroom and a great deal of extra expenditure. The truth is that in that environment, in which teachers with massive experience but massive workloads operate under difficult conditions with composite classes, small schools achieve some exceptional results. It is therefore important that, when allocating resources at that level, we prioritise and target the resources.

I was slightly worried to hear the minister say that decreasing school rolls would allow us to commit resources to some areas because, as has

been pointed out to us, school rolls are not decreasing everywhere. I was slightly disappointed that a particular issue, which she and I have discussed during previous debates and on which many people have come to Parliament to petition us, did not appear in the cabinet secretary's speech. That issue is the mainstreaming of special needs education. As we are well aware, the apparent decision by the previous Executive to presume in favour of mainstreaming special needs pupils has resulted in many teachers finding that their classes are disrupted. However, the parents of disruptive pupils would prefer to have the specialist provision that was in many cases previously provided. I would like the cabinet secretary to say something about moving abruptly away from the presumption that special needs education should be provided in the main stream.

Hugh O'Donnell (Central Scotland) (LD): Will the member give way?

Alex Johnstone: I am sorry, but I am just coming to the end.

It is important that new resources are allocated to ensure that all the priorities that we have discussed today are attended to. I would like the assurance that the money is additional money and not simply a reprioritisation of existing expenditure. I would also like the cabinet secretary to give a commitment that the arbitrary figures and targets of which she spoke will be adjusted to ensure proper prioritisation of local needs that will allow headteachers and parents to use the resources to achieve the most benefit in local circumstances. If we are to allocate such resources, we must ensure that the best people make the decisions about how they are used. The best person is often not a minister but a teacher or a parent.

15:52

Christina McKelvie (Central Scotland) (SNP): The cabinet secretary's speech will have energised the education debate. I am sure that teachers and parents alike will welcome her announcements. I would not quite say that pupils will welcome the pledges because having more teachers is never likely to be a favourite outcome for children.

Children who entered primary 1 in 1997, when Labour came to power, are now coming to their final years at school. They will have seen no improvement in their schooling throughout their school career, no real difference in class sizes or teacher numbers and no improvement in attainment. They will have seen public-private partnership and private finance initiative schools that architects describe as not being fit for purpose, and school gates being closed to

community groups. Those pupils will have completed most of their schooling during the years of big promises and no delivery. However, we can be grateful that the political culture that failed that cohort of pupils has been swept aside. The change of Government has obviously resulted in the refreshment of ideas, a fresh dedication to the cause of Scottish education and a quickening of the pace of improvement.

Margo MacDonald: Will the member give way?

Ken Macintosh (Eastwood) (Lab): Will the member give way?

Christina McKelvie: I will finish this point first.

The generation of children entering school this year can be sure that they will see improvements long before they leave school.

Margo MacDonald: Perhaps the member will not wish to hear what I say. Although no supporter of the previous Administration in all aspects of its education policy, I think that the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development reports rather contradict what the member said, which was that there was no improvement in attainment standards in Scottish education. It is better to start from where we are than from where we were perhaps 20 years ago.

Christina McKelvie: It is fantastic news that 300 extra teachers will be employed this coming year. As I am sure has been said before, it is the number of teachers in classrooms that matters and not the number of teachers on the register. It is essential to get those professionals to the chalkface.

Targeting the new resources at improving pre-school education and cutting class sizes will do more than anything else the cabinet secretary could have done today to deliver the improvement in school education that our children so desperately need. Early intervention has been shown to be far more effective than any amount of later remediation at delivering high-quality education.

I congratulate Fiona Hyslop on proposing measures that will help to fulfil the SNP's manifesto commitment to invigorate Scottish education. I welcome her commitment to ask councils to concentrate on addressing problems in areas of deprivation. Children with few other advantages in life should at least be able to benefit from a decent education.

The capital investment in our schools is also welcome. The delivery of resources into the school estate early will allow work to proceed and allow pupils and councils to make changes that will free up the physical space that is needed for more classrooms in which to teach and learn. The firm

foundations that are being built will provide a launch pad for our education system.

I was pleased to hear that the BEd programme will be expanded and that there will be extra places on the postgraduate training programme. The four-year route not only delivers new teachers who can step out into their careers with confidence but allows more time for the examination of the principles that underlie teacher training. The one-year course offers a route into teaching that allows for a late decision to enter the profession, but the four-year course should be valued for the immense benefits that it delivers, especially given that the cabinet secretary wants science specialists to be among the new entrants to the profession.

I ask the cabinet secretary to keep in mind problems that affect science teaching in our schools, such as equipment shortages, and to seek solutions to those problems. I am sure that she is well aware of the need to ensure that pupils leave our schools well enough versed in science to be able to follow a path in science through university.

SNP education policy is based on three As: availability, accessibility and ambition. I am delighted that the SNP Government is keeping those principles in mind as it decides on the direction of our education system. Our ambition for Scotland's children is our ambition for Scotland: may their options never be limited by a fear of lifting their eyes.

It is never enough to stand still. We would fail in our duty if we did not seek to move our country forward. We must bring education up to date and provide a modern system that allows our pupils to compete in today's global marketplace.

The announcement that pre-school provision will be expanded, that more teachers will be employed in primary schools, that resources will be made available to create new classrooms, that teacher training places will be increased, that a long-term early years strategy will be developed and that investment will be concentrated where it can do most for the country makes this a good day for education.

A good education can transform a life; a good education system can transform a country. The Parliament can work with the Government to transform the lives of Scots throughout the country and to transform the country's prospects. The cabinet secretary's announcement points us in that direction and represents a good start. Her proposals set us fair to make a huge difference to education during the next four years. I look forward to witnessing other parties' support for the SNP's transformation of education in Scotland, which will transform Scotland and her people.

15:57

Hugh O'Donnell (Central Scotland) (LD):

There is much in the cabinet secretary's speech—on the surface, at least—that we can commend. However, it is inevitable in situations such as this that the devil is in the detail or, rather, the lack of detail, as has been the case in most recent subject debates and announcements from the Executive.

I was disappointed to hear Alex Johnstone's somewhat sweeping observation about pupils with special educational needs, which implied that such pupils are a disruptive influence. There might be instances in which pupils with special educational needs need particular attention, but Alex Johnstone's generalisation was not acceptable.

Members have made many of the points that I was going to make about class sizes—I have had my fox shot, if that is the right expression. The early years are some of the most crucial in the development of our attitudes and the patterns in our lives, so there is merit in setting out plans on the issue. As the cabinet secretary acknowledged, the previous Administration took us down the road of smaller class sizes and sustainable increases in teacher numbers, as well as introducing free nursery places for three and four-year-olds. It is hard to argue with the Executive's aims in that regard. The figures show that, in the past decade, the average class size in primary schools in Scotland has fallen, as have the number of schools and the number of pupils. In the school census in 2005, the average primary school class size was 23.6, which is a considerable improvement on the United Kingdom average of 26.

One big issue with the current proposals is how they will impact on the number of composite classes. That takes us back to the detail. It is not clear whether any research has been done on how far forward the general proposal will take us.

Fiona Hyslop: Back in 2000, I asked the then minister, Nicol Stephen, whether there were any plans to carry out research into composite classes. He said no, and that only a review of the international literature had been done. I do not think that anything was done to develop such research in the following seven years. The member's point is well made.

Hugh O'Donnell: I am aware that there is a vast amount of research in education. No doubt, even the previous Executive did not manage to tick all the boxes in that regard.

On class sizes generally, even the most cursory review of the available international academic research reveals a general consensus that reducing class sizes is the most expensive option available in improving attainment. Further, there does not seem to be a methodology for identifying

class size to attainment ratios. Those questions must be asked. Where will we get the information to show how successful the policy has been? Class size is not the only factor that impacts on attainment—the picture is complex. Matters such as classroom processes, the quality of teaching, the prior attainment of the child and, perhaps, parental background are all likely to contribute. We need more detail on how the policy will give us the results that we need.

I have another question for the minister. As we are waiting for the comprehensive spending review, I would like to know whether today's announcement has implications for existing spending. Will the Executive make cuts to set the ball rolling?

To widen out my comments a little, I support Bill Kidd's remarks about the role of nursery teachers, but we must bear in mind the involvement of another group of people who are not necessarily as well represented in the Parliament or in wider society: the nursery nurses, who have a major role. I would not like the value of nursery nurses to be diminished as a result of an increase in the number of qualified nursery teachers.

