

MEETING OF THE PARLIAMENT

Thursday 17 January 2008

Session 3

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Scottish Parliament

Thursday 17 January 2008

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

Energy

The Presiding Officer (Alex Fergusson): Good morning. The first item of business is a debate on motion S3M-1152, in the name of Jim Mather, on energy.

09:15

The Minister for Enterprise, Energy and Tourism (Jim Mather): I am pleased to open this debate on the United Kingdom Energy Bill, which was published last week. I look forward to the debate and to being able to set out the Scottish Government's approach towards those parts of the bill that impact upon Scotland, and our energy future more generally.

I start by stating our view on a number of the bill's key aspects. Members will not be surprised if I begin with nuclear power. Our approach is clear: Scotland does not want or need new nuclear power. We are meeting a large part of our energy needs from non-nuclear sources. We have massive potential for exploiting our significant renewables resources, and we are capable of reducing our reliance on fossil fuel energy supplies while making them clean. Our non-nuclear strategy will foster the indigenous growth and export potential of energy, technology, expertise and products.

The Government's view of nuclear power is unequivocal. The UK Government has recognised the strength of that feeling, so the provisions in the UK bill that deal with nuclear decommissioning and waste do not extend to Scotland.

Gavin Brown (Lothians) (Con): The minister says that we do not want or need nuclear power. Did not his Government just give permission to increase the lifespan of a nuclear power station in Scotland?

Jim Mather: We did. That asset was bought and paid for by the people of Scotland and it is part of the current energy mix and migration plan for Scotland.

Parliament should know, however, that the UK Government did not let the Scottish Government see the nuclear provisions in the bill until the day that the bill was introduced at Westminster. We have expressed our disappointment that Scottish

ministers were not consulted in the normal way as Parliament would expect.

The data prove that Scotland does not need nuclear power. Figures that were published last week by the UK Government show that, in 2006, Scotland supplied the equivalent of 92 per cent of its electricity needs from a mix of fossil fuels, renewables and pumped hydro storage. In that same year, while the total amount of electricity generated in Scotland rose by 10 per cent, the amount of electricity generated from nuclear fell by a quarter, and we exported 25 per cent of our gross consumption. There is, and there will be, no energy gap; today, the Crown Estate has forecast that there will be an additional 5 to 10GW from renewables by 2020.

Tavish Scott (Shetland) (LD): As the minister knows, the Crown Estate announced yesterday the outcome of a study on grid connection using a cable down the east side of the UK. What would the minister say about the cost to the developer of that grid connection? Will he ensure that the Government considers that matter and the other studies that are being done, particularly through Highlands and Islands Enterprise? Will he seek to ensure that the cost of such developments to the developer is realistic?

Jim Mather: I recognise the member's concerns. In every case, we will sit down with the developers and anyone else who is investing in Scotland to seek to optimise the outcomes for Scotland and for those who wish to invest in Scotland.

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

Jim Mather: I will develop my remarks a bit further.

Parliament should accept that we are already looking at a future beyond nuclear power in Scotland. Those who favour nuclear power and comment upon the variability of other sources need to recognise that nuclear power itself has been unreliable. In 2006, the latest year for which we have official figures, the share of Scottish electricity generated from nuclear power stood at 28 per cent, not the 40 per cent figure that the Scotland Office quoted last week. We know that 2007 has seen similar problems at Hunterston.

Iain Gray (East Lothian) (Lab): Will the minister give way?

Jim Mather: I will just finish my point.

There are many reasons why we are opposed to new nuclear power. There are the unanswered questions about the storage and disposal of nuclear waste, and the concerns about security, health and, of course, cost. I could speak at length

about the cost, but I will take Iain Gray's intervention.

Iain Gray: The 2006 figure that Mr Mather uses is particularly low because of the outage at Hunterston. What proportion of Scotland's electricity generation is provided by nuclear power today?

Jim Mather: It is likely to be higher than the 26 per cent figure, but the issue is the robustness and stability of supply from a mix that is changing and evolving from what we have had in the past.

When the UK Government introduced the Energy Bill, it stated that the industry would be responsible for the costs of building, operating and maintaining new nuclear power stations and for dealing with waste. David Cairns, the Minister of State at the Scotland Office stated that such costs

"mustn't fall on the individual energy consumer, it must be the company that bears that cost".

The UK Government states that the costs should not be borne by the taxpayer and that they should not fall on the consumer. However, the costs have to fall somewhere; both statements cannot be right, and experience tells us that costs will undoubtedly be passed on to consumers in the form of higher energy bills.

As an aside, for a general view on the issue I refer members to the article by Iain McWhirter in last week's *Sunday Herald*, which highlighted the strategic and economic benefits of developing renewables within Scotland, even from a UK perspective.

Our targets and ambitions for renewables are clear, but we recognise that Scotland's future energy needs cannot be met by renewables alone; we require an energy mix with a range of sources and a clean base-load. We are aware of the need to reduce carbon emissions—our target of reducing emissions by 80 per cent by 2050 shows the importance that we place on that. The Parliament knows about the priority that we attach to the development of carbon capture and storage technology in Scotland. That technology has the capacity to reduce carbon emissions by 90 per cent.

Scotland is showing the way in several different ways. For example, Scottish Power has announced a feasibility study of clean coal technology at Longannet. The company has also announced its plans to undertake a research project with the University of Edinburgh—the first UK project of its type—to investigate storing greenhouse gases underground in the Firth of Forth.

The Scottish Government has agreed to part fund, alongside industry, a broader university-led study into wider CO₂ storage options in Scotland. I

hope to announce project partners shortly. We were in favour of the proposed CCS project at Peterhead, but the slow pace of the UK Government—along with its subsequent decision to rule out gas-fired stations such as Peterhead from being eligible for its competition—has damaged that project. However, I hope that other Scottish bids will be made for the competition.

We agree with the UK Government that a dedicated regime for the regulation of carbon storage is required. The UK Energy Bill could provide a common UK framework for storage; that move would be welcomed by the energy industry and would help it to build global competence in a critically important technology here in Scotland.

As members know, the issue is about waste, so control of carbon storage is a devolved matter within Scottish territorial waters up to 12 nautical miles. That brings it within Scotland's jurisdiction, so the Scottish Parliament has to agree to the UK legislating on its behalf. However, the 12-nautical-mile limit is an artificial boundary and we have proposed to the UK Government that Scottish ministers exercise new powers both within and beyond 12 nautical miles. Disappointingly, the UK Government has not agreed. Indeed, the UK Government has excluded Scottish territorial waters from the bill. We regret that and wish for a sensible discussion with UK ministers on the matter. We hope that progress can be made around the further extension of powers, but we are prepared to introduce our own bill if necessary.

I touched on the potential of renewables, but we are moving beyond potential. Renewables output has increased significantly and the installed capacity of renewables is now above that of nuclear power. Looking forward, we have increased the target for generating electricity from renewable sources to meeting 50 per cent of Scottish demand by 2020, with an interim milestone of 31 per cent to be achieved by 2011.

Furthermore, by basing the targets on whole demand, which includes transmission losses, the generation that is required to achieve those targets is greater than under the previous method of calculation. That is in line with international practice and will prove to be a more robust basis for comparison in the future.

We want to develop as wide a range as possible of renewables technologies and to deploy them in a more decentralised system of energy generation, including a significant increase in microgeneration. We will build on the successes of onshore wind and hydro. Biomass energy is making an increasing contribution to the generation of electricity and heat, and I am sure that my colleague Michael Russell will refer to that later.

We are determined to maintain Scotland's global lead in marine energy, so we will continue to work with the industry to remove barriers to the further development of our renewables sector; that includes the need for fundamental reform of the transmission access and charging regime.

The Energy Bill introduces changes to the renewables obligation mechanism. The new system of banding for renewables obligations will allow higher support for emerging technologies. We support those provisions, which will develop an aim that is shared by this Parliament. The fact that the current devolution of renewables obligation powers will be maintained will enable the Scottish Government to provide appropriate levels of support for wave, tidal and biomass developments that are located in Scotland.

Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green): I am a little disappointed that the minister has made no mention so far of demand reduction, although the motion refers to increased awareness of its benefits. Because of inefficiencies in generation and transmission, reducing demand is one of the most important things that we can do. Is the minister aware that, in evidence on the Scottish Government's draft budget, the Sustainable Development Commission expressed disappointment at the lack of an overall target to reduce demand for energy or electricity consumption? Why is the Government unable to set such targets? Does it intend to consider them in the future?

Jim Mather: I had a meeting yesterday with the Energy Saving Trust, so I share the member's concern. I am sure that my colleague Mike Russell will handle that point later. I am keen to move the debate to a new level of maturity so that we have much less complacency and procrastination from those who should be making moves to make better use of energy. The key fact is that driving down costs in that way is good not only for our environment, but for our competitiveness.

We expect to publish in the spring a consultation on renewables obligations, in which we will reserve the right to suggest a different approach to banding from that of the rest of the UK. For example, we consider that providing only two renewables obligation certificates for energy from marine sources is insufficient.

We welcome the widening and maturing of the energy debate in Scotland. We welcome some parts of the UK Energy Bill, such as the provisions on renewables. We recognise the importance of having a regulatory regime for carbon storage and we hope that we can have a sensible discussion with the UK Government on devolving powers beyond 12 nautical miles. In addition, we welcome the UK Government's recognition of the Scottish Parliament's and Scottish Government's powers in

relation to nuclear energy. That is fundamentally important. We also recognise and welcome the increasing level of investment in the renewables industry that is accruing from this Government's strong signals to the energy sector.

However, the introduction of the UK Energy Bill highlights how the current devolution settlement inhibits the optimisation of energy policy for Scotland. The way in which the bill is drafted provides proof of that in the overlapping competence between the UK and Scottish Parliaments on offshore carbon storage and renewables. We need full control of all energy powers and associated revenues. In the months to come, as part of the national conversation, we will set out more fully our views on energy powers. In the meantime, we will work to ensure that the UK Energy Bill gives Scotland the powers that it needs and deserves. I trust that today's debate will deflate two key fallacies by making these two key points: first, Scotland has no energy gap; secondly, Scotland is not an isolated energy market.

I move,

That the Parliament notes the Energy Bill introduced by the UK Government; welcomes the Bill's provisions in relation to promotion of renewable energy which will allow the Scottish Parliament to determine levels of support for emerging technologies; recognises the potential of carbon capture and storage for reducing carbon emissions and supports further dialogue with the UK Government on exercise of powers in relation to regulation of carbon storage; welcomes the Scottish Government's position that new nuclear power stations are not necessary to meet renewable electricity targets or carbon emissions targets and are not wanted in Scotland; welcomes the UK Government's recognition that the Bill's provisions on nuclear decommissioning should not extend to Scotland, and believes that Scotland can have a secure, low-carbon, non-nuclear energy future through a combination of a growing renewables sector exploiting a range of technologies, including marine energy, cleaner energy from fossil fuels, improved energy efficiency resulting from better insulated buildings and increased awareness of the benefits that accrue from behavioural change and demand reduction.

09:28

Lewis Macdonald (Aberdeen Central) (Lab): As some members may recall, at this stage in the previous parliamentary session I had ministerial responsibility for the energy portfolio that Jim Mather now holds. In that role—as I was reminded at yesterday's meeting of the Economy, Energy and Tourism Committee—I was particularly involved in two Government-industry partnership bodies. I was vice-chair of Pilot, which is the Government-industry task force for UK oil and gas that the Labour Government at Westminster set up some nine years ago. I was also the original ministerial chair of the forum for renewable energy development in Scotland—FREDS—which, as the

name suggests, seeks to apply and develop the Pilot model to maximise the economic benefit for Scotland of new renewable energy technologies. Pilot and FREDS are a good place to start today's debate because they highlight the range of energy sources and the huge significance of the energy industries in Scotland, both historically and for our future sustainable economic growth.

Labour's amendment to the motion points out that there are

"ongoing concerns about different sources of energy generation".

The burning of fossil fuels causes perhaps the most widespread concerns, but no serious or responsible mainstream party in Scotland argues that UK policy is wrong in seeking to maximise the production of hydrocarbons from the UK continental shelf. If the oil industry were to leave the North Sea tomorrow, the energy gap that we face would multiply exponentially and the impact on the Scottish economy would be little short of catastrophic, with the loss of tens of thousands of jobs, many millions in Government revenues, billions of pounds in export earnings and the driver of technical innovation in everything from remote operated vehicles and offshore wind to information technology and keyhole surgery.

If it is impossible to imagine any mainstream party demanding an early end to North Sea oil, it was equally bizarre last week—and again today—to hear senior members of the Scottish Government appear to dismiss surplus production of electricity as somehow unnecessary, unwanted or irrelevant to Scotland's needs. A fundamental assumption in the setting up of FREDS and in the previous Administration's renewable energy policy was that we wanted to sustain Scotland's role as a surplus producer of energy and an exporter of electricity. In a new era of power production, we wanted to sustain the technical expertise and high-quality jobs that the energy and power sectors have provided to the Scottish economy over many years as well as reduce carbon emissions to the atmosphere.

Jim Mather: Does that come at any cost?

Lewis Macdonald: Of course not. In each and every energy sector, clearly there is and must be a balance of argument. However, senior Scottish ministers have argued that, because at a particular point in time more than 90 per cent of energy consumption could be met by coal, oil, gas and renewables, there is no energy gap and therefore no need to think of any other sources. They are guilty not just of using selective statistics for their own ends, but of being fundamentally wrong in their suggestion that Scotland should produce only the energy or electricity that Scotland will consume. They are also guilty of talking down a

major Scottish export industry and the jobs that go with it.

Ministers have trumpeted the idea of energy self-sufficiency and have been hugely creative with statistics for the sole purpose—as we heard again in Jim Mather's speech—of being seen to be against nuclear power generation. Their fundamental proposition that only the Scottish National Party stands in the way of a new generation of nuclear power could hardly be further from the truth. We all know that there is no queue of multinational energy companies eagerly awaiting the opportunity to build the next generation of nuclear power stations in Scotland. The transmission charging regime, which the SNP also likes to be seen to oppose, effectively incentivises companies—given the scale of capital investment involved—to locate new nuclear power plants closest to the largest markets in the south and midlands of England. The logic and economics of locating close to markets would be difficult for any developer to overcome.

Alasdair Allan (Western Isles) (SNP): Will the member allow me to welcome the sensible views of some members on the Labour benches? Sarah Boyack, Malcolm Chisholm and Pauline McNeill have all either signed or lodged motions on nuclear power that SNP members could have written. Does he agree with them that no convincing case has yet been made for a new generation of nuclear power stations in Scotland?

Lewis Macdonald: The next time that Alasdair Allan intervenes on me to welcome comments from members on the Labour benches, it might be appropriate if he welcomed the comments that I have just made rather than jump to a different part of the debate.

The reality of electricity trading and transmission is that Scotland is not self-sufficient in energy in any meaningful sense because it is not a separate market. Scotland is part of a single national network and a single national grid that covers Great Britain as a whole—long may that continue. The British electricity transmission and trading arrangements give Scottish electricity producers access to the larger markets in the south, provide Scottish consumers with a direct price benefit relative to consumers elsewhere and minimise the risks of power cuts anywhere in the country. Those arrangements mean that nuclear electricity does not stop at the border. When we export Scottish electricity to England, we export the product of Torness and Hunterston as well as that of Longannet and of Scottish hydropower. When the UK bridges the energy gap by developing new nuclear power stations in the south of England, Scottish as well as English consumers will continue to take electricity from the grid that those power stations supply.

SNP members' portrayal of themselves as the great opponents of nuclear electricity is simply an illusion. In fact, by opting out of the Energy Bill and a common strategy for nuclear waste and by declining to extend the polluter-pays principle to nuclear power station decommissioning, they are opting out of the real debate, opposing Scottish new-build proposals that no one has made and making no real difference to the level of nuclear electricity generation in these islands in the years to come.

Of course, the opt-outs do not stop there. We heard from Jim Mather that carbon capture and storage offers a potential new technology that the SNP would have us believe it supports. Alex Salmond positively demanded that Scotland should host a pilot project worth potentially billions of pounds in subsidy from the UK Exchequer. Labour at Westminster has put Britain in a position to lead the world in this area. The potential benefits of concentrating on carbon sequestration from coal could be enormous, not just for this country but for all the emerging economies around the world that are currently burning huge quantities of coal.

However, today's SNP motion calls for further dialogue on carbon storage, despite the fact that legislative provision for carbon capture and storage could readily be inserted in the UK Energy Bill. There would then be no need for further dialogue with UK ministers on whether provision should be made for carbon storage in Scotland. If ministers really wanted that technology, they would proceed on the basis of the existing devolution settlement, lodge a legislative consent motion and work with UK ministers to implement in Scotland the same provisions that the UK Government intends to implement elsewhere. If Scottish ministers fail to do that, it will only add to the impression that all their opt-outs have little to do with promoting cleaner energy and a lot to do with breaking up Britain's energy market.

Jim Mather: Does that mean that the member would support extending provision for carbon capture and storage beyond the 12-nautical-mile limit, to take advantage of the oil well capacity that exists there?

Lewis Macdonald: I recognise the potential of carbon capture and storage to operate both inshore and further out at sea, depending on the sector in question. However, when the UK is legislating for carbon capture and storage in inshore waters, which is most relevant to carbon capture from coal, it makes no sense for Scotland not to be at the table and part of the process. Ministers should focus on how they will work with UK ministers to make carbon capture and storage happen.

Scotland should not seek to opt out of the British electricity and energy market and should not abandon its leading market position as an exporter of electricity and other forms of energy to the rest of the UK. Instead, we should build on that established strength to become a lead player in renewables and cleaner fuels technology and to earn money and create new high-quality jobs by producing more than we use and selling it in England and beyond. That is why we call today for work towards more ambitious renewables targets in the future, for the development of the full range of new technologies and for Scotland to remain open to as diverse a range of energy sources as our natural assets and scientific knowledge allow.

In our manifesto last year, we called for 50 per cent of electricity to come from renewables by 2020. We welcome adherence to that objective from any quarter, but the experience of the past four years confirms that, in the competitive market in which we operate, simply setting targets is not enough. That is why we set up FREDS. It will take work—work with the industry, building on the success of FREDS—for us to meet our targets. That means partnership with the trade unions, which bring a good deal of expertise to the table, as well as with energy companies large and small. We must work with the Scottish Renewables Forum and with those Scottish industrial companies whose expertise is in fossil fuels. They understand just how hard it will be to bring clean coal technologies to market, but they also have the knowledge to get the job done.

In my time on FREDS, we took the first steps towards realising Scotland's potential in marine renewables and biomass. Much progress has been made in both areas, but there is still a long way to go. We should not assume that that potential will be realised until the technology is proven, nor can we take for granted that the economic benefits will be realised in Scotland. However, it is right that we should work towards both ends, because marine renewables and biomass have great potential.

Labour will support Scottish ministers when they work in the way that I have described and will call them to account when they do not. We will press them to address fuel poverty, to improve energy efficiency and to support microgeneration and combined heat and power. We will not support the SNP when it threatens Scottish jobs or the interests of Scottish consumers by undermining the British energy market, no matter how much it seeks to present that as something other than a political ploy. That is what is at stake today.

I move amendment S3M-1152.2, to leave out from "notes" to end and insert:

"supports the further development of a Scottish energy strategy, in partnership with the UK Government, which

delivers a mixed energy supply and a focus on energy efficiency to meet our energy needs, secure sustainable economic growth and tackle climate change; believes that the Scottish Government should work towards more ambitious targets for generating electricity from renewable technologies; believes that Scotland needs the full range of renewables to be developed including biomass, marine and local combined heat and power technologies; believes that the investment in the grid and the costs of transmitting electricity should continue to be shared by consumers across Great Britain; believes that, while there are ongoing concerns about different sources of energy generation, we should not rule out any single energy source, as doing so may risk both the security of our electricity supply and thousands of jobs across Scotland, and calls on Scottish ministers to work in partnership with UK ministers on addressing our future energy needs."

09:40

Gavin Brown (Lothians) (Con): We need an energy policy that is long term, sustainable and balanced, with the right energy mix; that guarantees security of supply; that remains competitive; and that ensures the right reductions in carbon dioxide emissions. It is worth noting at the start of the debate that we need an energy policy—not just an electricity policy—of the sort that the Scottish Government set out today. Depending on who one speaks to, between 20 and 25 per cent of our CO₂ emissions come from electricity generation, whereas the rest comes from transport, domestic heating, industrial heating and a number of other sources. If we are to have any chance of reducing emissions by 80 per cent by 2050, we cannot focus only on electricity policy. Half of the minister's speech focused only on nuclear electricity policy.

Let us look at the national context. Our oil supplies are decreasing. Our coal power stations and, ultimately, our gas power station are fairly close to the end of their lifespans, to the extent that decisions about them need to be made today. Our nuclear power stations are also reaching the end of their lifespans. At the same time, we want to grow our economy. The Scottish Conservatives, at least, also want us to remain a net exporter of energy. Currently, we export about 20 per cent of the electricity that we generate to England, Wales and Northern Ireland.

The geopolitical context is that many gas and oil supplies are in unstable and unfriendly countries. Most important, global warming is hanging over the entire world. We must get this right—no ifs, buts or maybes. Based on what we have heard today and on what we heard leading up to the debate from Mr Swinney and Mr Salmond, Scottish Conservative members do not believe that the Scottish Government's approach achieves that. We will not support the Government motion today.

The Labour Party has lodged a robust and sensible amendment that we are happy to back. Our amendment to the Labour amendment strengthens it, making the point that solving our energy issues and meeting our targets needs a broad range of measures and that nothing can be ruled out. The specific point that we want to make—a point made well by David Cameron just last month—is that energy decentralisation can play an important part in enabling us to achieve our goals. It is not the whole solution, just one component of it, but if some people and communities generate their own electricity, they will become far more conscious of how they use it. In addition, many microgenerators offer the opportunity to capture heat, which can then be used for domestic or commercial purposes, reducing many of the inefficiencies and losses from transmission that Patrick Harvie mentioned in his intervention during Jim Mather's speech.

Let us look at what the Government said. It claimed to want a renewables revolution that will turn us into a global renewables powerhouse. Conservative members and, I suspect, every other member of the Parliament support that objective. However, the figures do not match up. Funding in the energy and climate change line of the Scottish Government's draft budget will rise from £19 million a year to £33 million a year. With a mere additional £14 million a year in that line, the Government hopes to achieve a renewables revolution and to make Scotland an energy powerhouse. Of course, such a revolution will not be created by Government spending alone—the private and public sectors will drive it together. However, a Government that claims to be taking the lead with a mere additional £14 million, while at the same time completely ruling out a proven, mature technology such as nuclear power, is simply flapping in the wind.

The Government claims to have bold long-term targets, but it has quietly ditched its manifesto commitment to an annual mandatory emissions reduction target of 3 per cent. The Government used to trumpet that commitment, but it does not talk about it a great deal now.

Rob Gibson (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): What is the total cost of building, running and decommissioning a nuclear power station?

Gavin Brown: I cannot give a precise figure, because every nuclear power station is different. However, compared with the first and second-generation nuclear power stations that we have in this country, the costs of building third-generation nuclear power stations are far lower and they can be built far more quickly. There are good examples of that in France. Instead of a different model being used for every design, designs are transported across, which cuts costs by 30 to 40

per cent. We are comfortable that third-generation nuclear power stations are economic. Once such a facility is up and running, electricity is produced far more cheaply than with other methods. Even according to the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, nuclear power produces 5 per cent of the carbon emissions of a gas or coal-fired power station.

I have asked Mr Mather, in committee and in the chamber, what the renewables mix will look like, but the Government does not seem to have any concept of it. It reels off a shopping list of ideas, but there is no plan A for what that mix might look like, and no plan B for what we will do if it does not work. If renewables do not work, if we do not get them to market quickly enough, or if unforeseen problems arise, and we have completely ruled out nuclear power, we will be left with an energy gap. The Scottish Conservatives are terrified of the energy gap, and we are sick of hearing the disingenuous use of statistics by the Government. We hear that the installed capacity of renewables is already larger than nuclear, but installed capacity is not the important point; what is important is the amount of electricity that is generated that can actually be used. To quote a figure of 92.5 per cent without nuclear, as Mr Swinney did, completely ignores the 20 per cent that we export to other parts of the United Kingdom.

Energy policy is bigger than any one party's ideology. It is bigger than any one Government, and it is bigger than any one generation. We face a most dangerous enemy in the form of climate change, which is why we need as many different technologies—mature and fresh—as possible to get results. We need renewables, we need cleaner coal, we need to be more efficient, we need nuclear and we need more decentralisation. There is no one big idea to solve all our problems. We need all our ideas to work.

I move amendment S3M-1152.2.1 to amendment S3M-1152.2, to insert at end:

"calls for more emphasis to be placed on decentralised energy, promoting micro-generation and small providers to give communities greater control of their energy production and increased energy efficiency."

09:47

Liam McArthur (Orkney) (LD): With the publication last week of the UK Government's Energy Bill, the debate is timely. Looking ahead to the climate change bill in this Parliament, it is a welcome opportunity to set out our respective ideas. The motion and amendments are evidence of the cross-party consensus on many of the key issues. They are evidence too of the accepted need for Scotland to work co-operatively within a

UK as well as a European and international framework.

Of course, publication of the UK bill triggered a predictable round of name calling between London and Edinburgh over nuclear power, some of which has been echoed this morning. The Liberal Democrats have made clear our opposition to an energy source that we believe is unwanted, unsafe and uneconomic. UK Labour ministers have now conceded that public and political opinion in Scotland will not tolerate new nuclear power stations in this country. The cabinet secretary was quick to claim credit for that. As Lewis Macdonald pointed out, such self-aggrandisement from the Government is not unusual, except perhaps a little in the case of the usually modest and reasonable Mr Swinney.

As Alasdair Allan conceded, political opposition to new nuclear build does not readily respect party boundaries. Despite SNP proclamations, I would suggest that the prospect of new nuclear power stations in Scotland has been off the agenda for some time. However, it has allowed for sabre rattling by Administrations north and south of the border. More gratifyingly, it has even allowed the Tories to step out from under the skirts of their SNP coalition partners and flex their unionist muscles again—just a wee stretch, mind—before returning to the folds of the nationalist skirts in time to vote through the budget next month.

Let us be clear. Last week's publication of the UK Energy Bill means that the nuclear boat has sailed—if that is not too alarming a prospect for those already concerned about ship-to-ship transfers. There are more immediate priorities, in relation to which concerted action can help to deliver the low-carbon society we all want. Scottish ministers have been consistent in recognising the significant progress made by the previous Scottish Executive—as outlined by Lewis Macdonald—in promoting and developing Scotland's world-class renewables potential; in stimulating microrenewables; and in beginning to address the fundamental issue of energy efficiency, as raised by Patrick Harvie. The Government has rightly acknowledged that there is a solid and encouraging foundation on which to build. The national planning framework, published last week, can help in that respect, not least in identifying the national importance of grid infrastructure.

The challenge now for ministers is to take that national framework and make it flesh. Identifying the priority projects was relatively straightforward, but finding a way of delivering those priorities—including grid improvements—will be the true test of the Government. Grid improvements are crucial to unlocking Scotland's world-leading potential in marine renewables—a subject close to my heart,

to which I will return shortly. However, realising such potential is still a number of years off, notwithstanding the remarkable progress that has been made in Orkney and elsewhere in Scotland over recent years, and will happen only if the confidence of the industry is not undermined in the meantime.

Onshore wind is the proven technology. It remains the best means of providing the bridge to the low-carbon future to which we aspire. Consistency in supporting onshore wind—financially and through timely decisions on consent applications—will be essential. Offshore wind will enjoy an increasing prominence, particularly as issues of maintenance are resolved, but it is simplistic to assume that those developments will simply come to replace onshore projects in the foreseeable future. Both technologies are key to us achieving our renewables ambitions.

That will require leadership—not only industry leadership but political leadership. In opposition, the signals from the SNP were not good. We heard calls for taxes on wind farms. A moratorium was mooted. Some aspiring SNP MSPs were even moved to demand local referenda on wind farm developments—another creative way, presumably, of managing the planning process. Post-election, the tone has thankfully changed. Even local referenda have been quietly ditched—a straw in the wind, perhaps, with regard to other referendum plans?

Alasdair Allan: I am interested to hear myself referred to obliquely by the member. If he is referring to the Western Isles, will he comment on the fact that his party's candidate in the Western Isles was far more militantly opposed to wind farms than I was, calling for an absolute ban on wind farms in the Western Isles and feeling that the SNP was too moderate in its stance?

Liam McArthur: I was drawing attention to the fact that the SNP found a neat way of circumventing the planning process by urging local referenda. That has been quietly dropped since the election.

Concerns about intermittency will always be raised in relation to wind—on or offshore. There is perhaps no single magic bullet here, but a range of options are worth considering. The minister has identified a number. For example, Liberal Democrats believe that biomass has considerable potential. As Lewis Macdonald said, FREDS has carried out valuable work in that area and many others, but barriers to fully developing and exploiting Scotland's potential in biomass—both small-scale, local projects of the kind to which Gavin Brown referred, and larger plants that could, in time, help to address base-load issues—still need to be removed.

Likewise, further investment in developing Scotland's potential for clean coal and carbon capture—both pre and post-combustion—is essential. The costs are likely to be considerable, but the potential return could be dramatic. In key markets such as China, such technology and expertise place Scotland in an enviable position to derive significant economic benefit from major environmental breakthroughs. Indeed, Liberal Democrats want more attention to be paid to the issue of storage, which remains a vital enabler in helping Scotland to harness to our renewables potential.

In the development of marine energy technologies, Scotland enjoys a competitive edge—due in no small part to the efforts of Jim Wallace and Nicol Stephen in government—but as well as resolving the outstanding grid and transmission issues, more impetus must be given to efforts to bring forward the date by which such technologies can start to make a meaningful contribution to our energy mix. Double ROCs would provide a powerful signal, but more capital funding is essential to help to scale up pilot initiatives. As our amendment suggests, Liberal Democrats believe that the enterprise networks can continue to play an important facilitating role in that process. We want renewables to remain a priority for Scottish Enterprise and Highlands and Islands Enterprise, both of which must be resourced to meet that challenge.

Our amendment highlights the importance of microrenewables. Progress in that area has been slow, despite significant investment, but the bill proposed by Sarah Boyack offers a sensible way of injecting real momentum into efforts to extend take-up of microrenewables. I know that ministers are cautious about supporting the bill, but I would urge them to rethink.

Of course, as well as microrenewables and energy efficiency, Sarah Boyack's proposed bill addresses fundamental issues of fuel poverty. Tackling fuel poverty will require a broad approach from Government and others. Therefore, it is disappointing that the UK Energy Bill makes no reference to smart metering. The Government should make representations to fast track that technology and ensure that it is rolled out by 2015.

Another area in which the UK Energy Bill seems to fall short is heat. There is growing acceptance of the importance of heat in the energy debate and of the need to decarbonise heat and provide renewable sources of it.

It is difficult to address all aspects of the debate in a little more than seven minutes. More localised generation, combined heat and power and small hydroelectric power all have an important role to play. There is now overwhelming political and scientific consensus on the existence of, risks from

and man's contribution to climate change. The Stern report and the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change have left no room for dispute about the need for action. There remains a genuine and legitimate debate about the hows, but I hope that it does not deflect us from using the levers that are at our disposal to make the changes that evidently need to be made to create a low-carbon economy and society.

I move amendment S3M-1152.1, to insert after "fossil fuels":

"microgeneration and biomass; acknowledges the important role of the enterprise networks in helping to achieve this and the need for renewables to remain a priority for a well-resourced Scottish Enterprise and Highlands and Islands Enterprise, and further recognises the central importance of".

The Presiding Officer: We come now to open debate. Members will have noticed that I am not at my most autocratic when it comes to timing. We have a little bit of time in hand, but I ask for speeches of around six minutes.

09:56

Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP):

A third of known global oil reserves have already been exhausted. With fuel consumption accelerating due to rapid economic growth—particularly in India in China—and continued population growth, it is likely that oil and gas reserves will be denuded much faster than was thought only a few years ago. However, I am an optimist. I must be: I joined the SNP in September 1979 after we had lost nine of our 11 MPs in those halcyon days when the Tories had 21 MPs in Scotland. Once, they roamed the land like the buffalo; now they exist as but a small, insignificant herd.

Human ingenuity has few limits, and the future for renewables and new technologies is exciting and varied. We know that many members across the chamber look forward to such a positive future. Confidence in clean, green energy is such that, when Friends of the Earth Scotland polled MSPs after May's election, 72 stated their opposition to commercial nuclear generation, with only 24 in favour. No doubt some of those 72 MSPs are Labour and that is why the word "nuclear" does not appear in the Labour amendment.

I will touch on the new technological opportunities for Scotland, but we should not forget that old technologies can also add tremendously to the mix. Only last week, it was announced that the Glendoe hydroelectric plant will come on stream later this year, providing enough electricity for some 250,000 Scottish homes. As Patrick Harvie mentioned, some 65 per cent of primary energy is lost during conversion. We must tackle that.

If we are to consider whether we have enough energy for the future, one of the most fundamental issues that we must tackle is how energy is used at present. There are many policy ideas that can be adopted—everything from energy taxes to financial incentives, professional training, labelling, environmental legislation, greenhouse gas emissions trading and international co-ordination of regulations and traded products. Efficiency means getting the same service for less energy. That could be achieved by better insulation, compact fluorescent light bulbs, which use a quarter of the energy of normal bulbs, energy-efficient devices, efficient building designs and retrofitting of old buildings with new systems.

Of course, United States power providers are already expected to build another 280 500MW coal-fired plants between 2003 and 2030, and China builds the equivalent of one large coal-fired plant each week. Those plants generate about half the amount of electricity that Hunterston would generate in an average year.

Alex Johnstone: Having mentioned Hunterston, will Kenneth Gibson take the opportunity to tell us how he reacted to the decision to extend the lifespan of the power station and, on a more hypothetical note, how he might react to any future proposal to replace it with a new-generation nuclear power station on the same site?

Kenneth Gibson: I was delighted that Hunterston's lifespan was extended to 2016. In fact, I had hoped that it would be extended to 2017. However, I have made it clear publicly in my local press—unlike, for example, my Labour MP, who shares my views but is reluctant to express them in the local press—that to spend more than a decade building a nuclear plant that will generate electricity for 35 to 40 years, produce waste that will last tens of thousands of years and cost billions of pounds to decommission is not appropriate. I supported the life extension for Hunterston because it allows us to invest in new technologies, consider renewables and bring some of those technologies on stream before Hunterston has to close, as I believe it should.

Carbon capture and storage are used to boost petroleum production in the US by pumping captured carbon into oilfields. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change estimates that 99 per cent of captured CO₂ will remain underground for the next 1,000 years. The integrated gasification combined cycle is more expensive but more effective than coal-steamed electric power and is the least expensive option for carbon capture.

Photovoltaic cells produce some 5,000MW annually around the world. That is only one sixth of 1 per cent of the world's energy use, but production is increasing rapidly and new

technology has been able to double efficiency to some 30 per cent. In California, two Stirling engine mirror farms that will also rely on solar power are being built. Those innovative plants should produce as much power as a major power station.

For the past decade, wind turbine energy production has been increasing by 25 per cent a year. Biofuel studies have also demonstrated the ability to gain energy from biomass. Green diesel gasification of organic material is also possible, and there are high hopes for hydrogen, which is important. Once the technology of hydroelectric cells has been fully harnessed, it will be possible to electrolyse hydrogen from water to replace petrol and diesel in engines. That will produce few emissions and allow people to drive their cars into the next century without emissions being an issue.

Fusion is likely to come on stream in the next 30 or 40 years. That will produce massive amounts of power with, essentially, no waste and no radioactivity beyond 1km from where the fusion generator is located.