We must address in more detail the impact of the change in class sizes and the potential increase in composite classes on mainstream special needs education. We must also address the impact that the announcement will have on special needs schools—we need much more detail on that. Much of what the minister said was laudable but, as I said at the outset, the devil is in the detail. I seriously look forward to hearing some detail about how progress will be made on the proposals.

16:03

Pauline McNeill (Glasgow Kelvin) (Lab):

There is little dissent now over the claim that investment in early years is beneficial to children and wider society. We know that there is a vital link between early experiences in childhood and adulthood. Brain development is most rapid in the months before birth and, by the time a child is three, he or she has learned 50 per cent of their language—by five, the figure is 85 per cent. That should be enough to convince us that the early years matter and that what happens before we reach school is more significant than what happens at other stages of life. Once a child starts primary school, they are there for only 15 per cent of the time. It is hard to disagree that early years policy should be central to everything and much has been said today to support that.

I caution the new Administration against coming to the Parliament and behaving as if the SNP is the only party that understands the importance of

early intervention—ministers will find that there is wide consensus on the issue. Ministers argue in *The Herald* today that early intervention will be a hallmark of the Government. I am pleased to hear that. The sunrise agenda was a central belief in the Labour manifesto. We believe that it is worth investing in giving parents choice in child care, improving the quality of provision, creating a sunrise fund to target young children and building on our UK policy of extending parental leave from 13 to 39 weeks.

I hope that Christina McKelvie presses ministers to match Labour's record on the building of more than 200 new schools. We have yet to hear from the education secretary how that will be matched. Christina's contribution is probably one of the most partisan that I have heard.

Fiona Hyslop: I appreciate the member's points on early intervention; indeed the first Labour-Liberal Administration made significant progress on early years issues. Does she agree with the findings of the previous Education Committee's early years inquiry that some of the impetus for that early intervention strategy may have been lost in the second session?

Pauline McNeill: No, I do not believe that the impetus was lost and I will talk more about Labour's beliefs because the devil is in the detail, as other members have argued.

It is astonishing that Bill Kidd does not seem to know or want to admit that Glasgow City Council—a Labour-controlled authority—has 39 weeks of nursery provision. The education secretary has said that everyone will benefit. Will she confirm that Glasgow City Council will get an increase in provision?

So far, the SNP Administration seems to have done quite a lot to avoid discussing the detail of issues that we want to discuss. I urge the Administration to go all the way when it is considering its policies. I hope that we will hear more detail on the pilot programmes for free school meals, which are targeted at a very small number of children. I was surprised to hear that the reduction in class sizes will be in deprived areas. We do not know what that means. Nothing has been said about a reduction in class sizes for secondary pupils, which is something that Labour would have acted on. I hope that ministers address ability to pay in relation not just to students currently in higher education, but to those who pay for their part-time education and those who have had nothing out of the system. I would like to hear more about that policy.

The challenge for any Government that believes in early intervention is how we should spend our resources in pursuing that policy. Labour reserves the right to argue about the detail of how that

should come about. We were committed to an increase in nursery provision from 33 weeks to 38 weeks and to extending the number of hours a week from 12 and a half to 15. We would have preferred to hear a commitment to both those policies.

According to many experts, parenting is the pivotal factor affecting a child's future. If that is so, we cannot afford to ignore that when shaping our policy on early years. As Hugh O'Donnell said, reducing class sizes can make a difference, but we know that the quality and the type of teaching matter too. We favour reducing secondary class sizes in the key subjects of maths and English because that can make a difference to children's education. Crucially, though, the support that a child gets at home can impact on their confidence and their aptitude. More thought should be given to targeting those children for whom we cannot provide a good parent substitute and for whom we would like to provide more support in learning.

In my final minute, I will jump to a subject I feel passionate about. We cannot separate the question of how to give a child the best start in life from that of how to help working families, and the poorest families at that. Many of those families will be made up of loving parents, brothers and sisters, but they will nonetheless expect the redistribution of wealth towards their situation. I hope that, in tackling child poverty, helping working families will remain a priority for the education department and that education ministers will work hand in hand with other ministers. The cabinet secretary could perhaps clarify why she has set her heart on UK targets rather than the Scottish targets set by the previous Administration.

I welcome many of the provisions, including that on free school meals. I urge the education secretary to consider increasing the provision of free school meals so that poorer families with older children benefit. I ask her not to wait until the comprehensive spending review. She has not waited for it on other issues; why should she wait for it on that issue?

16:10

Ian McKee (Lothians) (SNP): I praise the cabinet secretary for the announcements that she has made today. Education has the power to transform life chances. It is an investment that will give Scotland and the people who live in it a better chance for the future. It is a good start, and it is a bit sad to hear the miserable, carping tone of some Opposition members.

Nowhere is education more important than in communities that face abnormal challenges—communities in which a culture of failure has, perhaps, become accepted as inevitable. We must

not entertain that defeatist attitude for a moment. We must nourish a culture in which every child, whatever his or her background, can be successful. That is not only fair, it is common sense, because an educated workforce is the prerequisite for the country's economic success. Every one of us has something to gain by giving every child that basic human right.

The creation of a greater pool of skilled workers is not the only way in which society benefits from that investment. Two major studies in the USA, the Carolina abecedarian project and the High/Scope Perry pre-school project followed children into adulthood. The latter project in particular showed convincingly that quality educational input in the early years for children from a deprived background was rewarded with lower rates of crime, less likelihood of dependency on state benefits and a lower incidence of births outside a stable relationship, than for the children who were in the control group.

That is why it gives me particular pleasure to hear that the provision of free nursery education for three and four-year-olds is to be increased and, above all, that that will start first for children who live in deprived communities.

Jeremy Purvis: That is yet another reference to a pilot or project starting in deprived areas. How does Ian McKee—and how does the SNP Administration—define deprived areas? I have many constituents whose local authority areas are not within the index of multiple deprivation, but they should have every right to exactly the same benefits as constituents in other areas.

Ian McKee: The plan, as far as I understand it, is for the policy to be rolled out in deprived areas first, but to cover every area of Scotland before the end of this parliamentary session; manifesto commitments cover a session, after all. It would take a lot longer than the answer to Jeremy Purvis's intervention to say precisely how one defines a deprived area. However, although it might be difficult to define an elephant, we know one when we see one, and I have worked in deprived areas for most of my professional life.

Children who grow up in such areas suffer from a cocktail of emotional, physical and educational-deprivation handicaps not only from the day that they are born, but from the time that they are in the womb. Such children are more likely to be born prematurely and to be below average weight at birth. They may also be fed erratically with low-quality, high-calorie food so that they remain physically malnourished. Their more fortunate contemporaries are read bedtime stories and play with toys that are designed to stretch the mind and stimulate the imagination, but the children in deprived areas may live in houses that have never seen either a toy or a book.

It is easy to blame parents but, all too often, they have come from such a background themselves. Like the vast majority of us, they want to do what is best for their children but often simply do not know how. Even showing love is difficult for someone who has never been shown love themselves. *The Herald* published an article on 19 June reporting the findings of a recent study by the centre for longitudinal studies of the University of London in which many children from disadvantaged backgrounds were found to be already up to a year behind more privileged children in their education after a mere three years. Although there is some evidence that the situation in Scotland is not as desperate as that, there is no doubt that our underprivileged children face a similar handicap.

Although increasing high-quality nursery provision will not solve that problem on its own—problems with multiple causes require multiple and co-ordinated solutions—it is a start that is much to be welcomed. The same goes for the cabinet secretary's reiteration of the SNP manifesto commitment to reduce class sizes in P1 to P3 to no more than 18 pupils—the evidence shows that those are the years in which small class sizes are extra beneficial—which will give our children the best possible start in formal education.

Smaller class sizes and the fact that local authorities will be given funds to employ more teachers will do something to allay the worries that newly qualified teachers are unable to find permanent placings. That is welcome, as I know from my constituents that such worries exist and they can now be reassured. I only hope that the extra money that is being given to local authorities will be used for the purposes for which it is intended.

It is a great start. Those investments will give this country and the people who live in it a better chance in the future.

16:15

David Whitton (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (Lab): First, I declare an interest. I was a member of and worked for the Scottish Council for Development and Industry and my speech will lean heavily on a recent SCDI paper about science and technology education. If we are to achieve our objectives for a smarter Scotland, science and technology education is very important. I recommend that the SNP front-bench team read the SCDI report. I would even recommend it to Professor Harvie—although he is no longer in the chamber—as it is a well-written, well-researched piece of work.