High-altitude wind is being investigated in the United States, as is space solar power—placing solar panels in space—which will be able to gain eight times more sunlight per cell. Nanotechnology solar cells are likely to be developed in the US within the next five years. They will use billions of tiny dots to create electricity much more efficiently and much more cheaply than is currently the case.

A global supergrid could also be built, using supercooled superconducting wires to transport electricity and hydrogen all over the world. I tell Lewis Macdonald that, when it comes to generation and grids, we want to think not only about Britain but about the world.

We know about wave and tidal power, which could provide a fifth of the UK's electricity. There are also biological solutions. We could create organisms that reprocess carbon dioxide into natural gas or produce hydrogen from sunlight using photosynthesis. A large algae farm next to a 1GW power plant can produce 50 million gallons of ethanol a year by reprocessing CO₂.

Scotland has plenty of coal, which we need to burn much more cleanly. We have oil and gas for our needs for many generations. As I have pointed out, building energy efficient options can also significantly reduce energy use. For example, energy for transportation can be reduced by improved vehicle design, lower speed limits, traffic management and hydrogen cells. We have a tremendous opportunity, not only through what is happening in our country but by learning from the technologies that are being explored in the United States and elsewhere, to take our country into the green, clean future that we all want.

10:04

David Stewart (Highlands and Islands) (Lab):

There can be few more important debates than that on the future of energy in this nation, particularly as the United Kingdom is now a net importer of oil and gas for the first time in a generation.

The debate draws out strong emotions, with technology versus technology and process versus process. Advocates have argued their often conflicting cases with an intensity that would bring a blush to the face of a tattooed gangland leader in Los Angeles. It can also be a complicated debate, with the technospeak of product life cycle, proven technology, carbon capture and storage, security of supply and—my personal favourite—avoiding Russian-end supply chain, which I am sure the minister will be able to explain on a flip chart later.

Where, however, is consideration of the energy needs of the ordinary Scottish citizen in Leith, Lerwick or Lossiemouth? The lights might not go out all over Edinburgh, but if we get the energy balance wrong in the next decade, we will be paying over a barrel—or, indeed, over a therm of gas—to countries with the political stability of Burma and the civil liberties record of Zimbabwe.

One of the most fluent and well-argued documents on the subject is the Royal Society of Edinburgh's report on its inquiry into energy. It concluded that the challenge is to meet the growing aspirations of the developing world, not least China and India, while mitigating the impact of global climate change. The UK is now more reliant on imported energy, at a time when the international market is much more competitive. The developed world has a particular responsibility to carry the torch and show leadership in reducing greenhouse gas emissions.

I mention in passing that I am very pleased that the first act of the incoming Labor Government in Australia was to sign the Kyoto protocol. That should have been done many years ago.

I will cover three points: first, the importance of developing further what I call the father of renewable energy—hydropower; secondly, developing the role of biomass energy; and finally, examining the increased role that microrenewables and decentralised energy systems can play in the future.

As we have already heard this morning, the context of the debate is the Westminster Government's white paper on energy and the Energy Bill. As the introduction to the white paper says, articulately in my view,

"More than two thirds of the world's carbon dioxide emissions come from the way we produce and use energy".

We should focus on three things—some members have already mentioned them. First, we must focus on saving energy, which we sometimes forget about. Secondly, we need to develop cleaner energy. Finally, we should ensure that we can secure reliable energy supplies at competitive prices that are set in the market.

Renewables play an important role, particularly hydropower. As members are well aware, Scotland has a proud record in that regard. Members will need no history lesson from me, but I will mention the important role that hydropower has played in our history. Back in 1896, the first hydropower station was built at Foyers by the British Aluminium Company. Around 1900, a large hydropower station basically was responsible for the development of the village of Kinlochleven. As members will also be aware, Tom Johnston, Labour's Secretary of State for Scotland under Winston Churchill, nationalised hydropower in the 1940s and created a network of dams and transmission towers that provided electricity to poor highlanders for the first time. Cynics might say that that would never have happened under the current planning regime. However, it is perhaps for others to make that point.

Hydropower is not some bygone relic of a forgotten age. The Glendoe project, near the banks of Loch Ness, will provide the largest hydropower station for half a century. It will provide clean renewable energy that could provide enough light for every household in Glasgow. Hydro is cheap when oil costs around \$100 a barrel, and its operating costs are one tenth of those of gas-fired or coal-fired stations. Is it not time for a hydro revolution? Can the minister tell us what work is being undertaken to develop the potential for new sites and developments? If the minister wants a campaign slogan, I suggest "It's Scotland's water".

Scottish Renewables tells me that the potential to increase the capacity of hydropower lies in small-scale projects and run-of-the-river developments. As members will probably know, the Garrad Hassan report for the Scottish Executive in 2001 estimated that there is potential for small-scale developments up to around 30MW. A renewable energy inquiry in 2004 estimated that small-scale projects could provide about 11MW by 2020.

I ask the minister to consider three further points when he sums up. First, could he comment on the development of pump storage technology? Secondly, are there any plans to streamline planning for hydropower, so that local authorities can determine applications under 5MW? Finally, what plans are there to develop more small-scale hydro developments and upgrade them on a strategic basis? Hydropower must, of course, be

developed with environmental considerations very much to the fore.

Biomass has an important role to play in energy generation. For example, a new factory has been opened in Ross-shire that will allow wood pelletisation to be developed for domestic combined heat and power. That will stop the importing of wood pellets from abroad, which will mark a step change in that technology.

On microrenewables, WWF has said that our reliance on centralised energy generation is wasteful, given that two thirds of the energy that is generated is lost in the form of heat and through long-distance transmission. Microrenewables have an increasing role to play. In Wick, for example, hot water from the Old Pulteney distillery is piped to homes, businesses and Caithness general hospital. Microrenewables also play an important role in innovation, particularly in rural areas, where they provide partial energy self-sufficiency. I congratulate Sarah Boyack on her energy efficiency and microgeneration bill proposal. Microrenewables provide local power schemes that are under community control, which can contribute to marginal economies.

We need to work smarter, not necessarily harder. The University of Strathclyde has programmed a computer that can switch off household fridges during the peak period of the "Coronation Street" tea break, which can ensure that we have intelligent and responsive homes.

We all know that the task is great, but Scotland has the opportunities and skills to achieve it, not in a self-serving way but as a partner in the UK. With appropriate development and the right technologies at a sustainable scale, and using the proven skills of our Scottish workforce, we can take a lead in Europe and beyond, and we can contribute to meeting our global climate change responsibilities.

10:12

Rob Gibson (Highlands and Islands) (SNP):

The energy debate centres on the production of electricity and the conservation of energy, which must be central to how we tackle the challenges that we face. Controlling demand for electricity and saving energy go hand in hand. The context is the climate change consultation and the bill that we will deal with. The whole issue of energy must be considered in addressing the imperative to deal with climate change. The development of a Scottish energy strategy is central to the Scottish Government's approach to meeting our climate change targets, which should be more ambitious. That will be fleshed out this year.

Maintaining early momentum towards creating clean energy is a key part of that approach. If that

is to be achieved, development of the current renewables industries that use onshore technologies must continue, and offshore technologies must also be developed. I am glad to note that WWF is right on message with the Scottish Government in recognising those principles.

We used to ask the previous Administration about energy saving. If we consider how much money is invested in a nuclear power station—let us say a couple of billion pounds—what bang do we get for our buck if we spend the same amount on energy-saving measures? That is the sort of question that we must consider now, and I hope that we can start to quantify the answer in this year of the climate change consultation.

Clean energy development is an essential partner to that. We have got a competitive edge, and a base from which to work, which will allow Scotland to ensure that the advantages that we have started to gain are fully realised. Why throw that away by relying on an energy strategy from London that deals with security of supply in terms of what happens in Kazakhstan or elsewhere? The security of supply that we can provide—indefinitely—comes from the waters and the air, and the waves and the tides around our own shores. They are so close to us; only someone who is totally myopic could not see that. That is the difference between the Government's strategy and the Opposition's, particularly Labour members and their Tory friends, who are skirting round the central issue.

I will concentrate on one particular potential—the Pentland potential. Liam McArthur spoke about the Orkney input into the development of marine renewables. We need an all-Scotland focus on the Caithness and Orkney area. We have academic input from the environmental research institute in Caithness; we have the industrial base from subcontractors and from Dounreay's technology; we have test sites and the excellent work of the European Marine Energy Centre; and we have Highlands and Islands Enterprise, which should be working as an infrastructure developer, although questions arise about how much it is doing that and how the Government can ensure that it takes a more strategic role.

In considering the renewables potential in Orkney and Caithness, which will feature in a conference in Edinburgh on 6 February, we must consider energy for home consumption and for export. We have the potential to fulfil our power needs and to make money from a clean and green source of power. However, we must ensure that we are not inhibited by bodies such as the Crown Estate, which, according to the most recent press releases, is thinking about an interconnector that goes only to Norfolk. Such inhibitors to development must be removed.

The Crown Estate has an arbitrary approach to taking money from harbours. It is a superfluous body, and it is a tax gatherer on the seas for the Treasury that gives nothing concrete back to Scotland. That inhibitor must be removed. For example, Scrabster harbour, which is the nearest mainland base to the west Shetland basin and which could be an oil base for the future, pays £36,000-plus a year to the Crown Estate. The harbour trust has stated:

"There is no apparent benefit to the trust nor the local community from these payments as we are not aware of any reinvestment in our area by the Crown Estate".

We must remove the Crown Estate, which is a development inhibitor that stems from London. For example, when the Forestry Commission set up a Scottish body, the Crown Estate pulled out of Scotland—it is a London-based tax gatherer on the seas.

A second inhibitor is the Office of Gas and Electricity Markets, with its scandal of charging 30 times what is charged in Denmark to hook up to transmission lines. Figures gathered by HIE at the time of the previous Caithness conference on energy show that that approach inhibits the potential of our secure and clean renewables. That inhibitor must be changed and removed, but I see nothing in the Energy Bill in London that will do that.

A third inhibitor is the nuclear legacy. Taxpayers' money was used to build the nuclear power stations of the past and that investment continues—every year, £157 million is spent on decommissioning Dounreay. If public and private partners invested the same amount in renewable energy development, we would begin to see the kind of moneys that are required to develop the potential of green power here. However, that has not yet been realised because, under devolution, London takes most of the powers and lets us have a small number. We need a Scottish energy strategy that targets money to ensure that the aspirations in the national planning framework are met. We need to channel cash resources from the Scottish Government and private partners.

Gavin Brown: Regardless of where anybody stands on nuclear power, decommissioning has to happen, so where would the member get the £157 million a year to invest in clean technology?

Rob Gibson: We will get it through the partners in the Pentland potential projects that I mentioned—which include the industry and academics—and through Government backing and the potential for investment capital bodies to realise that the projects have a secure future. We will get the money from the public and private partners.

We have the potential for infinite clean energy. Investment should not be siphoned off south to create a nuclear energy base; instead, it must be harnessed for Scotland's needs in a Scottish energy policy. I support the Government motion.

10:19

James Kelly (Glasgow Rutherglen) (Lab): I welcome the opportunity to take part in this energy debate. Energy policy, covering gas and electricity, is one of the big challenges of the 21st century. It is essential that we produce a secure energy policy that keeps the lights on, reduces consumption and carbon emissions, and tackles fuel poverty. In that light, it is important that we have a balanced energy policy. Currently, the balance for electricity generation includes renewable sources, gas, coal and nuclear. That mix is important to protect us against future shortages and changes in market conditions. When the new electricity trading arrangements were introduced in September 2001, the price per megawatt hour fell below £20. Over time, market conditions changed and the price rose towards £40. If we had put all our investment into one source of energy, that source would have fallen short and we would not have been protected against those market conditions.

It is important that we do not end up as an electricity importer, as has happened with gas. Currently, we are an exporter, which is an economic asset that we must protect. To be honest, some of the SNP analysis in the past week has fallen a bit short. Alex Salmond trumpeted the fact that the nuclear share of electricity generation fell from 38 to 22 per cent from 2005 to 2006, and he spoke about, in effect, being nuclear free in 2007. He also downplayed the importance of exports. However, he did not speak about the fact that Hunterston was offline for much of that time, nor did he make much play of the fact that coal generation has increased from 25 to 33 per cent, or that gas generation has increased from 19 to 22 per cent. Cockenzie power station had to be run at full capacity to meet the shortfall. The fact is that Torness produces 8 terawatt hours of energy, which is a significant contribution to electricity generation. No sprinkling of energy fairy dust by the minister can simply replace that in the future.

It is important that we have a strong and stable base-load, and a mixed energy policy would contribute to that. As coal currently accounts for a third of electricity generation, it is important, as the minister said, to pilot and prioritise the production of clean coal, as Scottish Power has done at Longannet.

Energy and electricity generation are crucial to economic growth. The SNP Administration has a

target to grow the Scottish economy by the same rate as the UK economy by 2011. If we are to do that, we must continue to export 20 per cent of the electricity that we generate.

Kenneth Gibson: Given that the member makes a strong argument for nuclear, is he disappointed that the Westminster Labour Government has decided that it will not have any nuclear plants in Scotland?

James Kelly: I have said that the current mix of renewables, gas, coal and nuclear serves us well and that we should not rule out any options in future. We must consider what is required to meet Scotland's energy needs. It is easy to say that we all want renewables, but the fact is that wind farms are only 33 per cent reliable. On Friday, I was in Stornoway in Alasdair Allan's constituency, where, unusually for January, it was not a very windy day, so some of the wind farms were not generating as much energy as normal. All those factors must be taken into account in generating our future energy policy.

If we are to get more energy from renewable sources, we need to get that energy on to the grid. Getting such grid connections will require a speeding up of the planning process.

I am disappointed that the SNP motion does not mention fuel poverty. We have to make great strides towards tackling fuel poverty, and rising energy costs are a threat to that. A 5 per cent increase in energy costs can put 30,000 households into fuel poverty. If the npower increase is replicated throughout Scotland, 90,000 households could be put into fuel poverty. If the SNP is serious about eradicating fuel poverty by 2016, it must back up its warm words with strong actions. It is therefore disappointing that the SNP has not supported Sarah Boyack's proposed energy efficiency and microgeneration bill. Some of the measures in that bill would go a long way towards tackling fuel poverty.

In my constituency, Rutherglen and Cambuslang Housing Association has been installing solar panels, which Sarah Boyack came to see in August. We spoke to householders who showed us how their fuel bills had been reduced by the installation of the solar panels. That practical example shows how we can do a lot to tackle fuel poverty.

Issues to do with pre-payment meters should be addressed. People on pre-payment meters are paying an average of £137 more than people who pay by direct debit and an average of £214 more than people who pay online. Specifically, Scottish Power's practices have to be questioned, because the company is back-charging customers in Scotland but not in the rest of the UK. I would like to hear what the minister is doing to press Scottish Power to end that practice.

Patrick Harvie and others have mentioned energy demand and the need to reduce consumption. Smart meters could be considered in that regard. Liam McArthur said that smart meters are not mentioned in the UK Energy Bill, but the onus is on the energy companies to introduce such meters. There would be advantages both to the companies and to consumers.

Energy is a major challenge in the 21st century. We will need an energy policy that tackles the environmental challenges, contributes to economic growth and eradicates fuel poverty.

10:28

Alison McInnes (North East Scotland) (LD):

There are compelling reasons for ensuring that we have a coherent and comprehensive energy strategy for the UK, including the need to tackle climate change, the ever-increasing demand for energy, higher prices, and the decline in oil and gas resources. We need the right energy strategy for the UK and we need a Scottish Government that is willing to employ its own powers to best advantage.

The recent Royal Society of Edinburgh inquiry into energy concluded that

“Scotland cannot operate in isolation on energy. It is part of the global energy market. It will have to work within the powers reserved to the UK government ... The Scottish Executive will need to work in harmony with the UK”.

Working in harmony with the UK Government is not something that the SNP has yet perfected. Can we hope that it is prepared to give it a go on such an important matter?

The right strategy will have to be effective in tackling climate change, but it will also have to promote sustainable economic growth, deliver security of supplies through a diversity of supply, and eradicate fuel poverty. I am disappointed that the UK bill is silent on fuel poverty.

I believe that the UK Government is wrong to press forward with a new generation of nuclear power. Nuclear power remains unwanted, unsafe and uneconomic. The market is rigged in favour of the nuclear industry. Billions of pounds of public money have gone into research and development for nuclear energy, compared with the tiny amounts that have gone into research for other forms of energy. There is a real risk that focusing on new nuclear plants will undermine attempts to find a cleaner, greener, more sustainable and secure solution. We should be concentrating our efforts on renewables and greater energy conservation.

Urgent action is needed now at Westminster, here in Holyrood and throughout the country at

local authority level. We must unite to ensure that cleaner energy sources have a competitive edge. I would like to see a step change in funding for research and development in and the demonstration of renewables and low-carbon technology.

We have seen what can happen when Governments put their minds to it. The previous Scottish Administration transformed the prospects of renewables in Scotland. I want that good work to be built on. Our manifesto proposals—which were independently assessed as being the greenest—were ambitious. We support investment in renewables, demand reduction, energy efficiency, decentralised energy and microgeneration. We need look no further than Denmark and the Netherlands for good examples of using energy production to energise regional economies and reduce dependence on fossil fuels.

I would like to take a few moments to highlight north-east Scotland's contribution. Forty years of experience in oil and gas has built Aberdeen into one of the most influential, innovative and proactive energy cities in the world. Many leading international energy companies are headquartered there, and there are around 900 energy-related businesses, agencies, government bodies and research institutes in Aberdeen city and shire. A total of 16 per cent of the region's employment is in the energy business. There is a massive bank of knowledge and expertise, which is just as important as the oil reserves that we still have. The north-east is rich in natural resources—forests, wind and wave. Harness those resources with that knowledge and the north-east will continue to be the powerhouse not only of Scotland's economy but of our future energy needs.

The north-east understands the need for action and the potential economic advantages that investment in energy research and production can bring. Aberdeen Renewable Energy Group was established six years ago. That private-public partnership was set up to identify and promote renewable energy opportunities for businesses in Aberdeen city and shire. It has around 100 members drawn from energy businesses, research institutes, oil service companies, professional consultants, economic development agencies and local authorities. That collective diversity extends into every source of renewable energy—onshore and offshore wind, wave and tidal, biomass, fuel cell, photovoltaic and geothermal. Incidentally, the group was set up using money from the previous Administration's cities growth fund—funding that is no longer available for such initiatives. Support must continue to be provided to such initiatives. It is clear that government at all levels can be the

catalyst for change by creating a supportive environment and developing markets.

What action can we take in Scotland? The SNP has not yet taken forward an energy efficiency strategy. The previous Executive drew up a draft energy strategy with a comprehensive package of measures, but the SNP Government is refusing either to publish it or to come up with one of its own. The Government should act quickly to remedy that.

We need more efficient financial instruments to support the move away from a reliance on fossil fuels. For example, the biomass industry has been disappointed that, until now, renewables obligation certificates have not covered the production of heat. I understand that things are changing, but there is not yet a commitment to the provision of heat ROCs. I hope that that will be resolved soon. It would help to encourage sensible and sustainable solutions for generating heat in off-gas areas.

I want the SNP Government to commit to a second round of the biomass support scheme. The first round, which was introduced by the previous Government, was a great success. The grants that were given generated an investment of around £6 million in the north-east alone, without counting the jobs that were created and the safeguarding of existing businesses such as sawmills. The multiplier was around three times the grant funding.

As many have said, we need to promote sensible microgeneration. That must involve a review of the planning processes. At present, small schemes for a single turbine can be subjected to the same scrutiny as megawatt wind farms, which discourages people from trying to make changes.

Liberal Democrats are ambitious for Scotland. The previous Administration transformed the prospects of renewable energy. The new SNP Administration is giving mixed messages and lacks clarity, which is risking confidence in Scotland's renewables industry. The key to success will be continuing the close partnership of Government, industry and academia that is represented by FREDS—the forum for renewable energy development in Scotland. I ask the minister to confirm his commitment to that forum.

10:34

Shirley-Anne Somerville (Lothians) (SNP):

Today the SNP has presented a positive vision for Scotland's energy future, but at the same time it has saved future generations from the error of going back down the nuclear path. Absolutely central to the SNP vision is the need for us all to reduce our energy usage at home. The domestic

sector is responsible for about one third of the UK's carbon emissions. Not only is reducing home energy consumption vital for hitting climate change targets, it makes sound financial sense, particularly at a time when 65,000 Scots are living in fuel poverty. I acknowledge Mr Kelly's disappointment that that is not mentioned in the SNP motion. Perhaps he is equally disappointed that it is not mentioned in the Labour Party amendment, either.

Citizens advice bureaux reported a soaring number of inquiries about utility bills last year, as 37 per cent more people sought assistance because they were frustrated and confused by their bills. The Westminster Government needs to do more to address the worsening problem of fuel poverty in an energy-rich nation.

One of the measures with the biggest potential to reduce household energy bills and decrease our carbon emissions is the rolling out of smart meters. People cannot monitor their energy use effectively by reading meaningless numbers off dusty old meters that are hidden under the stairs. It is time to reduce the use of that archaic and inefficient system and to include the use of smart meters, which would allow better communication between electricity suppliers and customers if they were rolled out throughout the country.

Scottish and Southern Energy is sponsoring trials of smart metering and estimates that smart meters could be rolled out to about 95 per cent of UK households by 2015 if the political mechanisms were put in place. As Liam McArthur said, it is therefore extremely disappointing that there is no mention of smart meters in the UK Government's Energy Bill, which is yet another missed opportunity. If we do not get the enabling legislation in place now, we will fall further and further behind.

Many other measures can be taken at household level to conserve energy and build a greener Scotland. Now that we have an SNP Government, we can start to play catch-up with our more enlightened European neighbours. Although reducing overall energy consumption is key, the SNP will also look imaginatively at how we generate the energy that we need. That is why I am delighted that the SNP Government tripled the budget for the Scottish community and householder renewables initiative, which offers grants, advice and project support to assist the development of new community and household renewables in Scotland.

In addition to investing in microgeneration, the Scottish Government will invest in the research, development and infrastructure that is necessary to connect a variety of renewables projects to the national grid. By the time that new nuclear is on board in England, Scotland will already be leading

the way with energy efficiency and renewables solutions.

We are already at the cutting edge in research and development in relation to renewables technologies. Much Edinburgh-based research has been included in that. For example, the ocean engineering group at Heriot-Watt University is looking at key engineering and economic issues that affect marine renewable energy systems, which could be a significant contributor to our energy resource if investment is made in the industry. It has been estimated that marine energy converters could provide as much as 25 per cent of the UK's energy requirements, so the potential is staggering.

Another major Edinburgh success story is Pelamis Wave Power Ltd, which is based in Leith and which supplied the world's first commercial wave energy project and is now supplying four Pelamis generators to the proposed Orcadian wave farm project, which has already been mentioned.

Although exciting renewables projects are being developed, another part of Scotland's energy solution has to be increased efficiency in the use of existing sources and a move towards decentralised energy. Outdated and centralised coal power plants waste two thirds of the energy that they produce.

In Edinburgh there are examples of the pioneering use of combined heat and power technology, from which we can take heart. The University of Edinburgh has gained an international reputation for its proactive approach to environmental sustainability. It has invested £12 million over four years to replace ageing steam systems with combined heat and power systems that now serve three of its five campuses, which is generating £1 million in savings for the university each year and reducing its carbon emissions by more than 4,000 tonnes per year.

Scotland is at an energy crossroads and, thanks to this SNP Government, it is choosing the right path. Scotland is right to reject nuclear and can and should look to our European neighbours, such as Denmark and Sweden, for clean energy solutions. The Danes live and work in one of the most efficient systems we know. Wind power meets about a fifth of Denmark's energy needs and the Avedøre multifuel power station runs with up to 92 per cent efficiency. The community of Malmö in Sweden is heated and powered by 100 per cent renewable energy.

The solution to our future energy requirements is clear. Scotland does not need nuclear. We will not look to Finland's new nuclear project, which is now running two years behind schedule and £0.5 billion over budget. The Finnish MP Oras Tynkynen—I

apologise if my pronunciation was wrong—said recently:

"The nuclear industry in Finland is arguing that you can have the cake and eat it too, that you can invest in more nuclear power capacity and at the same time invest in renewable energy sources and energy efficiency, but I think the empirical evidence so far is to the contrary. We have made the choice, we have chosen the nuclear path and that has meant that we have neglected sustainable alternatives like energy efficiency and renewable energy resources."

That is not a mistake that the SNP Government will make.

Greenpeace has described using nuclear energy as an answer to climate change as

"like taking up smoking to help control your weight—a dangerous distraction."

I have shared hustings with many of the Labour Party's front-bench spokesmen, including Sarah Boyack, who has said that she is against nuclear power. I call on them to take part in the debate, to say what their positions are on nuclear energy and to come out, as they have done in the past, to support the SNP in working to give Scotland a greener, cleaner future.

10:41

Michael McMahon (Hamilton North and Bellshill) (Lab): In 1961, John F Kennedy announced a far-sighted programme that would see man walk on the moon within the decade. President Kennedy made it clear that to look into the future, we had to see scientific progress take place

"in an age of both knowledge and ignorance."

So much of a visionary was Kennedy that he might even have anticipated the SNP Government's energy policy, given that, in the debate in Texas in 1961, he said:

"The greater our knowledge increases, the greater our ignorance unfolds."

The Government tells us in its motion that it

"believes that Scotland can have a secure, low-carbon, non-nuclear energy future."

We may well be able to have that in future, but at the moment, much more research and development in renewables is required before anyone can make such a bold statement with absolute certainty. It is no more than an aspiration. However, this Government is no stranger to making promises that it knows it cannot guarantee to deliver. Perhaps if we harness the energy from its cheek power we could end the search for more renewable sources now.

Undoubtedly, science helps us to move on. A decade after Kennedy's speech in 1961, Greenpeace was founded as a result of concerns

about the development of nuclear power generation. Thirty years on, its founder Patrick Moore is now telling the environmental movement that it needs to update its views as nuclear energy may just be the energy source that can save our planet. He is saying not that it is the answer but that it may be part of the solution. He says that because scientific knowledge has increased, raising questions for those who have closed their minds to a future role for nuclear power generation.

The Government might not wish to acknowledge it, but nuclear power is a large-scale, cost-effective energy source that is proven to reduce carbon emissions, and we know that it has the ability to satisfy a growing demand for power. It is absolutely right that we should talk about reducing demand for power, but we do not know that that will be achieved. While such uncertainties remain, we have to look at all possibilities to deal with the future demands that we are going to face.

I am happy to join illustrious environmentalists such as Moore in arguing that one way of reducing fossil fuel emissions from electricity production while ensuring that future demand is met securely could be through a balanced programme of renewable energy sources, which could include nuclear power.

Patrick Moore is not alone in changing his mind on this subject. The British atmospheric scientist James Lovelock now believes that nuclear energy could help us to avoid catastrophic climate change. Stewart Brand, founder of the *Whole Earth Catalog*, says that the environmental movement must embrace nuclear energy to wean ourselves off fossil fuel.

Kenneth Gibson: Does Mr McMahon not accept that three quarters of the members in the chamber, including many of his colleagues on the Labour benches, do not accept his point of view? That has been recognised by the Westminster Government, which has said that it will not have any more nuclear plants in Scotland. The debate has moved on. A decision has been made that there will not be any new nuclear plants in Scotland. Does the member not think that he should move on to talk about the other technologies that we should be bringing into Scotland, given the decision that has been made?

Michael McMahon: Mr Gibson misses the point that I am making. The British Government has not said that it believes that there should be no new nuclear energy plants; it has recognised the views that have been expressed in this Parliament and the fact that the Scottish Government does not want nuclear power. That is not to say that the UK Government agrees with the Scottish Government, and it has devised the UK Energy Bill to address the concerns that I am speaking about, which

include all aspects of renewables sources. My point is that key environmentalists have said that we should not close our minds, and I am asking Mr Gibson not to close his either.

Let me give another example. The late Bishop Hugh Montefiore, founder and director of Friends of the Earth, was forced to resign from that group's board for writing a pro-nuclear article in a church newsletter after having looked at the scientific evidence. All the people whom I have mentioned have recognised that all options must be explored, for good economic and technological reasons.

Not all forms of new renewables technology have been shown to have anything beyond the potential to be economically feasible on a large scale. Equally, no current storage technology exists on the scale required.

Carbon capture has been mentioned repeatedly this morning, and the basis for looking at carbon capture and sequestration was outlined by my colleague Lewis Macdonald. However, carbon capture is no more than a prototype technology at best, and there are no guarantees that a gas pumped under the sea at several times ambient pressure will not leak. Will the minister tell us what environmental assessments the Government has done to quantify the possibility of such leaks happening and their impact?

We can all give good examples of where new technology is being used to take us forward in positive and commendable ways. In my constituency, Argent Energy established a biodiesel plant, which has rightly won awards for its innovative technology. However, the reality is that the plant draws its source from the abattoir and rendering plant next door, which lacks the capacity to deal with the demand for the by-products that allow the biodiesel to be produced. It has just had its licence from the Scottish Environment Protection Agency withdrawn because of the odour emissions that it creates in the local community. There is a downside to almost every technology—there are pluses and minuses, and we should consider them all in the round.

President Kennedy was right. Knowledge of renewables is increasing, but much remains for us to learn before we know for sure what will be required to meet Scotland's future energy needs. Until we do, nuclear power has to be considered as a viable and reliable future technology. It is as simple as that.

10:47

Joe FitzPatrick (Dundee West) (SNP): We must consider the context of today's debate, which is that almost every environmentalist throughout the globe accepts that our planet is at risk from

global warming. That is, every environmentalist except for the one we just heard about—Patrick Moore—who does not accept that global warming is happening. If he is the one person who members use to justify nuclear power stations, the argument speaks for itself.

Alex Johnstone: Will the member give way?

Joe FitzPatrick: No.

It will not surprise members that I will highlight some of the contributions made to Scotland's energy needs by Dundee. I remind members of the twin 2MW turbines that are generating about one third of the energy needed by the Michelin tyre factory in Dundee. As two of the largest urban wind turbines in the world, they are a positive reminder of what can be achieved when there is a will. I encourage members to find time to visit Dundee to see the turbines for themselves.

As well as helping to reduce Dundee's carbon footprint, the turbines have shown how the technology has improved to such an extent that many fears, such as fears of noise pollution, are no longer relevant—even when we are talking about large turbines very close to housing.

I am sure that members will also be aware that Dundee is the sunniest city in Scotland—that is a fact. With a south-facing aspect, Dundee is in a position to make the most from solar energy, although it is a technology that is appropriate for other parts of Scotland as well. Solar energy—specifically solar water heating—is the most mature renewable energy, with the shortest payback time, that people can install in their homes. It is ideally suited to many urban settings and can be retrofitted to existing homes. However, in spite of a well-proven technology that can be shown to be financially advantageous to many, we are still harnessing only a tiny fraction of our solar potential in our cities and rural communities.

Traditionally, solar installations in Scotland have been exclusive to a very small, environmentally conscious, relatively affluent minority, but we have moved on in recent years. The majority of solar installations in Dundee have been in social housing, with housing associations and the council including solar renewables projects as part of new-build housing and reroofing projects. That has had an impact in tackling fuel poverty in some of the poorest areas in Dundee, and I congratulate all those who were involved in making it happen. I know that Sarah Boyack was instrumental in the previous Executive, and I give her credit for the work that she did.

The housing associations and councils did not carry out solar energy projects just because Sarah Boyack and environmentalists said that it was a good idea. They installed the systems after rigorous cost analysis indicated that the schemes

were financially beneficial as well as environmentally sound. We have made considerable progress in Dundee, and we are making progress throughout Scotland, but we are still tapping only a tiny proportion of our solar potential.

The main problem with solar energy is its seasonality and dependence on the time of day, so I want to talk briefly about another form of solar energy, which is my main source of heating—wood.

Wood is stored solar energy, and the burning of it is carbon neutral. The problem that I faced in choosing to use wood instead of gas for my space heating was that Dundee is a smokeless zone. The legislation has failed to keep up with technology. I am pleased that considerable progress has been made on that front, and I again acknowledge the work of Sarah Boyack during the previous parliamentary session. However, it cannot be right that our legislation still makes it easier to burn mineral fuel oil than use a clean-burn carbon-neutral wood fuel.

As has been mentioned by many members, Scotland has huge renewable energy potential. Each year, new developments are ensuring that Scotland moves closer to claiming the title of Europe's renewables powerhouse. One such innovation is creating biofuel from seaweed. The Scottish Association for Marine Science is currently working on converting kelp into methane and ethanol to provide clean green energy to power everything from cars to central heating systems.

The SAMS marine laboratory near Oban is at the forefront of the emerging marine biology industry in Scotland, with 60 doctors of science researching both global warming and potential sources for renewable biofuel energies. Some members may be sceptical, but using seaweed for energy is a viable option, and as long as it is not taken from the beaches around Scotland's nuclear power stations, it is a very clean fuel. In Japan, scientists are currently working on a biomass fermentation system that uses seaweed to produce fuel for generating electricity, and work to create the world's first power plant to run off seaweed has begun.

There are several advantages to using seaweed as a source of fuel. First is the growth speed: seaweed can grow from a few centimetres to a few metres in a season. With Scotland home to the majority of large kelp in the UK, we have huge potential to produce methane and ethanol for use as a biofuel. Another advantage of using seaweed is that it does not use land for biocrops—it involves harvesting from the shores and seas. Great concerns have been voiced that cultivating some soils can result in the release of carbon,

meaning that the overall carbon balance of the fuel may not be neutral. That is especially significant in the carbon-rich soils to be found in north and west Scotland. Again, that problem is avoided by the use of seaweed.

Members will be aware of the issues surrounding palm oil and the associated deforestation. The use of seaweed has the potential to ensure that we are not reliant on imports to meet our biofuel targets, and I look forward to seeing the results of the SAMS research in the months to come.

I have touched on just a few of the areas in which Scotland is embracing renewables, and it is clear for all to see—with the exception perhaps of some Labour and Conservative members—that Scotland is on the way to becoming Europe's renewables powerhouse and that nuclear energy is a thing of the past.

10:54

David Whitton (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (Lab): I speak in support of the amendment in the name of my colleague Lewis Macdonald. The title of the SNP's motion is false. Instead of saying that they are talking about energy policy, SNP members should come clean and admit that the debate is just another challenge to Westminster, to which we have heard several references. The SNP wants to inflict another piece of constitutional chaos on the people of Scotland. It flies in the face of the recommendation of the Royal Society of Edinburgh, among others, that the SNP should get real and start talking to everybody about energy use, as we have heard.

Mr Mather is supposed to be Scotland's energy minister and to be responsible for ensuring that Scotland's people, industries and commerce are supplied with the power that they need to maintain a 21st century lifestyle, yet as soon as the UK energy policy was announced, he was on his feet to say:

"Scotland does not want or need new nuclear power. We have massive potential for alternative clean, green energy."

He repeated that today, so at least he is consistent on that.

Mr Mather also said:

"In 2006, overall electricity generation in Scotland increased by nearly a tenth, while electricity generated from nuclear power ... decreased by a quarter."

I respect him, so I regret to say that his position is hypocritical at best and totally dishonest at worst, for he is the same minister who signed the extension to the licence to allow Hunterston nuclear power station to continue to operate beyond 2011.

Jim Mather: How does the member define disrespect? *[Laughter]*

David Whitton: That is touché for when I called Mr Mather the David Brent of Scottish politics.

Mr Mather is happy to accept the fact that nuclear generation still provides for a significant share of Scotland's power needs and will do for several years, while he pontificates about alternative sources of energy supply, many of which are still unproven and some of which are not even operational. Our energy minister is also happy to accept electricity that comes up the grid from our neighbours over the border in England, when he knows full well that it might have been generated from a nuclear source.