The SCDI report paints a stark picture of the skill shortages that face Scotland due to the

decreasing interest in science subjects among schoolchildren. In major competitor counties such as China and India, young people are embracing science and engineering in their hundreds of thousands. Here, on the other hand, there is a steady decline in numbers. The root of the problem seems to lie in how science and technology subjects are presented to pupils as the foundation of a solid career choice. The report says:

"In light of the fact that industry needs to recruit many more young scientists, engineers and technicians, the future success of the Scottish economy will, to a great extent, depend on the skills of these people."

What are the facts? The report illustrates a steady decline in the number of pupils taking higher physics, chemistry, technical studies and maths. That has a knock-on effect at universities and in further and higher education colleges. At university level, there has been drop of about 20 per cent

"in enrolment in Physics degrees, 34 per cent drop in Chemistry enrolments and a 21 per cent drop in enrolments for Electrical and Electronic Engineering degrees."

In further education, the latest data show

"a 13 per cent drop in the numbers enrolling in general Science and Technology college courses and massive drops in the numbers enrolling in Mathematics, Physics and Chemistry",

with a drop of nearly 40 per cent in mechanical engineering, a drop of more than 42 per cent in electronic engineering and a drop of more than 21 per cent in civil engineering. That all leads to employers, who are

"dependent on science, engineering and technology know-how",

expressing deep concerns about

"the long term decline in numbers"

studying science and technology in schools, as well as about the corresponding effect on university and college courses.

Reports for the OECD show science and engineering to be

"amongst the UK's top skills shortages."

That is mirrored in Scotland, where science, technology and engineering are

"above the norm for the Scottish economy"

in that respect. I do not need to tell members that there are widespread reports of skills shortages in construction across the country, with a lack of new recruits coming through the university and college networks. To bridge that gap, many employers are turning to engineers and craftsmen from eastern Europe and Asia. The shortages have hit key industries. In particular, oil and gas and chemicals have fantastic potential and can offer terrific career

choices, yet there is anecdotal evidence from companies involved in those two sectors of a skills shortage and of an ageing workforce. The SCDI report puts it graphically:

"Without a steady supply of skilled workers at all levels of the industry, Scotland risks losing many of the economic opportunities still to be won in the North Sea."

Fiona Hyslop: I very much welcome what the member says and I agree with the concerns about having to change and turn round what has been a difficult situation in the past. Pupils who are not enthused about taking science at standard grade will be less likely to take more than one science subject at higher level and therefore less likely to go on to university. Does the member agree that we have to enthuse children at primary level and at early secondary level? The real target is to get more pupils to take science standard grades, so that more of them are likely to take science highers and to pursue science and engineering at degree level.

David Whitton: I thank the cabinet secretary for that intervention. I am just coming to that. I certainly agree with the commitment that she has just given to bring in science teaching at primary level, which the report touches on.

The Economy, Energy and Tourism Committee, of which I am a member, met for the first time this morning. We hope to have a session with Mr Mather before the recess. I hope that the question of Scotland's skills gap will be on the agenda for our committee, just as it is for the committee that is scrutinising Fiona Hyslop.

There is no use in the SNP going on about opportunities in the oil industry or Mr Mather describing the growth of the renewable energy sector as

"a combination of our inventing the personal computer and Microsoft DOS and finding oil at the same time",—[*Official Report*, 31 May 2007; c 337.]

unless something is done to enthuse school children and show them that by studying science and technology they can take up good, well-paid jobs that offer a long-term career choice, which will also be of massive benefit to the Scottish economy. In its own document, the SNP said that it would

"use the new Skills committee of the Scottish Funding Council to ensure that the Further Education Sector is geared up to deliver required local and national skills. This will involve a new emphasis on vocational options in secondary schools with these skills valued and recognised alongside more traditional academic pursuits."

The SCDI makes a series of recommendations, which I offer the minister as food for thought. It would like to see a proper assessment of the Scottish economy's future need for scientists, particularly in the physical sciences. I support that

recommendation, which was touched on at the first meeting of the cross-party group on the Scottish economy. The SCDI also wants science subjects to be taught in primary schools, where misconceptions about them being difficult, or for boys only, can be addressed directly. To echo the minister, the best start is an early start.

We need more science teachers and lecturers, which might require an innovative approach to recruitment, perhaps with higher salaries offered to those who are able to pass on these skills to the next generation. The SNP's strategy is about availability, accessibility and ambition. Teachers are available, the money is accessible and, if the SNP had any real ambition, it would match Labour's proposal and give every probationary teacher leaving college this August a job, which would make a real difference.

Scotland is the country that invented the telephone and television. It is home to scientists carrying out world-leading research into cancer cures. We—everybody in the chamber—must do everything that we can to ensure that Scotland is smart and successful. I challenge the minister to match that.

16:22

Aileen Campbell (South of Scotland) (SNP): I congratulate the Scottish Government on encouraging a debate on a smarter Scotland and on the welcome announcements. The title of the debate allows us to focus the mind on what should be the crux of why we are all in the chamber, which is the matter of how we make our country better. Some good and constructive comments have been made and I am sure that the Government will listen to them and take appropriate action.

A United Nations Children's Fund report stated:

"The true measure of a nation's standing is how it attends to its children—their health and safety, their material security, their education and socialisation, and their sense of being loved, valued and included in the families and societies into which they are born."

A debate about making Scotland smarter is therefore more than a debate about the role of schools in providing first-class education in maths, English, science or social science. Rather, it is a debate about establishing how we are going to make Scotland's children happier, healthier and more confident. Schools have an integral part to play in that.

As a start towards hitting those long-term goals, we should accept the case for reducing class sizes. Evidence suggests overwhelmingly that reducing class sizes will produce enormous benefits, so we must strive to overcome any problems that are identified. The oft-cited

experiment in Tennessee shows that there is a direct correlation between attainment levels in schools and smaller class sizes.

Hugh O'Donnell: The study to which the member refers is only one of more than 150 on the University of Glasgow's academic research site's review of literature. As many say, "yes it works" as say, "no it doesn't", so we have to say that there is no clear evidence that reducing class sizes automatically produces an increase in attainment. The issue is much more complicated than that.

Aileen Campbell: I thank Hugh O'Donnell for that, but I argue that there is still overwhelming evidence of a direct correlation and that reducing class sizes makes attainment levels higher. It does so for three reasons. First, children get more attention from their teachers. Secondly, if there are fewer children in the classroom, there are fewer distractions in the learning area. Thirdly, children forge better relationships not only with their teachers but with their fellow pupils. The Educational Institute of Scotland recognises that, which explains why it vociferously supports reductions in class sizes.

In "The Scots' Crisis of Confidence", Carol Craig argues that Scots collectively and individually lack confidence, which has knock-on implications for our economic growth, enterprise, physical and mental health, and creativity. We need to shift the cannae-do and "Ah kent yer faither" mentality to one that values excellence and encourages and praises effort and determination. A positive child-focused education system, combined with smaller class sizes in the early years, would make a great difference. If we ensure now that there are fewer children in P1 to P3 classrooms, we will have more confident, ambitious and successful Scots in the years and decades ahead. I hope that the Government agrees that we must do everything in our power to create happy and confident kids.

Last week, I had the pleasure of attending a global schools initiative event at the Scottish Storytelling Centre. A teacher told me that the Scottish kids were in awe of their African and Asian peers who had travelled to Scotland as part of that valuable global exchange. The Scottish kids were struck by the visitors' ability to speak confidently and eloquently in public. There is an endemic lack of confidence in our society, so much so that we consider that lack an unfortunate Scottish trait. However, Scottish children are as able as children from Africa, Asia, Europe or anywhere else in the world. We must ensure that our education policies address their lack of confidence.

The Scottish education system was—in many respects it still is—the envy of the world because of its ability to give every child a decent education, regardless of where he or she comes from. I hope

that the Government will retain that principle. However, we must remember that despite that principle, it is often the poorest children in society who are most disadvantaged, as Ian McKee correctly noted. Urgent anti-poverty strategies must be implemented to work in tandem with all other social policy issues. In its recent report, UNICEF stated:

"The evidence from many countries persistently shows that children who grow up in poverty are more vulnerable: specifically, they are more likely ... to have learning and behavioural difficulties, to underachieve at school ... to have lower skills and aspirations, to be low paid, unemployed, and welfare dependent."

I am sure that all members have seen the shameful child-poverty statistics from Save the Children. We must realise that we cannot ignore anti-poverty strategies when we discuss education and the goal to have a smarter Scotland. No child should be born to fail in a country with as much potential as Scotland. I hope that the Government will acknowledge that as it implements its new policies. We need to raise the aspirations and hopes of all children in our nation and ensure that they are never written off.