The minister also knows that the Scottish Trades Union Congress and others have questioned statements by him and his Government officials about the current generation statistics. Members will know that this is trade union week in the Parliament. The STUC's contribution to the debate is welcomed by me, but perhaps not by the SNP.

The STUC has said that the figures that the Scottish Executive has released for installed capacity are "somewhat misleading". The minister's department claims that installed capacity for renewables is 2,731MW and that it has outstripped installed capacity for nuclear, which is 2,400MW. The STUC says that that is "meaningless", as what counts is available capacity, as Gavin Brown said.

Mr Brown and I are members of the Economy, Energy and Tourism Committee, which will hold an inquiry later this year into Scotland's energy needs. In preparation for that inquiry, we held a fascinating round-table discussion with key players from the energy industry last year. I recommend to Mr Mather the *Official Report* of that meeting, which took place on 19 September. One witness questioned how electricity companies could guarantee a supply of electricity to Scotland after 2011—he spoke before the minister's decision to grant Hunterston an extension. He said that if Hunterston went off stream at that time, unless very quick action was taken to

"develop a big renewable resource that we can switch on,"

Scotland

"will be quite close to not having enough electricity at peak load".—[*Official Report, Economy, Energy and Tourism Committee*, 19 September 2007; c 108.]

That scenario would be made worse if Cockenzie or Longannet power station was being renovated at the same time. Our witness asked what guarantee there was of peak-load delivery from 2011 to 2015 and onwards. We know part of the answer, because Hunterston's working life is to be extended—thank goodness for nuclear, Mr Mather.

Our witnesses were concerned that too much reliance was being put on renewables. The SNP has set ambitious targets for renewable energy generation. That is fine and I support that, but it is only continuing the work that my colleague Sarah Boyack drove forward.

The SNP is not telling us its overall energy policy, where investment in renewables will be made or how much will be invested. Mr Mather is really tilting at windmills—he is the Don Quixote of Scottish energy, and he has a donkey, too.

To put things in perspective—I know how much the minister likes statistics—I point out that 37 per cent of Scotland's electricity comes from nuclear sources. To replace that would take 110 acres of wind farms—the equivalent of 10 Isles of Bute. If that supply were replaced by coal power, 2 million tonnes of extra carbon would be generated. That would be the equivalent of a 50 per cent increase in Scotland's traffic and certainly would do nothing to reduce our CO₂ emissions.

Labour members believe that Scotland needs a mixed energy supply. The experts who came to the committee's round-table discussion by and large agreed with that view—perhaps the minister should listen to this bit; he might learn something. We also want renewables to be expanded to generate 50 per cent of Scotland's electricity. SNP members talk up renewables but oppose wind farm developments in their own constituencies. The debate on Lewis is a case in point—I see the member for that area arriving just in time.

Does the minister recognise the high-quality jobs that the electricity generation industry provides? Does he believe that we should still produce surplus energy to export? Does he know the difference between installed capacity and available capacity? How does he envisage replacing the stable base-load from nuclear power with intermittent supplies from renewables?

What is the minister doing to explore the vast potential of carbon capture from coal? Perhaps he should ask Jim McColl, who is a member of the Government's Council of Economic Advisers and the boss of Clyde Blowers and Weir Pumps, about that. His company sells clean coal technology to China but sells none here.

What will the minister do to overcome opposition in his own ranks from members who claim to support wind power but who then campaign against wind farms in their areas?

Finally, the minister should recognise the variety of views on the issue. The SNP does not speak for Scotland on the matter. Under the heading "Scots Shun Bid to Remove the Nuclear Option", a poll in the *Scottish Daily Express* earlier this week said that as many as 70 per cent of those who were questioned supported a mix of supply that

included nuclear power. It will disappoint Shirley-Anne Somerville to learn that, among SNP voters, a majority of two to one was in favour of nuclear. That number includes one George Kerevan, an economist and columnist in another newspaper—*The Scotsman*—who happens to be the SNP's Westminster candidate for Edinburgh East.

Minister, the unions do not support your motion, the business community does not support your motion and even your own candidates do not support your motion. It is time for you to head homeward and think again.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Alasdair Morgan): I point out to the member that it is not my motion, but the Government's motion.

11:02

Tavish Scott (Shetland) (LD): I hesitate to say this, especially as I am standing next to Mr Russell, who is an author of note, but I wrote a pamphlet several years ago that was entitled "Scotland: A Renewable Energy Powerhouse", or something of that ilk. It was received with critical acclaim—or at least with criticism. I take Joe FitzPatrick's point that it is important to recognise how Scotland can gain in this international world and I will deal with that in a few minutes.

Mr FitzPatrick showed commendable bravery in saying that the sun only shines in Dundee. There is no doubt that he will go far in this place. David Whitton introduced what I suppose we must call the Whitton doctrine of respect, to which we will all listen carefully in the coming years.

If we can agree on a few matters following the debate, they are that we need to keep the lights on, as Gavin Brown said, that we need to tackle the cost of power to Scotland's households and that we need to recognise the national and international requirements that are placed on the Parliament by documents such as the Stern report, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change's reports and the many scientific reports that are produced here in Scotland and in the wider sphere.

It is a little unfair for SNP members to claim that only they stopped new nuclear facilities. No new nuclear development happened in the past eight years, so it is a bit unfair to criticise Labour members such as Sarah Boyack. It is probably because of people such as her that some nuclear development did not happen. She has created a debate in her party and she deserves a little credit for that bravery. All our parties benefit from those in them who question the basis on which we advocate energy or other policy.

Conservative and Labour members were a little coy about extolling the virtues of nuclear power—I

will return to the energy mix in a moment. Parties, professionals and scientists who articulate those points have a responsibility to tackle the issues that many members across parties have raised this morning, such as the independently projected clean-up cost of existing nuclear power capability of some £70 billion.

There is an appalling record of cost overruns on nuclear technology new builds. No British nuclear plant has ever come in on time or on budget. Indeed, the industry seems to run as much on optimism as on uranium. The billions of pounds of taxpayers' money that are spent on nuclear research and development should be compared with what is spent on other energy production methods. Furthermore, it is not true that nuclear energy is carbon free. The whole life cycle of nuclear plants and the emissions from uranium mining construction and decommissioning should be considered.

Members who extol the virtues of nuclear technology have not mentioned nuclear waste. There is no satisfactory long-term solution for dealing with nuclear waste. According to a UK Environment Agency report to UK ministers, the current plans are "overly optimistic" Last week, the independent nuclear consultation working group reported just before the UK Government made its announcement on new nuclear power that there is

"no proven technical solution for the long-term management of radioactive wastes."

Those are serious issues that must be addressed by those who extol the virtues of nuclear technology. The Sustainable Development Commission, which is much quoted in the chamber by members of all political parties, has said:

"there is no justification for bringing forward plans for a new nuclear programme at this time".

I want to deal with other points that members have made. Patrick Harvie was right about the need for an energy reduction target. He and I also agree about the argument that some people put forward for aiming to make nuclear energy a great export industry for Scotland—the Conservatives in particular have spoken about that. The Liberal Democrats do not support that contention. We think that there are many ways of marketing Scotland in the international sphere, not least as a world centre for life sciences and as a country with globally competitive universities. We should not market Scotland as a great exporter of nuclear energy. Such an approach would not suit us.

Lewis Macdonald and Alison McInnes made a correct point about the oil and gas industry. It is a driver of technical innovation—Lewis Macdonald was right about that—but surely there must be a new role for the Pilot programme and FREDS and

other Government and industry bodies when that industry turns its focus towards developing renewables, and engineering solutions and its intellectual firepower are brought to bear on the new technologies. When that happens, we will see a real take-off in renewables technologies in Scotland.

I agree with the arguments about nuclear energy that Mr Mather made in his opening speech, but I was disappointed that he did not have any prior knowledge of the UK Energy Bill, as we are sometimes told that the relationship between the UK Government and the Scottish Government is excellent—indeed, Mr Lochhead said that yesterday in the fisheries statement. A little consistency on that would be beneficial. However, Mr Mather was right about territorial waters. I suspect that the argument is not only about energy, but also about the marine bill that we will no doubt consider in the coming weeks and months.

I turn to the strong arguments that, to be fair, members across the chamber have made about the importance of renewables. No one has argued that wind power is the only option; rather, most members who care deeply about the matter have argued that there should be a mix of renewables and that there is a mix within the renewables industry. It is simplistic to say that the energy mix can be renewables, nuclear, and coal and gas—there is a mix within renewables. We are not yet there with the commercialisation of many renewables, but they can be commercialised. Back in 2004, Jim Wallace opened the European Marine Energy Centre, to which my colleague Liam McArthur, and Rob Gibson, referred. Commercialisation was one of the aims of that innovative and world-leading centre. Jim Wallace also launched the green jobs strategy, which I commend to the current ministers. Given that time has passed, it no doubt needs to be reconsidered, but it provides the right basis for moving forward.

Other members—Kenny Gibson in particular—talked about hydrogen. I agree with what Mr Gibson said about it. The Pure Energy Centre on Unst exports intellectual capital on energy policy around the world. Many of us see the potential for hydrogen—again, as part of that mix—to be developed and to help meet Scotland's future energy needs.

David Stewart put forward an excellent argument for hydropower. He and I are concerned that the Glendoe project may be the last hydropower project on such a scale. I hope that it is not, and encourage ministers to consider ways in which the large-scale provision of hydropower can continue. I know that there are environmental concerns, which the Minister for Environment, Mr Russell, must tackle with Government and non-

governmental bodies, but David Stewart made a serious argument, which I agree with.

As 80 per cent of Scotland's energy demand is not delivered by the electricity grid we need to think in that context. Possibly, as others have argued, the black gold of yesterday can become the green gold of tomorrow.

11:10

Alex Johnstone (North East Scotland) (Con):

I rise to support, unreservedly and unashamedly, Labour's amendment to the motion and to seek support for the Conservative amendment to that amendment, which will add something to it.

We must clearly set out the lines of the debate before we can make good sense of it. Politicians are often accused of simply arguing for argument's sake, and it must be said that, if anything, the debate has demonstrated the broad consensus on energy policy in the chamber. Members of all parties have said a great deal in which I can find great common interest.

Of course, we understand that there is a need to save energy in Scotland and that energy efficiency is a key target. Cleaner energy is also needed. In industrial terms, Scotland was once one of the dirty men of Europe. We ought to be proud that we are quickly changing our image.

The need to ensure that energy is affordable has been mentioned. Fuel poverty remains a major problem in Scotland. I am not talking about only domestic fuel poverty—we should also consider our economic efficiency. Affordable energy is important in developing industry and providing the jobs that further the aims of our broader economic development policies. Reliable and affordable energy is a key priority.

Kenneth Gibson: Did the member support the last Conservative Government's introduction of VAT on fuel?

Alex Johnstone: I did not support that at the time and I regret that it was introduced. I hope that that is an unequivocal answer.

I have talked about what members have in common, and hope that anyone who is watching the debate will not make the mistake of thinking that we are at one another's throats over energy policy when I talk about what divides us. There are simply one or two key areas in which views that have been expressed in the chamber, particularly on the Government front benches, call into question the SNP's commitment to some of the broad principles that we all hold dear.

I share Jim Mather's enthusiasm for renewable energy. It is important that we develop the renewable energy industry in Scotland, as

renewable energy may be one of the things that our economy relies on in the future. However, his opening speech raised one or two important questions in my mind. I put those questions to him in the hope that we get clear and unequivocal answers at the end of the debate. He told us that we do not need nuclear energy, but he and members of his party have enthusiastically greeted the extension of Hunterston B's lifespan, which is evidence that Scotland appears to need nuclear energy in the short term and perhaps the medium term at least.

What does Jim Mather mean when he compares installed capacity with potential production? I want him to address directly an idea that has been raised by previous speakers. When he says that the installed capacity of renewables in Scotland now exceeds nuclear capacity, surely he must realise that, on an on-going basis, the energy produced by renewables is unlikely to exceed much more than 35 or 40 per cent of its installed capacity. The energy produced by nuclear power stations—when they are running, which is most of the time—is much nearer to 100 per cent of their installed capacity. Before he tells me that there have been shutdowns at our nuclear plants, I remind him that there was also a major shutdown last year at the Longannet coal-fired plant. That can happen to other power plants, not only to nuclear power plants.

Rob Gibson: Can the member tell us how long world supplies of uranium will allow existing nuclear power stations to run? Is it five years, 10 years or two years?

Alex Johnstone: It is much longer than that. Our nuclear industry can survive for a very long period on the un-reprocessed fuel that already exists in the United Kingdom. The fuelling of nuclear power stations is not an issue.

Two things in Jim Mather's speech confused me slightly and worried me rather more. The first of those was the SNP's broad commitment to the concept of a separate Scottish renewables obligation, producing a separate Scottish renewables obligation certificate. What worries me about that is the fact that any changes that destabilised the regime that has encouraged the development of our existing renewables industry would have the potential to cause a major shift in investment. The last thing that we want in Scotland is an undermining of the existing renewables industry.

The second thing that worries me slightly is the fact that that may be combined with attempts to change significantly the transmission charge system, as Jim Mather mentioned. If an increasing level of energy production in Scotland, attracting the support of Scottish renewables obligation certificates, is combined with changes in the

transmission charge system, there is a danger that, if the minister gets it wrong, Scotland's electricity may become the most expensive anywhere in the world and the transmission charge system may ensure that that expense is dumped entirely on the Scottish consumer. If the minister gets it wrong, there will be a grave risk to our economy in the future.

There are a couple of points that I need to address quickly, relating to nuclear power. First, I am not here to argue for the construction of new nuclear power stations in Scotland as, sadly, that argument may now have been lost; however, nuclear energy still has the potential to provide the cheapest electricity. The reason for that is simple. Perhaps coal and gas plant can produce cheaper electricity than nuclear plant on the basis of the whole-life cost figures of plant today, but if the cost of carbon capture is added to those, the whole-life cost of nuclear plant could yet make it the cheapest source of electricity.

Secondly, the Scottish Government has made a commitment that there will be no new nuclear power stations in Scotland; however, I put it to the chamber that that position is fundamentally dishonest. Every part of the policy that the Government has put forward is wholly reliant on having a good neighbour to the south and a connection to the national grid that can supply us with electricity on the days when the wind does not blow and the waves do not rise. That dependence ensures that Scotland is wholly dependent on the United Kingdom's future investment in nuclear technology and means that the Government's position is hypocritical and dishonest.

11:19

Sarah Boyack (Edinburgh Central) (Lab): I agree with the other winding-up speakers that this has been a very good debate, in which we have managed to explore our differences. More of that would be good for the Parliament, as would more debates of the tone of this morning's discussion. The debate has also been good in identifying some of the areas in which there is a strong basis, across all parties, for determining the future direction in which we should take our country.

We have come an incredibly long way since the early days of the Scottish Parliament. In year 1, if I had told Donald Dewar that, eight years on, his legacy would be agreement pretty much across the chamber that we could deliver 50 per cent of our electricity from renewables by 2020, I am not sure that he would have appointed me—I am not sure that that would have been a believable position just eight years ago. Let us remember how far we have come and use that to move forward.

As members will know—a couple of speakers observed it today—I am not a member of the nuclear fan club. Nuclear power is not cheap; it is rather expensive. It requires very secure waste management, regardless of whether that is deep disposal or disposal above ground, and it needs it for a long time. Furthermore, such facilities cannot be built quickly. I stand by the views that I have expressed previously in the Parliament.

Nevertheless, as my Labour colleagues have made clear, the future of our energy policy is regularly and seriously debated within our party, along with our trade union colleagues and our local communities. Therefore, we come to the debate not parading soundbites but with a background of serious consideration and the range of views that Parliament has heard this morning. We are a mature political party that understands the challenge of addressing the issues that have been raised by the IPCC and in the Stern report. There are core principles on which we all agree, which we made clear in our election manifesto, and we have signed up to them in our amendment today.

We need a Scottish energy policy that is crafted to meet Scotland's needs and that maximises our opportunities, and we must start from the principle that we need to use energy more efficiently. Regardless of members' preferred energy mix for Scotland, we need to accept that the more energy that we consume and waste, the more difficult are the choices that we set for ourselves and for future generations. With our commitment to social justice, we are passionate about tackling fuel poverty, hence our commitment to the free central heating programme for pensioners and the warm deal. I ask, therefore, when the SNP will be in a position to give us its plans on energy efficiency in detail and when it will move to extend the provision to include the retro-fitting of systems such as solar panels for heating water.

I acknowledge Joe FitzPatrick's enthusiasm for solar-powered water heating. He is correct in saying that it makes economic sense, taking into account of the life cycle of such energy systems. I have seen them operating in people's homes throughout the country. They save money for people who are on low incomes and they reduce people's carbon emissions. James Kelly was right to point out the difference that such systems make to people's comfort and quality of life—and their fuel bills plummet.

The Labour Party believes that we need to act. We believe that we could be the renewables powerhouse of Europe. We are proud of our achievements in the first eight years of the Parliament through working in partnership to deliver 20 per cent of our electricity from renewables by 2010, a target that will be upped to

40 per cent by 2020. Given the rate of progress over the past eight years, our election manifesto committed us to working to raise that figure to 50 per cent by 2020. We do not regard that as a given, but we believe that with hard work and support for the renewables industry such a figure is absolutely deliverable. That is why the planning guidelines that we issued last March promoted the use of CHP and onsite renewables and increased the pressure on developers to deliver throughout Scotland with a level playing field. Those planning guidelines must be promoted by the SNP Government.

We set in place the building blocks for the mass expansion of biomass. David Stewart talked about the progress that has been made in the Highlands and Islands, where the Highlands and Islands Community Energy Company is leading developments. He also rightly highlighted our support for future hydropower developments, with the major opportunities being for small-scale hydropower facilities. In addition, our manifesto focused on the need for more community-owned and community-developed renewables, seeing a role for the co-operative movement in benefiting communities. We have left a strong legacy that we believe the SNP must build on now.

We recognise the need for action to reduce the carbon footprint of the rest of our energy supply. In particular, we support the move to cleaner coal. We have technology in Scotland that we should be exporting to the rest of the world. That would be good for all our economies and for the planet.

We must ensure that the debate is about more than just picking a fight with the UK Government, either on principles or on practical politics. The debate on Scotland's future energy cannot be reduced to a bun fight on nuclear power. There is hypocrisy at the heart of the SNP motion. The Government's principled position does not rule out using nuclear power now, and it does not rule out extending the life of existing nuclear plant—we note its pragmatic welcome for the extension of the life of Hunterston B. However, most hypocritical of all—we heard this from Jim Mather this morning—the Government does not rule out using energy from existing or new nuclear power stations in England through the UK grid. We live in an increasingly interconnected world, and the agreement throughout Europe is that we need a Europe-wide grid to which all our countries would input energy and from we would all benefit through the security of supply.

As if that was not enough, I do not think that we are exactly being knocked over in the rush of companies wanting to build new nuclear power stations in Scotland. They are not encouraged by the transmission charges and, as we said before the election, there is absolutely no question of the

UK Labour Government wanting to force Scotland into building new nuclear power stations. The SNP knows well that the devolution settlement gives the Scottish Government control over planning decisions. It is not good enough for the SNP to create a false fight over nuclear energy, and it is not good enough for it just to talk the talk on energy efficiency and renewables; it must do more to meet the target, for which there is broad support, of producing 50 per cent of our energy from renewables by 2020.

I am keen to hear from Mike Russell in his summing up what target the SNP intends to set for renewable heat, which is one of the big opportunities that must be grasped. We cannot just talk about electricity; we have to move the agenda on to renewable heat and I know that Mike Russell is keen on biomass. Liam McArthur also made the point forcibly that we have to move on from electricity to renewable heat.

The Labour Party is committed to making it possible for people to heat and power their homes with renewables. One of the first things that we would have done would have been to take money off people's council tax if they installed microgeneration or energy efficiency measures. Until we change the law in Scotland, we will be the only part of the UK where people do not get financial benefit for doing their bit to tackle climate change in their homes, which is one of the fastest ways to drive down CO₂ emissions and tackle fuel poverty.

Is there a date yet for the consultation on permitted development rights for microgeneration? We are falling behind England and Wales—last year's elections have not delayed Rhodri Morgan's Government in Wales. Where is the Scottish Government's energy efficiency strategy? We left it to progress that strategy. What new, radical measures will it include?

We desperately need to make our existing housing stock more energy efficient. Some 80 per cent of current housing stock will be in existence in 2050. Improving its energy efficiency has to be a radical priority. It is not just housing, either; public sector buildings must lead the way in driving down our CO₂ emissions and producing renewable energy. A commitment to procure buildings from the top quartile of energy efficiency would instantly drive up standards in the property market.

In the previous parliamentary session, we lobbied across the chamber for faster action to make sure that public procurement included microgeneration and biomass boilers as standard. Time and again, John Swinney argued that the Executive should act, so that Perth and Kinross Council could include biomass boilers that use wood fuel in the Breadalbane academy project in Aberfeldy. Imagine my disappointment—disbelief

actually—that one of the first acts of the new SNP-Liberal Democrat council in Edinburgh was to cancel the biomass boilers for the five new high schools and two primaries approved by the outgoing Labour council after a lot of work. New care homes in our city have benefited from carbon-neutral heating systems. The wood fuel for the schools was to come from Dalkeith—there could not be a more sustainable or better local energy synergy. I hope that the SNP Government will go back to the City of Edinburgh Council and have more discussions with it.

Shirley-Anne Somerville: Does the member realise that the decision about the biomass boilers was taken because of safety concerns about the boilers? Surely it is correct to delay installation rather than putting unsafe measures into schools in Edinburgh.

Sarah Boyack: That is a smokescreen, if I can use that term. Biomass boilers have been used safely across the globe. We in this chamber have spent years demanding that the highest possible standards are implemented in urban as well as rural areas. There has been cross-party support for that, so it is not good enough to come to the chamber with such a view today.

We need a little less hot air from the nationalists, a little less of the “nuclear war of words”, as the *Daily Mail* put it on Friday. The SNP Government has talked the talk on renewables; it now has to deliver. Alison McInnes made that point and I agree with her absolutely, although it will be a bit of a challenge for a party that has demanded more renewables as long as they are not wind farms in its constituencies.

Before the elections, the SNP campaigned for a statutory annual 3 per cent reduction in carbon emissions, but that was quickly dumped. All of us in this chamber must ensure that the SNP's commitment to renewables and energy efficiency does not also get sidelined.

We need progress; we need the SNP to produce a strategy for energy in Scotland and to work co-operatively with the UK Government to deliver it. We must ensure that if opportunities arise from the new UK Energy Bill, we seize them and do not miss the boat. There is appetite from environmental groups, communities, local authorities, trade unions and business communities to play their part. Ministers just need to get on with it.

11:29

The Minister for Environment (Michael Russell): I start as Sarah Boyack did by welcoming the tone of the debate which, unfortunately, she did not keep going throughout her speech. However, the tone of the debate has been, by and large, very positive.

I am pleased to support my friend Mr Mather in closing this debate on the UK Energy Bill. We have had a useful discussion about both the specifics of the bill and wider energy aspects and we have identified not just a Government with clear ambition and the means to achieve it but the areas on which there is great agreement across the chamber.

An area about which we have heard too little in the debate is the environment. We develop our energy policy in the context not just of providing energy supply but of our five strategic objectives, particularly the greener Scotland objective. That includes not just a reduction in carbon emissions, which some members mentioned, but the consideration of the impact of energy developments on landscapes and habitats—indeed, Scottish planning policy 6, which we endorsed specifically, and our decisions on individual projects have made, and will make, that entirely clear.

I will list some of the key points in the debate and then pay attention to two or three of the significant contributions this morning. The nuclear provisions in the UK Energy Bill that deal with nuclear decommissioning and waste do not extend to Scotland. We are very pleased that the UK Government has recognised the strength of feeling about nuclear power. We welcome that, but we would of course say that that is due to the benefit of having an SNP Government in Scotland standing up for Scotland's best interests. However, in the interests of consensus and in view of the unusual experience of working so closely with the Liberal Democrats—we will support their amendment—I note that some people in previous Administrations have also been strongly against nuclear power and have played their part, whatever part that was.

The UK bill could provide a common UK framework for a number of energy developments, a key example of which is carbon storage—a move that would be welcomed by the energy industry. We have proposed to the UK Government that Scottish ministers exercise new powers in that regard, both within and beyond the 12-mile limit. It is interesting that there is a clear read-across on that matter to our position on marine policy, which is supported in many parts of the chamber. I hope that our position on carbon capture and storage will be supported too. It is disappointing that, so far, the UK Government has not agreed with us. We regret that. We want to continue a productive dialogue and we hope that we can negotiate on the matter. We make it clear, as we have to, that we are prepared to introduce our own bill if we deem it necessary.

We broadly support the bill's proposals on renewables and the proposed system of banding

for renewables obligation certificates to allow higher support for emerging technologies. We are pleased to see that current executive devolution of the renewables obligation powers will be maintained, which will enable the Scottish Government to provide the appropriate levels of support for wave, tidal and biomass developments that are located in Scotland. I will return to the subject of biomass, which has not been given enough attention in the debate. We will consult more fully on the renewables obligation in the spring and we reserve the right, as we must, to suggest a different approach to banding from that of the UK. For example, we already consider that two ROCs for marine energy is insufficient.

We heard a number of speeches on ROCs and other issues this morning. I was surprised by Lewis Macdonald's speech because he accused the Government of lacking ambition. The one thing that this Government never lacks is ambition. We continue in our ambition to export energy. Indeed, we made a manifesto commitment to pursue the North Sea grid to export the huge potential of marine energy. In undertaking our grid studies, we worked closely with the Crown Estate, whose study is reported in *The Scotsman* today. We recognise the need to export, so that remains in our energy mix.

I was even more surprised by Gavin Brown's speech. It was the strongest plea for a managed economy that I have ever heard from a Tory spokesperson. He seemed to think that only the state could provide resources for energy generation. I am sure that he did this unintentionally, but he misled the chamber about the resources that are available from Government. Of course, those resources are only part of the matter—there is not just the £33 million a year that he dismissed out of hand, even though it is an increase of something like 60 per cent on the money that was offered by the previous Administration. There is not just an energy budget; there is support through the renewables obligation, about which we have been speaking, for which the consumer pays. There is support through the work of Scottish Enterprise and Highlands and Islands Enterprise. There is access to UK funding. In fact, there is a range of resources that support renewable energy, rather than the limited picture that Mr Brown gave.

Gavin Brown: I resent the allegation that I misled the chamber. The figure that I gave earlier is attached to a single line in the draft budget for energy and climate change. There is also a single line for Scottish Enterprise, with nothing to show that it contributes to renewable energy.

Michael Russell: I am sure that somebody with much greater expertise in energy than I have—I am merely an environment spokesperson—would

know the detail of those budgets and be able to talk about them. Of course, I am sure that Mr Brown did not mislead the chamber deliberately, but he certainly misled the chamber.

I want to say something positive about Sarah Boyack's speech and her long-standing commitment to the issue. We acknowledge the importance of her proposed energy efficiency and microgeneration bill. As she knows, discussions are going on and there is a keenness to implement measures, but I ask her to be generous with us. It took eight years for nothing to happen under her party's Administration; we are only eight months into the new Administration and we are making substantial progress.

Other Labour speeches can be described as the tale of two Daves. Dave Stewart made a tremendously strong contribution. I welcome his role as Labour spokesperson on the environment. He got right to the heart of the matter and asked important questions, for example about hydropower. We will answer those questions and I am sure that we can have a dialogue about them. He raised issues about biomass that I also want to discuss.

The speech from Dave Whitton was scaremongering and negative. Its tone was contrary to the tone of the debate. It exposed the hollowness of the Labour case for nuclear power, because it was built on two issues of fear. It generated fear of an energy gap, which does not exist, and it generated fear that Scotland is isolated in the energy market, which it is not. When those props are removed there is no case for nuclear.

I would like to talk about other speeches, but I can mention only one or two. Kenny Gibson made a tremendous speech, which fully justified his subscription to the *New Scientist* in that it contained information of which we were all completely unaware. I am grateful to Joe FitzPatrick for giving me a new slogan. As members know, I am a retired spin doctor but, were I still in office, I would seize on the slogan "It's Scotland's seaweed" and exploit it as strongly as possible.

I emphasise what my friend Mr Mather said at the beginning of the debate: Scotland does not want or need nuclear power. My friend Mr Tavish Scott made the point even more clearly when he said that nuclear power is neither clean nor green. The people of Scotland understand that—it is the Labour Party that is out of touch on the issue.

There are many reasons why people should oppose nuclear power, such as issues to do with storage and disposal of nuclear waste, the legacy to future generations, concerns about security and health and, of course, cost, as consumers are

faced with higher bills. The fallacy of cheap nuclear energy has been fed to the people of Scotland since the 1950s. It remains a fallacy.

Presiding Officer—I was about to say, “Deputy Presiding Officer”, but I see that there has been a seamless change—one point will serve to emphasise the difficulty with nuclear power. The clean-up of the Chapelcross works in Dumfriesshire will cost £1.37 billion and the site will not be available for reuse until 2128 at the earliest—in 120 years’ time. I put that in context: in 1888, 120 years ago, the Scottish Labour Party made its first commitment to devolution, in the Mid-Lanark by-election, but we waited 111 years for devolution to be delivered. That demonstrates that 120 years is a long time, but that is the period for which nothing on the Chapelcross site can be used. In that regard, nuclear energy is not the cleanest form of energy but the most extreme polluting form of energy.

Elaine Murray (Dumfries) (Lab): Will the minister join me in arguing for early site clearance at Chapelcross, which would not only ensure that the site was available much sooner but retain the expertise that exists in the labour force on the site?

Michael Russell: Of course I will work with the member on such issues, although I understand that probably it is technically not possible to reduce radiation at the site more quickly.

I mention an area that has not received adequate attention in the debate. I am sure that keen observers of the Government’s work will have read the report of the wood fuel task force, which was delivered to me last week. I pay tribute to the task force’s members. If members have not read the report, I will be happy to provide it for them—Sarah Boyack has read it, of course. Wood biomass can make an enormous contribution. This year we are using around 0.75 million green tonnes to produce energy from wood but, in the light of the task force’s work, we can probably increase the amount to around 8.5 million green tonnes within 15 years. There is huge potential, even in such a limited sector, provided that we use ideas, recognise the importance of the energy source and work on it.

Alison McInnes: Will the minister give way?

The Presiding Officer (Alex Fergusson): I am afraid that the minister is in his final minute.

Michael Russell: We have ambitious targets for wood and renewables and we have ambitious targets for Scotland.

We are already looking at a future beyond nuclear power—that is the concluding message of the debate. Nuclear power is of no relevance to Scotland. That debate is over and the Westminster

Government has recognised that it is over. Now we have to invest our energy, enthusiasm and intelligence in ensuring that Scotland’s energy supply is a world leader in being clean and renewable. It is fortunate that the Government is capable of doing that. I am sure that the people of Scotland are glad of that.

Question Time

SCOTTISH EXECUTIVE

General Questions

11:40

Burns Night

1. Christina McKelvie (Central Scotland) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what plans it has to mark Burns night this year and how it intends to encourage the celebration of Burns night. (S3O-1951)

The Minister for Europe, External Affairs and Culture (Linda Fabiani): Burns night marks the end of Scotland's winter festival and will be celebrated across Scotland and around the world. The First Minister, cabinet secretaries and ministers will attend Burns events in Scotland and overseas during the coming days and will use those events to promote the year of homecoming in 2009.

I will celebrate Burns night in London. I will be promoting the best of what Scotland has to offer to visitors at a luxury Burns night at Harvey Nichols, which has been developed by VisitScotland and supported by the Scottish Government. On Sunday 27 January, I will be honoured to be back home to attend the Robert Burns annual tribute at the national portrait gallery in Edinburgh.

Christina McKelvie: I am sure that the minister will find that there is a new sense of pride in Scotland's culture, which is rejuvenating our culture. Does she agree that Burns represents a figurehead for a wonderful, deep and rich literary tradition in Scotland, which is still alive and strong and should be encouraged?

Linda Fabiani: Absolutely. Burns is a wonderful figurehead, is he not? It is interesting that a Burns supper that is to be held in Brussels promotes his internationalism. The supper is being held to celebrate the lives of Robert Burns and the national poet of Slovenia, France Prešeren.

We have a wonderful literary tradition in Scotland. Edinburgh is the city of literature and hosts the international book festival every year. I am delighted to have been invited to the aye write book festival in Glasgow in March. Members will be interested to know that on Burns day—25 January—an Edwin Morgan event will be held in Glasgow. It will be a 24-hour Morganathon—

Members: What?

Linda Fabiani: Morganathon. I am delighted to be taking part in it and perhaps other members will also take part.

To celebrate our literature—current and past—three literary events will take place in Brussels during Burns season as part of the Scottish writers series.

Alex Johnstone (North East Scotland) (Con): Will the minister join me in inviting all members to attend the Scottish Parliament's Burns supper, which will take place in the members' restaurant next Wednesday evening, at 6.30 pm for 7 pm? Tickets are £20.

Linda Fabiani: I am sure that it will be a wonderful occasion. I understand that some people in the chamber will perform that evening.

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Sustainable Growth (John Swinney): We are always performing.

The Presiding Officer (Alex Fergusson): Thank you, Mr Swinney. I will be doing the immortal memory.

A77 (Symington and Bogend Toll)

2. John Scott (Ayr) (Con): I wish the Presiding Officer every success.

To ask the Scottish Executive what discussions have taken place between ministers and Transport Scotland regarding the proposed upgrade of the A77 at Symington and Bogend toll. (S3O-1871)

The Minister for Transport, Infrastructure and Climate Change (Stewart Stevenson): Transport Scotland is in regular contact with ministers on transport issues, including the proposed upgrading work at Symington and Bogend toll.

John Scott: As the minister knows, the proposed scheme of improvements at Symington and Bogend toll—to a section of the A77 that has an horrendous safety record—was intended to commence in 2006 but has been pushed back for a number of reasons. The new proposed start date is 2010. The continuing delays on the project are of enormous concern to many of my constituents and to other people who regularly use the A77 between Kilmarnock and Monkton. Will the minister take the matter up with Transport Scotland, with a view to ensuring that everything possible is done to start the project at the earliest possible date, and to ensuring that if a local public inquiry is not required, work is commenced before the projected start date of 2010?

Stewart Stevenson: As the member knows, I visited the site of the difficulties with him some months ago to see for myself what is involved. The current state of affairs is that 16 letters of objection have been received, six of which are from statutory consultees. That raises the potential—but not the certainty—that there will be a public local inquiry. Should no public local inquiry be

required, we are looking to bring forward construction by a year to 2009.

Glasgow City Council (Discussions)

3. Bob Doris (Glasgow) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Executive what recent discussions it has had with Glasgow City Council. (S3O-1941)

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Sustainable Growth (John Swinney): The Scottish Government is in regular contact with Glasgow City Council on a wide range of issues.

Bob Doris: Recently, in light of representations from the North Kelvin Residents Group, I have been in correspondence with Glasgow City Council on the problems with houses in multiple occupation in the area. The issue is whether the council's planning department is abiding by its quota of 5 per cent for HMOs in designated blocks. The council has made me aware that, even when a local authority refuses planning permission for an HMO, the council's licensing department has no power to turn down a licensing application on that basis but has to use a narrow set of criteria that bear no relation to the planning decision. Will the cabinet secretary review the relationship between local authority planning and licensing sections and how they operate with each other to provide an effectively managed and joined-up approach to the planning for and management of HMOs in their communities?

John Swinney: The issue, including the encouragement of more effective working practices and cohesion in the regulatory environment for local authority planning and licensing functions, is being examined as part of a consultation on Scottish planning policy 3, "Planning for Housing". We are aware of the potential problems that can arise where there is an imbalance of HMOs in a community. We are exploring the ways in which local authority planning and licensing functions can work together more effectively to control HMO concentrations. Obviously, the Government will welcome any input into the consultation that Mr Doris, Glasgow City Council, or any other interested party may wish to make.