Confidence, anti-poverty measures and small class sizes have the potential to kick-start our economy by helping our country to become smarter and more successful. We might not reap the benefits immediately, but as politicians we must recognise that we should act for the good of society and our country with long-term thoughts in mind. We need to coax and encourage our children—the future generation—to realise that they are valued, wanted and needed in our society. Building confidence in the early years is one way to do that.

The power of the issue was made abundantly clear to me when I participated in a hustings that South Lanarkshire Council held in Hamilton during the election campaign. Schoolchildren from throughout Lanarkshire were present, and after the debate they were asked to use electronic keypads to vote on the matters that affect them the most. The poll showed that one of the biggest issues that concern young people at school is the lack of self-confidence. We must take note of that. If Carol Craig is correct, we can expect to improve economic growth, enterprise, physical and mental health and creativity by tackling the crisis of confidence in young Scottish children. The matter is therefore an absolute priority.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Trish Godman): I call Margo MacDonald.

16:28

Margo MacDonald (Lothians) (Ind): How long do I have, Presiding Officer?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You have about two and a half minutes.

Margo MacDonald: That is what I thought.

I urge on the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning the wisdom of not believing that, simply by reducing class sizes to 18, all will be well. A number of members have said that the Government is right to aim for a maximum of 18 pupils in primary 1 classes, but that elsewhere we need a much more sophisticated and subtle solution. I believe that the solution should also be more localised.

I am disappointed that the cabinet secretary did not mention children with special needs; a number of other members talked about it, so I will not. I will, however, mention the fact that there was not a single reference to specialist physical education teachers. In this chamber, we have heard ad nauseam that we will not have a smarter Scotland unless we have a healthier and stronger Scotland. We therefore need PE specialists, who also ensure better academic performance.

I will repeat a wee story to the members who believe that simply reducing class sizes will produce a better academic performance. In China, it is not unknown for classes of 100 to sit and learn maths, because China has a different attitude and different discipline. It is wrong to imagine that there is a panacea and that by reducing class sizes we will pass China in the OECD attainment levels in mathematics.

I also refer the cabinet secretary to the four-year and one-year courses for teachers that were mentioned, and the situation of PE teachers especially. There has come to my notice some of the disquiet that is felt in staffrooms up and down the country because of the disparity in content between PE courses for graduates and the full four-year PE courses. I ask her to pay attention to that. I would also like a policy on how parents will be integrated into encouragement of their children and support for teachers and schools. Will that be delivered through parenting classes or community education? I would like to hear much more on that.

I would also like to know whether the welcome extra money that the cabinet secretary has released will be strings-free. Will local authorities determine the priorities in their areas and allocate resources accordingly?

I will finish on a point that disturbed me. David Whitton—a former colleague of mine—seems to think that science teachers might be paid more money just because they learn how to use a Bunsen burner. I think not. If science teachers are so important in ensuring a smarter Scotland that we give them more money for it, what are we going to do about PE teachers? I presume that they will get even more because children have to

be healthy before we can let them loose with Bunsen burners.

A number of things have been said in the debate that some members might live to regret, but I have found it extremely interesting. I congratulate the cabinet secretary on her first appearance with a statement, but I hope that the next one will be full of detail.

16:32

Liam McArthur (Orkney) (LD): Despite the controversy over the preannouncement, we have had a good and wide-ranging debate. There is consensus on what Murdo Fraser called the direction of travel, and like him I should declare an interest, as my sister has just completed her probationary year as a teacher. I assume that we are not talking about the same person as his wife.

As members may be aware, Arthur Herman wrote a book in 2001 in which he sought to defy the Scottish cringe. The title of his work boldly proclaimed "How the Scots Invented the Modern World". In passing, I note that Herman argues persuasively that the treaty of union acted as a springboard for the enlightenment, but that is perhaps a debate for another day.

I would, however, argue that the enlightenment drew heavily on our commitment in Scotland to education—to universal public education and a school in every parish. As Karen Whitefield said, as we are a small nation in a globalised economy, education remains the silver bullet for achieving and sustaining success economically, environmentally and culturally—indeed, in any and all respects.

Although comparisons with other OECD countries, which Margo MacDonald referred to, have routinely placed Scotland high in educational achievement, and our universities and colleges command respect internationally, there is no reason or justification for complacency.

Arguments continue on whether the return on public investment is better in early years or when funding is targeted at high skills and research. That is a valid debate but is one of degrees. All members would readily accept that it is not an either/or equation. A smarter Scotland requires a genuine lifelong learning strategy.

The previous Government delivered record investment in higher and further education—more than £1 billion in the last spending review—but challenges remain. David Whitton highlighted many of them in his thoughtful speech, and competition—not just from universities and colleges south of the border, but internationally—is intense. It is therefore disappointing that the cabinet secretary is not willing to support the call

from Scotland's universities for £168 million in additional funding, or to support the 3 per cent real-terms increase in funding for colleges. May I also put in a plea that an early meeting be held with the principal of the UHI Millennium Institute about progress towards university status for that body?

As Hugh O'Donnell said, Liberal Democrats have long recognised the need for sustained investment in early years provision. I very much welcome Pauline McNeill's well-informed speech about that and the cabinet secretary's decision to build on the previous Administration's success in introducing free nursery provision and other policies. Hugh Henry talked about the valuable work of the learning through play initiative in primary 1—I hope that the Minister for Children and Early Years will address the Executive's policy on that.

I was disappointed that the determined to succeed initiative was not referred to. Aileen Campbell made valuable points about our young people's self-confidence, self-reliance and ambition; determined to succeed got to the core of that.

Much has been made of class sizes, which have been reduced in recent years, although I dare say that more can be done. Falling school rolls in places other than West Lothian offer opportunities, but I take Alex Johnstone's point that figures that are plucked out of the air and enforced too inflexibly will be counterproductive. As a product of composite classes and composite schooling, I stand in their defence.

School-college collaboration was not really picked up by any member, which is an oversight. It plays a part, not least in engaging people who have traditionally been turned off by a more academic approach in schools. Colleges have often felt like the Cinderellas of tertiary education, but their work in communities is vital to tackling skills needs, not just among young people but—as Futureskills Scotland's recent report identified—among the older population, on whom the economy will increasingly rely. John Park made excellent points about that.

The cabinet secretary suggested that learning will make a smarter Scotland: she will not find a dissenting voice to that here. Much common ground exists. The direction of travel that the Executive has adopted builds on some—but not all—of the previous Executive's successes. Jeremy Purvis identified several legacy issues that need to be addressed.

As Alex Johnstone said, what has been announced falls short of the unambiguous promises that the SNP made during and before the election campaign. As Jeremy Purvis said, the

Liberal Democrats will work with the Executive on much of what the cabinet secretary has announced, but will challenge the Administration when it is failing to deliver. That will be the key to delivering a smarter, healthier and more skilled and successful Scotland.

16:37

Elizabeth Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife)

(Con): I do not think that a single member disagrees with the cabinet secretary when she identifies the importance of education, lifelong learning and skills, which are in her brief in this third session of Parliament. In my role as the Conservative's shadow spokesman for schools, children and skills, I thank her for providing at least some of the detail about how she intends to deliver manifesto commitments for Scottish schools.

The cabinet secretary is right to identify the early years of a child's life at school as the most important, so I think that she will find common ground throughout the chamber when she places emphasis on making necessary resources available for the nursery and early primary school years. Too many children fall behind in those years, and a strong correlation exists with social deprivation, so early intervention may present the only prospect of getting back on the right footing.

I am sure that we all agree with the cabinet secretary when she states her determination to improve the learning environment for all pupils throughout Scotland by improving the curriculum's focus, by improving the opportunities for vocational training and by improving links with colleges and universities. All that is hugely important to our children's future and to suggest otherwise would be churlish.

In delivering that better learning environment, I challenge the cabinet secretary to address a specific issue: I ask her to accept unequivocally that something needs to be done urgently to improve school discipline. I stress that I say that not to scaremonger, to exaggerate or to take anything away from the excellent teaching that happens throughout Scotland every day, but it is time to acknowledge that the discipline problem is growing and that, in many cases, it threatens to undermine the well-behaved majority's educational achievements. Sadly, the problem is at the top of the agenda for a large proportion of the teaching profession and among parents. It simply cannot be allowed to continue.