Council Tax Freeze

4. Elaine Murray (Dumfries) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive whether it is satisfied that its proposals to freeze council tax do not breach any legislation. (S3O-1912)

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Sustainable Growth (John Swinney): The council tax freeze proposal is entirely legal.

Elaine Murray: The cabinet secretary has made much of the historic concordat with councils and of the level of his trust in local authorities. If a local

authority decides not to hold council tax at its 2007-08 level in the next financial year, will he confirm that it will not receive its share of the £70 million that the Government has allocated for the council tax freeze? Why will he not allocate the £70 million on the basis that he expects councils to freeze their council tax but gives locally accountable councils the freedom to decide whether to implement the freeze?

John Swinney: Of course the matter is one for the local authorities to determine. They will decide whether to accept the Government's proposition, for which resources have been put in place in the spending review, and which I hope the Parliament will support during its consideration of the Budget (Scotland) Bill. The resources are in place to enable the local authorities to freeze their council tax levels.

I have set out the allocation mechanism for the sum of £70 million, which will be used to compensate councils for freezing the council tax. The mechanism provides local authorities with compensation for the proportion of the £70 million that each council would have accounted for as a consequence of its share of the total council tax income that is raised in Scotland. We have put forward a fair funding mechanism. It is supported by the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities. In the forthcoming budget decisions that the Parliament and local authorities will make, I look forward to receiving a positive endorsement of the Government's invitation to the local authorities to freeze council tax.

Tourism (Highlands and Islands)

5. Dave Thompson (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Executive what action it is taking to increase tourism in the Highlands and Islands. (S3O-1955)

The Minister for Enterprise, Energy and Tourism (Jim Mather): Tourism is a priority industry and Highlands and Islands Enterprise works closely alongside tourism businesses to achieve our shared ambition to increase tourism revenues by 50 per cent by 2015. Visitors to Scotland associate Scotland and our beautiful scenery almost exclusively with the Highlands and Islands. VisitScotland therefore features the breathtaking scenery of the Highlands and Islands in most, if not all, of its marketing. Many tourism businesses across the Highlands and Islands give their visitors such a wonderful experience that they want to return again and again. That is the most effective way to increase tourism in the Highlands and Islands.

Dave Thompson: Destination management is proving very successful worldwide in developing tourism, including in Kitzbühel, Austria, and the Whistler mountain range near Vancouver,

Canada. Given that tourism is twice as valuable to the Highlands and Islands economy as it is to anywhere else in Scotland, what support is being made available for destination management organisations such as Destination Loch Ness to ensure that they can promote their areas successfully? Does the minister support Destination Loch Ness in its bid for United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization world heritage status for Loch Ness?

Jim Mather: In essence, we are supporting the widespread take-up of the destination management concept across Scotland, particularly in the Highlands and Islands. We have an on-going engagement with the industry through the tourism framework for change. Increasingly, the destination management concept is becoming the focus of VisitScotland. It is key to economic development and tourism in the Highlands and Islands. In addition, I have attended recent meetings with destination management groups. I brokered a meeting between the Scotch Whisky Association and destination management potential in Moray. Destination Loch Ness will get full support for its bid for the status that it requires.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): If I may, I will take the minister's attention further north. Does the minister agree that Wick airport represents a fine facility that is perhaps not used as much as it might be? Does he further agree that increased use would boost tourism in the far north—and, indeed, in Orkney and Shetland, too—and that it would help to underpin the economic regeneration that is vital in view of the continuing decommissioning at Dounreay?

Jim Mather: I accept that, but I also want to highlight every other transport opportunity to get north, including the road and rail network. I visited Wick in the summer. The tourism potential there is magical. I suspect that far too many people in Scotland, let alone the rest of the United Kingdom, never mind those in the rest of the living world, are unaware of the magic of the area.

Mary Scanlon (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I agree about the magic of Caithness.

I welcome the excellent new facilities at the Eden Court theatre and Culloden battlefield, both of which I visited last week. What is being done to ensure the continued increase in flights—and therefore tourists—into Inverness and the rest of the Highlands and Islands?

Jim Mather: I recognise the Eden Court theatre and Culloden. Indeed, in the papers today, I note that Culloden is looking for descendants of those who fought at the battle of Culloden, to ask them to make the return journey to the battlefield.

I continue to press my transport colleagues to ensure that transport to the Highlands and Islands

becomes increasingly affordable and available in order to get more people into the area.

The Presiding Officer: Question 6 was not lodged.

Village Halls

7. Elizabeth Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): To ask the Scottish Executive what support it will provide to village halls during this session of the Parliament. (S3O-1873)

The Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs and the Environment (Richard Lochhead): Funding for village halls will be available through the new £1.6 billion Scotland rural development programme for 2007 to 2013, once it has gained approval from the European Commission of course. In the meantime, we will commission research in partnership with the Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations to establish the current state of rural community facilities in general.

Elizabeth Smith: The minister will be aware of the growing concern among many churches and charitable and voluntary organisations that their exemption from water rates ends in 2010, as a result of changes to the principles that underpin water rate charges. What action is the Scottish Government taking to allay their concerns and to help them to avoid the difficulties that the new regulatory burden will impose?

Richard Lochhead: As the Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs and the Environment, I am paying close attention to the issue, which of course comes under the remit of the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Sustainable Growth. The Government is considering the responses to the review of the charging regime, including on the element that will apply to small organisations, including village halls.

Christine Grahame (South of Scotland) (SNP): Before I put my question to the cabinet secretary, I assure Mike Rumbles that I moved seats not because I wanted to sit further away from him but because the microphone on my console is not working.

Will the cabinet secretary ensure that we sustain our rural village halls, which are the centre of communities, particularly for older people? Indeed, many MSPs use village halls when doing their constituency rounds.

Richard Lochhead: I assure Christine Grahame that the Scottish Government is working flat out to sustain our rural communities. The SCVO is holding a conference in February on the future of village halls. I am looking forward to hearing the outcome of the deliberations then to see how the Government can further help to sustain our rural

communities generally and village halls and facilities in particular.

Train Services (Europe)

8. Charlie Gordon (Glasgow Cathcart) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive whether it will encourage the development of scheduled train services from Scotland to continental Europe via the recently improved Channel tunnel rail link. (S3O-1893)

The Minister for Transport, Infrastructure and Climate Change (Stewart Stevenson): We will continue to work with the Department for Transport to achieve the best solutions for services between Scotland and England with connections to mainland Europe through the Channel tunnel rail link.

Charlie Gordon: I thank the minister for that answer, but of course I am interested in direct services from Scotland to the continent. The Eurostar trains that were intended for our daytime services via the Channel tunnel have been leased to the French, the new sleeper trains that were intended for our night services have been sold to the Canadians, and Eurostar has said that it has no plans for services north of London without a brand new high-speed rail line. In view of the fact that it has been about 12 years since Strathclyde Passenger Transport, under my chairmanship, unsuccessfully took court action against the United Kingdom Government on this matter, does the minister agree that it might be time to have a look at the First ScotRail franchise to see whether we can build ourselves some direct continental services for the future?

Stewart Stevenson: I know of Charlie Gordon's long-term engagement with this subject and I welcome his support for improving services from Scotland to other parts of Europe. However, the responsibility for cross-border services lies primarily with the Secretary of State for Scotland. We can and do give non-binding advice, and we are encouraging the secretary of state and the Westminster Government to examine what significant improvements can be made to ensure that Scotland has access to the Channel tunnel and improved connections across Europe.

Jamie Hepburn (Central Scotland) (SNP): Does the minister agree that decisions by John Prescott and the Labour Government have thus far prevented direct links from Scotland to Europe via the Channel tunnel? Will the Scottish Government continue to ensure that its welcome upgrades to the railway system in Scotland always take into account the potential for links to the wider European network and not just the UK network?

Stewart Stevenson: The member highlights the significant investments that we are making to

improve the railway system in Scotland, thus addressing many of the difficulties that we have inherited. It is a shame that Charlie Gordon was not sufficiently persuasive when he talked to John Prescott, but I am certainly not going to overly criticise him for that.

Scottish Literature (Reclassification)

9. Bill Kidd (Glasgow) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Executive what response the Minister for Europe, External Affairs and Culture has had from the United States Congress to the concerns raised over the reclassification of Scottish literature as a subsection of English literature. (S3O-1947)

The Minister for Europe, External Affairs and Culture (Linda Fabiani): I am delighted to confirm to the chamber that, after reviewing submissions from several correspondents, including the National Library of Scotland, the British Library, Congressman Mike McIntyre and many individuals, the cataloguing policy and support office of the Library of Congress will rescind the decision made regarding Scottish literature, Scottish poetry, and similar headings. *[Applause.]*

Bill Kidd: The minister can tell by the applause that everyone is very pleased about that. We look forward to making sure that the patron saint of poets, Rabbin Burns, is celebrated not only in Scotland but across the United States as well, now that it has come to its senses.

Linda Fabiani: Well, yes. I agree.

The Presiding Officer: It was not really a question, so that is all you need to do.

Scottish Parliament Elections

10. Keith Brown (Ochil) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Executive what progress has been made in negotiations with the United Kingdom Government over elections to the Scottish Parliament, in light of the parliamentary debate on the Gould report. (S3O-1939)

The Minister for Parliamentary Business (Bruce Crawford): Perhaps I could lend Keith Brown some of the Benylin that I was taking last week as he seems to be losing his voice.

The First Minister wrote to the Prime Minister on the day of publication seeking early discussions. The First Minister is now due to meet Des Browne on 24 January. At that meeting, the First Minister will make it clear that the Parliament welcomes the Gould report, including the recommendations calling for the further devolution of executive and legislative powers to the Scottish Government and the Parliament for the administration of its own elections, and he will press for agreement to a timetable for the way ahead.

Keith Brown: I thank the minister for his offer of Benylin.

I encourage the minister to continue the Government's efforts on behalf of the people of Scotland to deliver the Gould report's central and fundamental recommendation, which is to give back the control of our own elections to our own Parliament in Scotland. Will he also consider whether there should be a thorough review of the electronic counting system, which proved extremely expensive, unresponsive on the night and unwieldy and incapable of independent verification?

Bruce Crawford: No one can be proud of the situation that unravelled as a result of the election counting systems on 3 May last year. Of course the Government will review all aspects of those elections. I think that we will receive some very helpful advice on that from the Local Government and Communities Committee, which is currently considering the issues under the able chairmanship of Duncan McNeil.

First Minister's Question Time

12:01

Engagements

1. Ms Wendy Alexander (Paisley North) (Lab): To ask the First Minister what engagements he has planned for the rest of the day. (S3F-427)

The First Minister (Alex Salmond): Later today I will have meetings to take forward the Government's programme for Scotland.

Ms Alexander: Before coming to my substantive question, I begin by offering the First Minister the opportunity to comment to Parliament on the way in which his Government handled the sackings of Julia Bracewell and Dougie Donnelly this week.

Will the First Minister also tell us why his Government is delaying new youth courts in Dundee, Kilmarnock and Paisley when the evaluation of an existing youth court concluded:

"With its fast track procedures and additional resources it was regarded as a model to be aspired to in all summary court business"?

Youth courts have a proven record in taking young people causing chaos in our communities off the streets within a few days. Why is the First Minister denying the same protection to other communities across Scotland?

The First Minister: As Wendy Alexander might remember, the previous Executive decided that there should be a review of the youth courts system, which I think has broad support and certainly has plenty of anecdotal evidence in its favour. The position was to be reviewed in spring next year in the light of the impact of the summary justice reforms. It is entirely sensible to follow that approach and then to consider the roll-out of further youth courts in the light of that review.

On her first question, given that we are establishing one body in charge of developing sport in Scotland, with one board and one chair, it is entirely understandable that the chairs of the two current bodies should stand down so that a new chair can be appointed.

Ms Alexander: The previous Executive decided to open three more youth courts. There were no ifs or buts from Scottish National Party members when they saw the results of youth courts. Mr Kenny Gibson wanted a youth court in Ayrshire and Ms Sandra White wanted one in Glasgow. They were supported by 15 of the First Minister's colleagues, including Mr Neil, Ms Cunningham and two members who are now ministers—Mr Maxwell and Mr Mather. Have they all changed their minds overnight?

Youth courts are not the only issue on which there are concerns about the SNP failing to protect the public. This week, the SNP opposed an amendment to the budget to guarantee an additional 1,000 police officers on Scotland's streets. This week, Grampian Police also had to plunder its budget to meet the looming crisis in police pensions. What assurances will the First Minister offer to communities across Scotland that they will not lose police from their streets in order to fund the pensions shortfall?

The First Minister: Given that at the election Wendy Alexander's party proposed no extra police officers in Scotland, I suppose that we should welcome that substantial conversion. I point the member to the Audit Scotland report that was published last year, which argued that the Government needed

"to develop an understanding of the cost-effectiveness of different service interventions to address the offending behaviour of young people".

Although the report was published in the autumn, Audit Scotland was reviewing the progress of the previous Executive.

It is entirely sensible for us to review the position, as was intended, in the spring of 2009, in the light of the summary justice reforms that have been introduced, so that roll-out of youth courts—which enjoy broad support—across the country can be considered. We are following the precepts of Audit Scotland in that matter and conducting the review that was planned by the previous Executive.

We now know the cost-effectiveness that the Labour Party intends for the people of Scotland. From the Finance Committee, we know the budgets that Labour intended to cut in order to finance the things that Wendy Alexander talks about at First Minister's question time: we know that it wanted to cut spending on road safety; we know that it wanted to stop work on the M8, the M80 and the M74; and we know that it wanted to cut road gritting and clearing—the winter maintenance budget. I repeat: Labour wanted to cut the winter maintenance budget. We know that it also wanted to cut the budget of the Scottish Crime and Drug Enforcement Agency and cut support for anti-terrorism measures. Given the list of cuts that the Labour Party took to the Finance Committee, is it surprising that it got the support of no other party in Parliament?

Ms Alexander: Let me deal with the two factual points that preceded that rant. Labour created not 500 or 1,000 new police officers, but 1,500, as the First Minister well knows. He also knows full well that Audit Scotland did not evaluate youth courts in its review of youth justice.

The country knows that the constitutional purpose of First Minister's question time is for the First Minister to account for his decisions and not simply to rant. Let me use it for the purpose for which it was intended.

A week ago, the Cabinet Secretary for Justice told Parliament that in Grampian an additional 230 police officers would be recruited by 2009. How does that square with the view of the convener of Grampian police authority, who said that

"money which should be spent on policing in the Grampian area will have to be spent on police pensions"?

The question is clear: will the Cabinet Secretary for Justice's guarantee on police numbers in Grampian be met or not?

The First Minister: Wendy Alexander should extend her reading. The latest information on Grampian police numbers is set out in an article of 9 January in *The Press and Journal*, which is headed "Boost to give north-east 'record level' of officers". [*Interruption.*] I hear the comment that that is not what Martin Greig said. Unfortunately, the article goes on to say:

"Councillor Martin Greig last night welcomed the extra resources, which he said will see an additional 60 officers join the force during the next financial year".

Martin Greig continued:

"We are definitely moving in the right direction".

He also said:

"It is good to see we are well on course to reaching record levels of officers."

In the most recent article on the subject, Martin Greig said that Grampian is on track to have an unprecedented number of officers. Given that he is the very person whom Wendy Alexander mentioned, perhaps I should offer her a subscription to *The Press and Journal* of Aberdeen.

The Presiding Officer (Alex Fergusson): Ms Alexander, your final question.

Ms Alexander: The First Minister knows well that there has been a rise in police budgets, which we welcome. However, he also knows that police budgets all over Scotland are being plundered to deal with the pensions shortfall that is forecast.

Let me make this very simple for all of us. Will the First Minister undertake to publish the best estimates of the police pensions bill for the next three years, so that forces can plan ahead and deal with the pensions hole, which has been forecast to be as much as £50 million next year? Will he reassure communities throughout Scotland that he will publish that estimate and that the pensions crisis will not be paid for out of operational police budgets, or will he simply admit that when the rhetoric is put to one side, we will

not have the reality of the numbers on the police pensions crisis?

The First Minister: The crisis that Wendy Alexander describes might have been developing over the past eight years while the Labour Party was in government. The figures that she asks for are already with the police boards and local authorities, and discussions are under way on how we can address the pensions issue, which has built up over a substantial period.

The difference between this Government and the previous Executive in addressing such issues lies in the historic concordat between local and national Government in Scotland. I see that a number of Labour group leaders have joined the ring-fence rebellion: David O'Neill of North Ayrshire, Kevin Keenan of Dundee, Jim McCabe of North Lanarkshire and Eddie McAvooy of South Lanarkshire. Given the support of local authorities for financial flexibility and the end of ring fencing, what did Wendy Alexander do to face down that rebellion? She gave an interview at the weekend, in which she said:

"Well, I think there should be a big reduction in ring-fencing ... I am all in favour of local discretion ... I think lots of the changes are a good idea ... I do think we need to give people discretion to make the right decisions locally."

Wendy—welcome to the big tent against ring fencing.

The Presiding Officer: A final question from Ms Alexander.

Members: No!

The Presiding Officer: Order. It is totally within order to offer a final question to Ms Alexander.

Ms Alexander: For the third time, I ask the First Minister whether he will publish the best estimates of the police pensions bill for the next three years. Yes or no?

The First Minister: If Wendy Alexander had not started on sportscotland, she would have had more opportunity to produce police numbers. We are in discussions with local authorities and police boards. Because of the new historic concordat and our new relationship with local authorities, we intend to deal with such difficult issues, as the previous Executive singularly failed to do.

Secretary of State for Scotland (Meetings)

2. Annabel Goldie (West of Scotland) (Con): To ask the First Minister when he will next meet the Secretary of State for Scotland. (S3F-428)

The First Minister (Alex Salmond): I will meet the Secretary of State for Scotland next week to discuss taking forward the recommendations of the Gould report. I shall do so armed with the substantial, overwhelming vote of the Parliament

to support the further devolution of executive and legislative powers to the Government and the Parliament so that we can run and administer our own elections.