Given that, members will understand why I was disappointed to receive a response earlier in the week from the cabinet secretary that suggests that she is preparing to make a personal U-turn on the publication of statistics—for which she asked

when in opposition—that would tell us exactly how many incidents of verbal and physical attacks on school staff take place annually. She rightly criticised the previous Scottish Executive for failing to produce such statistics—she has said that that failure was “not good enough”, because it suggested that there was something to hide. I hope that, in government, she will understand that teachers and parents expect her to be responsible for telling her department that it must produce such statistics, which—incidentally—local authorities already compile. It would not be expensive to publish them in the public domain.

Fiona Hyslop: I appreciate the member's raising that issue, which I have asked officials to consider. However, my letter to her said:

“Once I have obtained the cost and impact of instituting a new national collation of data on indiscipline on an annual basis in addition to or instead of more in depth studies, I would like to discuss options with you as well as educational professionals in deciding the best way forward.”

As a new member, Elizabeth Smith may want to consider negatives, but I gave a positive message of encouragement to make progress on the matter.

Elizabeth Smith: I thank the cabinet secretary for her clarification, but I am not being in the least bit negative. Statistics certainly cannot tell us the whole story about indiscipline in schools, but they are an important part of identifying the real problem, and we have a right to know what they are. Indeed, if she does not accede to demands for publication of those statistics, Parliament and the authority of the cabinet secretary to tackle school discipline could be undermined. The wrong message would be sent to members of staff who have been unfortunate enough to be the victims of such incidents.

Margo MacDonald: I agree entirely with the line that the member is taking. However, instead of getting together a set of statistics over which will we will argue, it would be quicker to get recordings of teachers' stress lines. A record of what teachers feel and know about pupils' attacks on them could be available from the Educational Institute of Scotland or the other unions.

Elizabeth Smith: That is a perfectly valid point and I thank the member for raising it.

The cabinet secretary used a large part of her speech to discuss the reduction of class sizes, which she obviously sees as being a vital weapon in the fight against indiscipline. In some cases, it may be, particularly in the early years, but I do not accept that national targets and a one-size-fits-all class size are the most pragmatic ways forward. Apart from anything else, such policies could be unusually expensive both in terms of parents'

freedom to choose the school that is most suitable for their child and for the public purse.

That brings me to my final plea. Does the cabinet secretary agree with the main thrust of the Conservative manifesto commitment to give head teachers far more control over their schools and the freedom to decide what is best for pupils and teachers in their schools, and about discipline, class sizes and setting their own budgets? Those men and women are the professionals on the front line. I hope that the Scottish Executive agrees with us that we should trust them as the people who are most likely to make the right decisions about what should happen inside our classrooms.

16:43

Ken Macintosh (Eastwood) (Lab): I welcome the announcement on funding for nursery education, the decision to employ 300 new teachers and the broad thrust of the cabinet secretary's plans to reduce class sizes and expand early years provision, including pre-school services. Mine are not gritted teeth, and I have no painted-on smile. I am sure that many times this session I will have to rise—a bit like Nicola Sturgeon of old—to a resounding groan from SNP members of, "Oh no, what's he moaning about today?" However, while the new Administration is enjoying its honeymoon, it would be wrong not to acknowledge that we support the increased hours of early years provision that will be available to all families and the reduction in class sizes, in general terms at least. Also, we recognise the benefits that are to be had from early intervention and extending support to families with children in their pre-school years. In particular, we welcome the targeted support for under-twos and deprived areas.

In fact, despite what Christina McKelvie said, some of the proposals feel like a continuation of Labour's policies in the past few years. We, too, enjoyed cross-party support in certain areas. Like most members, including, I think, Liam McArthur and Murdo Fraser, I welcome the direction of travel, but I would welcome further details from the minister.

The minister should look to Labour's sunrise agenda more broadly, as Pauline McNeill suggested. I am sure that the minister agrees that, rather than focusing overly on the set hours of formal nursery education that are available to young children, for example, it should be realised that child care and the flexibility of support are the key issues for many families. There is educational benefit to be had from increasing the number of hours that pre-fives are in nursery, but there is growing recognition that family centres, breakfast clubs, after-school clubs and wraparound care could make a major difference to the life prospects

of children from families that face particular difficulties.

I have other issues to flag up to the new Administration on which we could reach agreement. The play agenda is one, as is—it is already happening in some schools; I hope that the minister will continue with it—encouraging greater crossover between nursery and the early primary years and between primary and secondary years.

I wait to hear what the new Administration has to say about additional support needs, but again I hope that we can establish common ground. I am not sure that I agree with everything that Alex Johnstone said earlier. I certainly do not agree with what he said about moving abruptly away from mainstreaming.

I have established that there is much on which we can agree, but I have a few questions to put to the cabinet secretary and her team on issues that we need to address. On the urgent matter of probationary teachers, I was pleased by the announcement of 300 additional posts to help relieve the problem. I am sure that few members are unaware of the anxiety that is faced by hundreds of recently trained graduates in whom the country has invested. Probationers often have to make sacrifices to become teachers, as Mrs Fraser and Ms McArthur will testify. I am pleased that the minister has at least partially embraced Hugh Henry's suggestion that we should ensure that probationers have jobs to go to, but I worry that 300 posts might not be enough. I ask the minister to assure Parliament that she will continue to monitor the situation during the summer. In particular, will she work with local authorities to ensure that probationers are not used to replace full-time teachers, and to address the issue that has been raised with me that too many recently retired teachers are being brought back on supply?

Another key issue that has been raised by several members is whether the cabinet secretary is prepared to give head teachers any flexibility on the issue of class sizes. I agree with Hugh O'Donnell about the issue's complexity—it is not simply a matter of reducing class sizes and improving attainment. The previous Administration recognised that, in some cases, overly rigid application of the guidelines for reducing class sizes in English and maths in secondary schools might work against pupils' best interests. Will the minister clarify her position? Will she maintain the previous Administration's approach, or is she saying that schools must not exceed a maximum of 20 pupils per class in any circumstances?

Further, on the much-trailed limit of 18 pupils in early primary school classes, is the cabinet secretary suggesting that she will allow flexibility?

Until we hear further details about the SNP's class size policy, I worry that we will all either have angry parents queuing outside our surgeries after their local school's gates have been slammed shut or that we will see the memorable image that Hugh Henry and Murdo Fraser mentioned of an army of portakabins springing up in the playgrounds of the most popular schools throughout the country.

I have a further related question on this matter, which was touched on by several speakers, including Karen Whitefield and Pauline McNeill, and is particularly relevant to my constituency. How many new schools will the SNP Administration commit to building? The Labour-led Executive delivered hundreds of new schools throughout the country in the past eight years, but that work was far from finished. I am sure that the cabinet secretary will not dispute that many more schools desperately need refurbishment or rebuilding. Labour was committed to 250 more. Will the SNP match that commitment, brick for brick, as it promised? When will the cabinet secretary make an announcement on the Executive's school building programme?

I am conscious of time, and I will not be able to refer to several issues. However, I would welcome it if the new Administration gave us a sense of direction or a steer on several issues, including the early years workforce and what we could do to improve their career structure and pay and conditions. For example, does the minister approve of a national pay and conditions scale or of the current local agreements? Will there be a response to the Equal Opportunities Commission's inquiry into classroom assistants, which recognised that there are issues? Will there be a review of funding for part-time education? That is obviously a crucial part of addressing the skills agenda, about which my colleague John Park spoke. Are we going to get any decisions or a clear steer on the curriculum for excellence? For example, how do we promote science and technology, as David Whitton argued?

I am relieved that, seven weeks into the new session of Parliament, the new Administration has brought forward its first debate on education. I do not doubt the commitment of the cabinet secretary and her team to their subject. However, it is slightly disconcerting to find education downgraded in the manner in which it has been. It is not a reserved matter; it is one of the most important issues—if not the most important—that we have full devolved control over.

I conclude, Presiding Officer—I perhaps address my remarks to you as well as to the minister—by saying that I am a little disappointed at yet again finding a subject debate being used to make policy announcements. I understand the SNP's wish to

get to the summer recess without losing a vote, but while the debate is not exactly an abuse of parliamentary process, it is bending the rules. I suggest that, rather than shy away from parliamentary votes on these matters, the SNP should build on the common agenda that clearly—from this debate alone—exists in this Parliament. We have made progress over the past decade: this is no time to stall. Today's announcements are welcome, but we want firm decision making rather than more pilot projects or tinkering around the edges. In Jeremy Purvis's words, we do not want any more "piecemeal announcements", "cherry picking" or staged implementation. We want education to remain at the top of the political agenda and not to be demoted. I hope that that is what we see when we resume after the summer recess.

16:51

The Minister for Children and Early Years (Adam Ingram): I welcome the opportunity to close this debate on the Government's objective for a smarter Scotland. However, I confess to being a little disappointed by the grudging tone of the Opposition front benches—Murdo Fraser and Ken Macintosh excepted—particularly given that the cabinet secretary's announcement clearly builds on the previous Administration's progress on teacher numbers and class sizes.

Peter Peacock (Highlands and Islands) (Lab): I would be grateful if the minister could clarify a point. My recollection is that an extra £40 million to employ extra teachers was put into local authorities' baseline for this financial year. Last year, we added £12 million extra above the plans. The figure this year would need to be £40 million plus £12 million to maintain that momentum. It appears that the cabinet secretary has announced £40 million plus £9 million. Is there growth of a further £12 million or a cut of £3 million?

Adam Ingram: The £40 million to which Peter Peacock refers is extra capital expenditure that has been brought forward to enable local authorities to bring forward some of their building programmes this year. Perhaps Peter Peacock wants to come back in.

Peter Peacock: I am grateful to the minister. It is generous of him to give me a second go.

I was talking about the baseline of the revenue expenditure—leaving aside capital expenditure entirely, on which I accept his point—for local authorities. I recall that there was a starting point of £40 million extra cash this year. We increased our funding by £12 million last year. The Executive would have to give the same amount this year to maintain that momentum, but it appears that it may have given £3 million less. I am genuinely

seeking clarification. I would hate it if the minister were accused of cutting the budget when it was growing.

Adam Ingram: We are not cutting budgets. We are increasing expenditure on teachers and increasing the number of teachers who are being brought into the system.

Perhaps I should try to make some progress, Presiding Officer.

It is often said that people are Scotland's greatest resource and that the cornerstone of our country's success in the past was our ability to develop that resource through a world-class education system. That ability needs to come to the fore again in the modern world of the knowledge economy and globalisation. Education and lifelong learning will be the key driver for future success and is at the centre of this Government's drive.

We will deliver a wealthier and fairer Scotland only if we can give young people the skills that will allow them to make the most of their opportunities. We can no longer tolerate the waste of human potential that the low attainment and flatlining performance of the bottom 20 per cent represents. We will deliver a healthier and greener Scotland only if children learn the values, skills and behaviours that will equip them to take responsibility for improving their health and our environment.

Robin Harper: At a conference hosted by Scotland's Commissioner for Children and Young People at the Hub this morning, the contention was fiercely proposed that the best thing that we could do for our children, particularly the most disadvantaged ones, would be to appoint at least 500 extra health visitors to help them between birth and the age of three, and that we need to focus even further down than pre-school education.

Adam Ingram: I have a great deal of sympathy for Robin Harper's point. I hope to touch on that issue later in my speech.

The Government's agenda is for the long term, which is why we are placing so much emphasis on early years. The first few years of a child's life shape and can determine their future growth and development. Those are the years in which enthusiasm for learning ignites and carries children through school, college and university and into later life.

In the previous session, the Education Committee's early years inquiry found that after a good start, with the introduction of free nursery places for all three and four-year-olds, momentum in developing early years services gradually eroded over the past five years. I am determined

that, through the development of a comprehensive early years strategy over the next 12 to 18 months, we should reinvigorate early years policy and set a course that will lead us towards our long-term vision of integrated education and care services.

During the development of the strategy, I will work hard to build consensus with colleagues from all parties and will welcome good ideas from all quarters. I heard what Labour members said today. I know that there is agreement across the chamber that we should strengthen support for young children and their families and that our announcement of the first step in expanding pre-school provision for three and four-year-olds will be widely welcomed.

Many members are keen to strengthen services for the under-threes. The failure to address that issue was a deficiency in this debate. The first report of the growing up in Scotland study demonstrated the extent of the disadvantage that some children experience from birth and how that impacts adversely on their life chances. The recently published millennium cohort study confirmed that, by the time they reach their third birthday, children from deprived backgrounds can be as much as a year behind their peers in cognitive and social development. To our shame as a nation, the vicious cycle of poverty and deprivation remains to be broken. Early intervention is the key to achieving that. Over the coming months, we will develop our policy on supporting our youngest children.

We need to look beyond the existing narrow focus of early years policy to create a new vision of an early years sector that encompasses family support, pre-school education, child care and early primary education as a coherent whole—improving the transition to early primary education is vital. We also need to ensure that children in primary school receive extra support as soon as a need is identified. Nurture groups, for example, have been particularly successful in supporting young pupils, and we should build on that approach.

I stress the importance of different sectors working together to support children and their families. We know that an integrated approach to delivering services for children has particular benefits for disadvantaged families. There are already good examples of health, justice, education and social care services working together. For example, the Dundee families project provides a range of different services to support families to stay out of homelessness. We must build on that type of approach and go further and deeper if we are to break the intergenerational cycle of poor outcomes for children that afflicts too many families and neighbourhoods in Scotland.

George Foulkes: I think I am losing the will to live.

The Presiding Officer (Alex Fergusson): Order.

Adam Ingram: It is George Foulkes—what else can one expect?

These are exciting times to be involved in public life in Scotland. The challenges are great, no more so than in the field of education and lifelong learning. In the past, our country has led the world in developing human potential, and we aspire to do so again. However, we realise that a great national effort is required. We need to build consensus both in civic Scotland and in the Parliament for that purpose. That is the spirit in which we aim to move forward.

Business Motion

16:59

The Presiding Officer (Alex Fergusson): The next item of business is consideration of business motion S3M-203, in the name of Bruce Crawford, setting out a revised business programme.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees the following revision to the programme of business for Thursday 21 June 2007—

after

followed by

Executive Debate: Housing

insert

followed by

SPCB motion on membership of the Scottish Commission for Public Audit—[*Bruce Crawford.*]

Motion agreed to.

Decision Time

17:00

The Presiding Officer (Alex Fergusson): There are no questions to be put as a result of today's business.

Motor Neurone Disease

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Alasdair Morgan): The final item of business is a members' business debate on motion S3M-73, in the name of Margaret Mitchell, on motor neurone disease. The debate will be concluded without any question being put.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament acknowledges that motor neurone disease (MND) is a serious, progressively disabling and fatal condition, which can affect any adult and for which medical science currently has no known cause or cure; understands that there are currently 64 people in central Scotland and 280 people throughout Scotland with MND and that this figure is rising; congratulates the Scottish Motor Neurone Disease Association for its commitment to improve the lives of sufferers of MND and to help people living with MND; notes that in the financial year 2005-06 the association incurred costs of £63,836 in relation to the services provided by the MND care teams within central Scotland; further notes that there was no financial contribution towards the cost of providing these services from NHS Lanarkshire, NHS Forth Valley or NHS Ayrshire and Arran, the three NHS boards covering the central Scotland area; believes that there is a compelling case for NHS boards to meet some of the costs of providing these care teams which would make a huge difference in terms of the care received by those with MND, and therefore considers that the provision of this funding should be addressed as soon as possible.

17:01

Margaret Mitchell (Central Scotland) (Con): In the public gallery, we have with us members of the Scottish Motor Neurone Disease Association, sufferers and their carers, family and friends. I warmly welcome them to the Scottish Parliament.

Monday 18 June marked the beginning of motor neurone disease awareness week, so it is apt that we are debating my motion today and raising awareness of this devastating illness and the problems surrounding the funding of the care of those who have the disease.

Every day, three people in the United Kingdom are diagnosed with motor neurone disease and three die from it. In Scotland, more than 120 people are diagnosed with the disease every year and 120 people die from it. It is a fatal disease for which there is no cure and of which the cause is not known. It is a progressive disorder of the nervous system for which there is no definitive diagnosis. It affects different individuals in different ways, depending on the nerve cells involved, but it is always progressive, resulting in paralysis, loss of speech and impairment of the throat muscles—which means that sufferers are unable to eat or drink. Limbs and the diaphragm cease to function. Life expectancy after diagnosis averages 14 months.

Motor neurone disease has been described as one of nature's cruellest diseases, because while there is progressive degeneration and paralysis of the limbs and diaphragm, which results in respiratory problems, the mind remains intact. On rare occasions, it affects children, but it mostly affects people over 40—although a significant number of people are diagnosed in their 20s.

Motor neurone disease is no respecter of persons. Recently, the chamber was shocked and deeply saddened to learn of the death of Mark Canavan, the son of former Falkirk West MSP Dennis Canavan, at the age of only 41. In 2006, it claimed a number of football personalities, including Jock Wallace, the former Rangers manager, who was 61; Jimmy Johnstone, the former Celtic player and Lisbon lion, who was 61; and Don McVicar, formerly of Partick Thistle and St Johnstone, who was only 44. From the world of broadcasting and entertainment, in 1982, the disease claimed Ian Trethowan, the former director-general of the BBC, and, a year later, the actor, David Niven, who was 73.

The Scottish Motor Neurone Disease Association is the only charity in the country that cares for sufferers. It provides support, education and information to patients, carers—both voluntary and statutory—and families, and offers a multidisciplinary health team service at the time of diagnosis, during progression of the disease and beyond.

The association aims to raise awareness of motor neurone disease, to promote research and to ensure that the right help, care and support are given at the right time, to allow sufferers to live as well as possible for as long as possible. It focuses on ensuring that generic service systems of health and care are able to meet the needs of people who live with MND—in particular, their need for a rapid response to changing requirements. In effect, it ensures that fast-tracked requests for services are responded to.

The motor neurone disease Scotland care team of six people, which comprises three full-time and three part-time health professionals who are employed by the national health service, is stretched to breaking point. It exists only because funding is provided by the association. Last year, health boards contributed a derisory £9,415 to a £300,000 service.

I believe that the service that the care team provides is an example of world best practice. Furthermore, the model of care that it has implemented puts into practice the main principles of the Kerr report, "Building a Health Service Fit for the Future"—integration between health and social services, the delivery of services as locally as possible and the provision of prompt access to specialised services when necessary. The irony is

that the care team has been doing that since 1982.

I have three questions for the minister. When such a vital service fits so neatly into current policy, why does it have to rely for funding on the good will of the public through their donations to the association? Why does the association have to bear the responsibility of funding the care team when its members work alongside NHS-funded clinical specialists for other neurological conditions who work in the same offices and do similar jobs? Finally, what can she do to rectify that injustice and to help with research into such a humbling disease?

17:08

Christina McKelvie (Central Scotland) (SNP):

I thank Margaret Mitchell for bringing the issue to the Parliament.

Motor neurone disease is a devastating illness. As doctors will say, the prognosis for anyone who is diagnosed with the disease is not good—the expectation is that the patient will be dead within a few years. As a child, I watched my father struggle with the condition. Unlike most sufferers, he lasted for some 12 and a half years—an astonishing result—as the condition went through intermittent stages. There were times when he wanted nothing more than to be allowed to die. It was horrific to grow up with that, but that desire in sufferers is perfectly understandable when we remember that while their bodies fail, their brains remain intact, with the result that their bodies are almost turned into prisons for minds that are still active.

Modern medicine knows of no cause and no cure for the condition and cannot predict where it will strike. Any one of us could develop MND, as current good health is no guarantee of continuing good health.

As the motion states, the number of people in Scotland who live with MND is rising and the provision of support for sufferers is not all that readily available; as it points out, we should praise the work of the Scottish Motor Neurone Disease Association, which I thank for supporting my family. Its commitment to improving the lives of sufferers and to helping people to live their lives as comfortably as possible is admirable and should be supported.

The case for the association receiving some financial help from public funds should be considered. That is only one of many claims on scarce resources that ministers will receive, but I hope that it will be given careful consideration. I hope that the minister will look hard at the possibility of providing funding for the association, directly or indirectly, through asking health boards to ensure such provision. I hope that she will

ensure that research into possible causes and cures continues. I hope that she can tell us that our ministers will support the research or that she will ensure that such support will be forthcoming as soon as possible.

Few conditions are more distressing than motor neurone disease, and whatever we can do to alleviate the suffering and distress of patients will be most welcome. I hope that ministers will thoroughly consider in the coming months the full case for support of motor neurone disease sufferers and research into MND. I do not expect the minister to make a commitment today to provide funding and support, but I hope that we will hear a commitment to examine the case for it thoroughly and speedily.

I do not wish to take up too much time with my speech; I think that the facts speak for themselves. I hope, for all of us, that the minister will agree to take the necessary time to consider the issue. I support the thrust of the motion we are debating and I hope that the minister will feel similarly disposed.

17:10

Dr Richard Simpson (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): Both previous speakers have described the nature of this disease. The number of people who are affected is not large, which is welcome, but it is nevertheless a problem because it is difficult to devise services, develop research and provide comprehensive support quickly for such a small group of individuals. Health boards can lose the issue under the radar. The fact that the health boards involved support the care team's six co-ordinators only to the extent of £9,000-odd out of £300,000 is perhaps not surprising, but it is, frankly, unacceptable.

In a sense, the current situation with MND mirrors the situation that I found at the beginning of my professional career with the generality of palliative care, which was not handled well in Scotland or, indeed, the United Kingdom in the pre-hospice era. However, extensive palliative care was developed in the 1970s and there was improved awareness and increased support. Scotland led the way in that regard and should do so again.

The hospice movement was in deep financial trouble in Scotland in the 1980s, but Michael Forsyth, the Conservative Secretary of State for Scotland at the time, agreed to 50:50 funding. That meant that every £1 the public raised was matched by £1 from the public purse. Today, we have palliative care in Scotland that is the envy of the UK and Europe. I suggest to the minister that, for this small, select group of MND patients, we need to extend that 50:50 concept—not just for the

small number who require hospice care, but for the larger number who require extensive refurbishment of their homes, serious support for their carers and families, and equipment for sometimes short periods of time.

We previously debated in the chamber free personal care, which is one of the best examples of what has been achieved during the past eight years with cross-party agreement in the Parliament. We need to ensure that free personal care is applied without delay to those who suffer from MND. We also need to ensure that the care-and-repair budget, which will be £10 million for the coming year, will be adequate to supply the refurbishment that is needed to support the families of MND sufferers. We need to ensure not only that each carer of a sufferer is given the assessment to which they are entitled by law, but that they are told that they are entitled to that assessment.

Christina McKelvie made an important point: we forget the children of the families who are affected by MND at our peril. We need to support not only the carers, but the families.

We need to go beyond carer assessment, to carer training. The association's resources cannot extend beyond providing advice and help. It cannot go in and give the practical assistance for the caring that every carer of every MND sufferer must supply.

I expect significant developments in research, which will be important for Scotland, in the next week or two. I urge the minister to ensure, when she is in discussion with those who will achieve the funding, that the Government plays an active role and that it is seen to be committed to the sort of partnership that is a tradition in Scotland and which is good for Scotland.

If we discuss this matter again during this parliamentary session, I hope that, by then, every health board will have committed itself to provide adequate funding and support for the care team co-ordinators and to extend proper support for MND sufferers.

17:15

Mary Scanlon (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I congratulate Margaret Mitchell on securing this debate during MND awareness week and I acknowledge and thank her for her work on the issue. I thank Dr Simpson for acknowledging Michael Forsyth's input into the hospice movement—it was nice of him to mention that.

On average, 120 new cases of MND are diagnosed in Scotland every year. As Margaret Mitchell said, sufferers are faced with the fact that 48 per cent will die within a year of diagnosis. A

smaller percentage of sufferers live for more than five years, but they are exceptions, as Christina McKelvie said. According to information from the web, average life expectancy after diagnosis is just 14 months.

MND is a particularly cruel disease, which progressively and fatally disables muscles, affecting movement, speech and eating. It has no cure and can affect any adult, although most cases involve people over 40. I am hesitating, because members have made some of the points that I was going to make.

There are no drugs that can cure the disease, so treatment involves a package of care, which is provided in Scotland by organisations such as the Scottish Motor Neurone Disease Association. When I was researching the matter before the debate, I was shocked to discover that so much care is provided by a charity—I even checked with Margaret Mitchell that that is true before I stood up to give my speech. We do not expect that to be the case in modern Scotland. I understand that care provided by the association in the Highlands in 2005-06 cost £22,000. The SMNDA relies on the public's support to fund its care, and its request for 50 per cent funding from NHS Highland would cost the board only slightly more than £11,000. It is incredible that patients who are at risk are not receiving proper care and support and are dependent on a charity in this day and age in Scotland.

There have been calls for the extension of free personal care to people under 60. I am not calling for free personal care for all people under 60 who have a disability, but an extension of the policy might be appropriate for some patient groups. I hope that the minister will consider the issue.

However good the care package is, it is no consolation to sufferers, who know that there is no cure for MND. It is heartening that research is continuing. I was encouraged to learn that, during the past 15 years, similar—although not identical—features have been discovered in neurodegenerative diseases such as MND, Parkinson's disease and Alzheimer's disease. I share researchers' hope that a breakthrough in one disease might have a positive impact on our understanding of another.

I support Margaret Mitchell's call for NHS funding for care packages. As Dr Simpson said, MND sufferers are a small patient group. That means that they could easily be forgotten, so it is good that we are debating the issue. Anything that members can do to increase awareness will, I hope, lead to greater understanding of the disease and greater support for sufferers.

17:19

Karen Gillon (Clydesdale) (Lab): I join others in congratulating Margaret Mitchell on securing this important debate and in welcoming the members of the public to the public gallery, particularly my constituents, who have made the journey from Clydesdale. Several members have spoken in detail about the disease and how it affects people, so I will focus my comments on two issues: research and respite care.

One of my constituents and his family have been living with the disease for 23 years. He is not a typical sufferer. He has maintained his spirit and good humour throughout what must have been a difficult time. In those 23 years, little progress has been made on identifying the cause of the disease or, perhaps more important, on finding a cure for those who suffer from it. As Mary Scanlon and Richard Simpson said, research is continuing. I would be grateful if the minister outlined how she believes further progress can be made and how the Executive or the NHS could offer further support in the future. Although the disease affects a small number of people, the impact on them and their families is huge. Because so many people contract the disease at a young age and have their lives ended so quickly, we should try to make progress with research as quickly as possible.

As I said, many people who suffer from MND are not old. Many have families who provide care for them 24 hours a day, seven days a week. If such families are to maintain a semblance of normal family life, they need to go on holiday and do things as a family. However, respite care is not easy to come by. To ask somebody who is 40 to go into an old folks home for two weeks is not only wrong, but demeaning. In the past eight years, all members have become aware of the need to find adequate and appropriate respite care for under-60s who require such support. They need appropriate support and to have time with their peers, so that their families can be comfortable and secure in the knowledge that their loved ones are being looked after appropriately.

My constituent has been lucky and has had good care in the local NHS hospital. However, the circumstances have changed in recent years. Perhaps the minister can consider, and have further dialogue with NHS boards on, the issue of respite care for people who are under 60 and for whom a placement in a hospital may be more appropriate than a placement in an old folks home. That would be a positive approach. We now have new modern hospitals with individual rooms and support available, which is a more appropriate setting for such folk.

I welcome the debate, although I wish that we did not have to have such debates, because whenever we have them, that means that there

are real people out there suffering from real problems and with real illnesses that affect them every day. It is sometimes difficult fully to grasp how big an impact that has on people until one meets individuals. The debate is not about an abstract concept or a disease that we read about in a newspaper—it is about real people with real lives. As parliamentarians, we have a duty to do what we can to provide them with the support and assistance that they need at what is a difficult time in their lives.

17:23

The Minister for Public Health (Shona Robison): I pay tribute to Margaret Mitchell for bringing the debate to the Parliament and to the patients, carers and families, and people from the Scottish Motor Neurone Disease Association who are in the public gallery to listen to the debate.

As members have noted, the debate is well timed, as it coincides with motor neurone awareness week and tomorrow is global motor neurone awareness day. Margaret Mitchell is right to raise awareness of the condition, which is perhaps the most devastating of the neurological conditions in its effects on those with the disease, those closest to them and carers.

The motion praises the Scottish Motor Neurone Disease Association for its commitment to improving the lives of those with the disease. I am glad to have the chance to offer my thanks to the association for its valuable work in supporting people with motor neurone disease and their families, the importance of which was highlighted by Christina McKelvie in her very personal account; in increasing awareness of the condition among health and social care professionals; in promoting research; or in identifying areas in which services could be improved. The Government recognises the work of the association and supports it through the section 16B grant scheme.

We said clearly in our manifesto that we wanted to work in partnership with the voluntary sector to support new ways of delivering services, since by doing so we can make an immeasurable improvement to the quality of life of people living with long-term conditions. The voluntary sector has generally led the way in promoting a person-centred approach to services, and in stimulating innovative ways of delivering services. The development of the voluntary hospices is perhaps the best example of that. The NHS has learned from that through the development of specialist palliative care units in parts of the country that do not have a voluntary hospice. We need to find a way of ensuring that that pattern applies to other aspects of service provision. We want NHS boards and their planning partners to work with

organisations such as the Scottish Motor Neurone Disease Association to ensure that the innovations that are introduced by the voluntary sector can become part of mainstream provision. That process frees up the voluntary organisation to continue innovating, rather than devoting a disproportionate amount of time to fundraising to sustain approaches that have already demonstrated their value.

That sort of thinking is at the heart of Margaret Mitchell's motion. I have made some investigations of the services for people with motor neurone disease in the three NHS boards that are mentioned in the motion: Lanarkshire, Forth Valley, and Ayrshire and Arran. In NHS Ayrshire and Arran, everyone who is diagnosed with the disease is seen and given a full multidisciplinary assessment at the Douglas Grant rehabilitation unit at Ayrshire central hospital. They are always given priority and never have to wait for appointments. Services are kept local through outreach arrangements with the Southern general in Glasgow. The board believes that it has one of the most highly developed support services in Scotland for people with motor neurone disease. I give recognition to that this evening.

NHS Lanarkshire is seeking to develop its partnership with the Scottish Motor Neurone Disease Association, based on the range of services that the association provides for Lanarkshire residents. The association's request for 50 per cent funding of those services is therefore under consideration. The board is discussing with the association how it can play into key pieces of strategic work. Those include the board's comprehensive review of neurological services and its revised palliative care strategy. The board will also encourage links between the association and the board's recently appointed nurse consultant for long-term conditions.

NHS Forth Valley has a multidisciplinary motor neurone disease clinic, which is led by a consultant neurologist and supported by a Scottish Motor Neurone Disease Association nurse. The board's managed clinical network for palliative care contributes to that clinic. I am particularly pleased to be able to say that the board has recently agreed to the association's request for a contribution to the funding of the motor neurone disease care teams.

Taking account of Margaret Mitchell's general comments about boards, I intend to write to all boards to draw their attention to the terms of this debate and to encourage their active collaboration with the association. I will refer specifically to Richard Simpson's point about the principle of extending 50:50 hospice funding to the care of people with MND. I shall monitor that situation. We must be sure that people with motor neurone

disease get the best possible care, wherever they live.

With that point in mind, I know that the association has been having discussions with NHS boards and a variety of other agencies about the development of a Scotland-wide managed clinical network for motor neurone disease. MCNs give a strong voice to people living with a long-term condition, the voluntary sector and those who provide the services, on the way in which those services should be developed in the future. Designation as a national MCN would bring with it funding contributed by all the NHS boards in Scotland. That funding would cover the time of the lead clinician in championing the network, the appointment of a network manager and the information technology underpinnings that such networks need. I strongly support the development of such a network on the grounds that it would promote equity of access to services throughout Scotland, improve integration of care across multiprofessional teams and develop uniformity of standards of care.

The creation of such a network fits well with the work that NHS Quality Improvement Scotland currently has in hand to develop clinical standards for the provision of services for people who are affected by any neurological condition, which would include motor neurone disease. The standards need to reflect the aspects of services that matter most to the service users. In this case, that voice will be provided by the Scottish neurological alliance, of which the Scottish Motor Neurone Disease Association is a prominent member.

Equipment and adaptations have an essential role to play. As well as making real and practical improvements to quality of life, the right equipment can support people to live independently in their own homes and help to reduce the need for home care services. With motor neurone disease, the challenge is to ensure that services respond quickly enough to people's needs. By bringing together responsibility for health and housing, we can ensure that those issues are tackled effectively.

I take on board Richard Simpson's comments about support for carers. We recognise that need and will consider additional support to carers as part of the comprehensive spending review.

The motion challenges us all to do the best that we possibly can for people with motor neurone disease. The Scottish Government is committed to the principle that one of the key drivers of service improvement should be the experience of people who live with long-term conditions. We must ensure that the services that treat people treat them as people, not as bundles of symptoms. That is hugely important. We also need to ensure that

services are delivered in communities to address their needs.

People with conditions such as motor neurone disease deserve the best quality of life possible. I hope that I have given members assurance that we intend to build on the good work that has been done already and ensure that we develop equity of access throughout Scotland.

Meeting closed at 17:31.

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