Annabel Goldie: It is always good to see the First Minister supporting devolution in any form, so we welcome that.

I raise with the First Minister a subject dear to his heart: opinion polls, which are never dearer to him than when they are about him. In politics, we are all allowed our little bit of egocentric vanity. The opinion poll that I want to talk about was carried out by the Scottish National Party's favourite pollster, YouGov, and was reported this week in the *Scottish Daily Express*. I was tempted to refer to the poll finding of a record high support for devolution, but why talk about what the rest of us know already?

What intrigued me more about the poll was the compelling majority support—70 per cent of those who were questioned—for keeping in Scotland a mix of energy sources, including nuclear power. Last week, John Swinney said:

"Scotland does not want or need new nuclear power."

Will the First Minister admit that his favourite pollster got it right and that his favourite minister got it wrong?

The First Minister: I will certainly not make any attempt to rubbish the poll in general because, if I remember correctly, it showed a 9 per cent SNP lead across the country. However, even an excellent pollster with a great track record, such as YouGov, might benefit from putting the questions on nuclear power in a way that outlines the facts. I suspect that, if we asked, for example, whether the country wanted to waste billions of pounds going down a nuclear dead end—that is the truth—even Annabel Goldie would have difficulty answering yes to the question.

Annabel Goldie: I am interested in that reply because, not for the first time, the First Minister ignores what Scotland wants. However, let us deal with his attempt to deal with what Scotland needs. It is not only the YouGov poll that gets it right. It is perfectly clear that, to provide a secure and affordable low-carbon base-load energy supply in Scotland, we need a mix of energy provision in which renewables and nuclear power are complementary. That fact is supported by an impressive array of independent experts. The bottom line for Scotland is that for more than half our energy production we rely on finite and diminishing fossil-fuel sources. Yes—let us grow our renewables, but let us not risk the lights going out in Scotland because of the blockheaded parochial dogma of one man and his party. Does the First Minister really want that to be his legacy?

The First Minister: I understand that the votes later on today will give us an indication of the Parliament's view on the nuclear option. Whatever Annabel Goldie says about it, she should not say that it is cheap. I am old enough—Annabel may also be old enough—to remember when it was said that nuclear power would be too cheap to meter. In fact, it has been by far the most expensive energy source over the past 40 years, with many huge problems still to be overcome.

Let us have a look at the facts on electricity generation in Scotland. As we know, the most recent figures—for 2006—show a dramatic reduction in the nuclear component because Hunterston B was mostly offline over the period, as it was again last year. The nuclear component fell from 38 per cent to 26 per cent of electricity production in Scotland in 2006. In that period, when the nuclear component was falling like a stone, Scottish exports of electricity to England increased by 50 per cent.

I saw much of this morning's debate on energy and I know that there are major doubts and divisions in the Labour Party on the issue, but I hope that, across the Parliament, we will all be able to rally round the reality that virtually no other country in Europe has the vast array of potentially cheap, renewable and low-carbon energy sources that Scotland has. The real task for our country is not to secure our electricity production, which we will and can do, but to find the economic means of exporting the substantial surplus of power to the energy-poor areas of Europe. That is what this Government has been addressing and, incidentally, it is why we should welcome the analysis of undersea pipelines for electricity connections that the Crown Estate has published today.

Cabinet (Meetings)

3. Nicol Stephen (Aberdeen South) (LD): To ask the First Minister what issues will be discussed at the next meeting of the Cabinet. (S3F-429)

The First Minister (Alex Salmond): The next meeting of the Cabinet will discuss issues of importance to the people of Scotland.

Nicol Stephen: Last week, the First Minister's Minister for Communities and Sport, Stewart Maxwell, had to apologise to Parliament because of the mess that he is making of sports policy in Scotland. Why does he keep his job when Dougie Donnelly and Julia Bracewell lose theirs? Dougie Donnelly says that the First Minister's plans for sport are

"a ridiculous piece of political manoeuvring"

and that real damage could be done to our athletes' prospects at the Olympic and

Commonwealth games. Who does the First Minister think the people of Scotland trust more on sport: Dougie Donnelly or Stewart Maxwell?

The First Minister: They will certainly not be trusting Nicol Stephen—that is for sure. As was illustrated in the debate and decision on sportscotland, two effective organisations were taken to create one organisation, with one board and, therefore, one chair. That decision was in line with our wish to deliver all policies effectively and—of course—to reduce the number of organisations and quangos in Scotland. Obviously, if we have two chairs becoming one chair, the previous chairs will be rather disappointed that there is only one job where there had been two. That is understandable.

What did the people who do not have such an immediate interest say about the situation? Experts in sport in Scotland responded to the announcement last week. Derek Casey, the Glasgow 2014 Commonwealth games bid director, described the decisions last week as a "win, win, win" situation for Scottish sport. Chris Robison, the policy director of the Scottish Sports Association said:

"As long as the SIS continues to deliver services to athletes, I don't think it matters to the majority of our members whether it is independent. I think decluttering is a good idea. And we are glad sportscotland has survived."

Those are people with expertise, and they approve of the Government's decision.

Nicol Stephen: Not a single one of those people welcomed the sackings or supported them in any way. The First Minister is allowing ministers to foul up sportscotland. He made a nonsense promise in his manifesto, and it took eight months of turmoil before his minister botched it and broke it. Now, his vindictive and petty response is to sack Dougie Donnelly and Julia Bracewell. There are just 204 days until the start of the Olympic games. Instead of sharpening up Scotland's performance at those games, ministers were sharpening their long knives for the back of Dougie Donnelly. The Government is doing real damage to Scotland's sporting prospects. Why is it that, with Alex Salmond, top-quality sports leaders have to go, but his Fosbury flop of a sports minister can stay?

The First Minister: As is clear, the two bodies are not just merging: a radical overhaul will be carried out to create a single body under a single board. If a single body with a single board is to be created, it will not be a good idea to continue with two chairs. Even the Liberal Democrats might find it a bit difficult to have two chairs of one board. If there is one board and one chair, the two previous chairs clearly cannot continue in their jobs. Therefore, they are asked to stand down, as a

new appointment will be made. That seems perfectly understandable.

Members: They were sacked.

The Presiding Officer: Order.

The First Minister: It seems that the Liberal Democrats might have continued with one body but two chairs. That is the sort of logic that created the quango state in Scotland, which the Government is now sorting out.

The Presiding Officer: I will take a question from Jeremy Purvis on a constituency issue.

Jeremy Purvis (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD): The First Minister will be aware of the very regrettable decision by Barbour Ltd to close its factory at Tweedbank in my constituency, which has resulted in 46 redundancies of hard-working and loyal staff. The partnership action for continuing employment team has been activated. Will the First Minister ensure that the staff, whom I met last night at a cross-party meeting, together with Christine Grahame, Karen Gillon and John Lamont, receive all the support that is needed?

The First Minister will be aware that the textile industry in Scotland is fragile and needs additional support. Will he reverse the decision to downgrade the status of the promotional and marketing body for the industry, Scottish Textiles, which has scant presence in the economic strategy but which is crucial for supporting that fundamental business for the industry?

The First Minister: The Minister for Enterprise, Energy and Tourism has met textile industry representatives to discuss the latter point. I say to the local MSPs who visited the factory that the PACE team is aware of the situation and has met management. All facilities and support will be made available to the workforce. I represent a rural constituency, so I am well aware that 46 jobs can be a huge and substantial loss, as it will be in Tweedbank. Therefore, we consider the closure to be of great regret and significance, which is why the assistance that the member mentioned has already been mobilised.

Locally Sourced Food

4. Aileen Campbell (South of Scotland) (SNP): To ask the First Minister what steps the Scottish Government is taking to promote healthy diets from locally sourced products among the people of Scotland. (S3F-445)

The First Minister (Alex Salmond): The discussion document "Choosing the Right Ingredients: The Future for Food in Scotland", which was launched this week, provides an opportunity for our farmers and consumers to become involved in the conversation to inform a long-term vision for food in Scotland. We are keen

to encourage local suppliers to access a range of markets and to respond to the demand for healthier and affordable food in Scotland.

Aileen Campbell: I welcome the launch of the national food discussion. Does the First Minister agree that introducing children to healthier and—which is important—locally sourced products at an early age will have lifelong benefits, and that the Government's pilot of free school meals can only help in that process? Furthermore, does he agree that ensuring that all our children have a healthy diet, regardless of their background, should be central to any national food policy?

The First Minister: I agree with those points. The free school meals pilot gives us a substantial opportunity to pursue some of the arguments. Clearly, a healthy and balanced diet will not always include produce that is grown or sourced successfully in Scotland, but where we can produce home-grown solutions, we should do so. We should be aware of the great concern throughout the public sector about that. For example, there is concern that food in a number of private finance initiative hospitals has been delivered over vast distances and not always in the most edible condition, according to patients. Fresh food is best and, where it is possible to deliver it in our public services, we should do so.

Organ Donation

5. George Foulkes (Lothians) (Lab): To ask the First Minister whether the Scottish Government supports a system of presumed consent for organ donation. (S3F-434)

The First Minister (Alex Salmond): We need a thorough public debate on that sensitive issue. In "Better Health, Better Care: Action Plan", we set out our commitment to have such a debate. We welcome the fact that the organ donation task force is looking at the pros and cons. We expect to have its report on the issue by the summer. The member will know that the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Wellbeing and I have indicated our support for moving in that direction, but he will also realise that a public debate is necessary.

George Foulkes: I thank the First Minister for a helpful response—for once. I am glad that he and Gordon Brown see eye to eye on this issue, at least. Does he agree that the Scottish Government should implement the recommendations in the report that the organ donation task force published yesterday, including the recommendation that we set up a network of transplant co-ordinators? However, as that will have only a limited impact on the figure of 1,000 people in the United Kingdom who die each year unnecessarily while waiting for transplants, will he make representations on behalf of the Scottish Government to the task force—which is considering presumed consent—

that legislation on the issue should be introduced throughout the United Kingdom at the first possible opportunity?

The First Minister: It is not just Gordon Brown and I who see eye to eye; it seems that George Foulkes and I do, too—I do not know which is the more dramatic combination, but I certainly welcome that.

As George Foulkes will know, yesterday, we announced our support for the range of initiatives from the UK organ donation task force. The Government is involved fully in that task force—it is ours as well as the Westminster Government's. The initiatives are designed to remove the barriers to organ donation in the existing system. It is expected and hoped that by introducing those initiatives a not-inconsiderable 50 per cent increase in organ donation can be achieved in five years. Although it is important that we have a debate on presumed consent—both the Prime Minister and I realise that a debate is necessary and require one to take place—it is also important that we make substantial progress on the recommendations in the report that was published yesterday. All members of Parliament, whatever their views on the matter, should remember that about 700 people are waiting for transplants right now in Scotland.

Mike Rumbles (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (LD): Like a good many members, I am a donor-card carrier. We all want the task force's recommendations to be implemented, because that is the way to increase organ donations. However, does the First Minister agree that consent that is presumed by the state is no consent at all and that the way forward is to gain real consent from individuals, through the Governments in the UK and Scotland doing everything possible to increase the number of registrations?

The First Minister: The initiatives that were announced yesterday address the unanimously agreed requirements to increase the range of registrations, make the system more effective, and achieve a 50 per cent increase in organ donations over the next five years. I think that everyone, including Mike Rumbles, would agree on those initiatives. In that context, we can have a debate, which is necessary and important. A variety of points of view on presumed consent will be expressed. My thinking and the Government's thinking is that we should move ahead with the recommendations that were announced yesterday, and that we should have the necessary debate. Ethical and moral issues arise, as do libertarian and political issues.

The Presiding Officer: Members will forgive me if we overrun slightly on this important question. I call Kenneth Gibson.

Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP):

Having worked on a member's bill to introduce presumed consent when the SNP decided last year to support the idea, I welcome the SNP's present stance. Members all round the chamber support the idea, although there are those such as Mr Rumbles who are opposed to it.

Will the First Minister use his influence to move the argument forward? Does he personally support presumed consent, as four of his 16 ministers did when John Farquhar Munro lodged an amendment to the Human Tissue (Scotland) Bill in the previous session of Parliament?

The First Minister: I think that I revealed that information to George Foulkes a few minutes ago. I am sympathetic to moving towards a system of presumed consent, but I acknowledge that a debate is necessary.

My opinion is moving on the issue. Attitudes now are different from the attitudes of a few years ago. Attitudes are moving towards presumed consent being a necessary initiative to save lives that are unnecessarily being lost at present. However, those of us who are sympathetic towards a move in that direction should acknowledge that others have legitimate concerns. It is right and proper that there should be a full debate on an issue that touches on many moral and ethical questions.

Dr Richard Simpson (Mid Scotland and Fife)

(Lab): I recommended a move to presumed consent to the Health and Community Care Committee in my report on the topic in 2000. The recommendation was not accepted by the committee because public opinion had not moved. However, does the First Minister agree that, if we now move to presumed consent, the wishes of the family must still be respected and the family must still be asked for their view? With that element of additional consent, presumed consent in an opt-out system becomes feasible.

The First Minister: Yes, I agree with that. I have considered various safeguards that supporters of presumed consent have suggested. I repeat my view that a debate is necessary. We should all contribute to that debate; the Government certainly will and individual members of the Government certainly will. However, the priority is to move ahead with the range of initiatives that were announced yesterday. If they are applied correctly and implemented with enthusiasm, they will, I hope, result in a 50 per cent increase of available organ donors over the next five years.

Nuclear Power (Job Losses)

6. John Lamont (Roxburgh and Berwickshire)

(Con): To ask the First Minister what information the Scottish Government has on how many jobs

will be lost in Scotland following the announcement that it will not allow any new nuclear power stations to be built in Scotland. (S3F-433)

The First Minister (Alex Salmond): Scotland's two nuclear power stations will remain operational until the end of their safe economic life. Although employment at those sites is a matter for British Energy, we do not expect significant change over that time. As the member will know, after that time there will be a decommissioning process that will last many years. It is a very expensive process but, of course, it results in the generation of employment.

John Lamont: I thank the First Minister for his answer, although I doubt whether many people in Scotland's nuclear industry will.

The First Minister's decision to block new nuclear power stations will mean the loss of 705 core jobs at Torness and 671 at Hunterston. In addition, the decision raises concerns about Scotland's ability to meet its future energy demands. That may well jeopardise future investment in Scotland as businesses choose to invest elsewhere. How does the First Minister's decision on nuclear power tally with his objective to make Scotland wealthier?

The First Minister: I say at the outset that British Energy's employment figures are 460 at Hunterston and 470 at Torness. However, I do not see why people—even those who hold John Lamont's views—will be disappointed by my answer to his original question, in which I pointed out that the stations will remain operational until the end of their safe working life.

Although every job in Scotland should of course be valued, if we were to invest billions more in new nuclear generation, by definition we would not be investing those funds in other forms of generation. Although, of course, I recognise the importance of jobs in communities, let us just remember that there are now 2,600 jobs in renewable energy in Scotland—jobs that did not exist a few years ago, but which have been created by the substantial increase in renewables generation. As we move to clean coal solutions at Longannet, there will be an investment of—I think from memory—some £600 million, which will safeguard jobs in Scotland over the next generation. This country has a vast array of cheap, competitive and green energy resources that will generate thousands of jobs throughout Scotland in the energy sector.

The Presiding Officer: That brings us to the end of First Minister's question time.

Tricia Marwick (Central Fife) (SNP): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. Ms Alexander in her questioning of the First Minister raised issues regarding sportscotland, youth courts, police in

Grampian, police numbers and police pensions—I might have missed one or two others. In total, Ms Alexander took 13 minutes for the question and answer session. If Ms Alexander cannot focus her questions, she should not complain about the kind of answers that she gets from the First Minister. The effect of that was that there were seven minutes of normal time left for questions from back-bench members.

The Presiding Officer: What is the point of order, Ms Marwick?

Tricia Marwick: Although I appreciate the overrun that you have allowed today, Presiding Officer, will you reflect on First Minister's questions and on whether an adequate balance between questions by front-bench members and questions by back-bench members was achieved?

The Presiding Officer: I assure the member that I spend half my life reflecting on First Minister's questions. Questions are asked and answers are given—both sides of the equation add to the length of the session.

Margo MacDonald (Lothians) (Ind): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I was going to write to you about the issue of how questions and answers are delivered in First Minister's question time, but I will raise it now, given Ms Marwick's point of order. I believe that one senior member was out of order in asking the First Minister's opinion about an opinion poll. The First Minister is here to give an account of his Government's actions, not to say what he thinks of opinion polls. I suggest with all due humility that you get the business managers together and go through the format for First Minister's question time.

The Presiding Officer: Margo MacDonald knows perfectly well that that is not a point of order for me. I think that we should all go to lunch.

12:38

Meeting suspended until 14:15.

14:15

On resuming—

Question Time

SCOTTISH EXECUTIVE

Health and Wellbeing

Healthy Living Centres (Remote and Islands Communities)

1. Jamie McGrigor (Highlands and Islands) (Con): To ask the Scottish Executive what support is available for healthy living centres in remote and island communities. (S3O-1872)

The Minister for Public Health (Shona Robison): Community health initiatives, such as healthy living centres, can play a vital role in complementing public services through effective approaches to improving people's health in hard-to-reach communities. The Scottish Government provides funding to health boards and local government to support local services such as healthy living centres, in line with local needs and priorities.

Jamie McGrigor: Does the minister recognise that the future of many healthy living centres in remote and island communities, including the one on Islay in Argyll, is in doubt because of their difficulties in convincing the Big Lottery Fund that their work affects enough people to merit support? Surely the population of Islay, which is 3,400, is large enough to justify the continuation of a healthy living centre that up to now has been successful in providing services to the people of the island. However, the centre will close if further funding is not forthcoming. Will the minister make representations to the Big Lottery Fund in that regard and emphasise how valuable the centres are in helping to improve health and well-being in some of our most remote communities?

Shona Robison: Last week, the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Wellbeing met healthy living centre alliance representatives, among whom was a general practitioner from Islay who set out very well the case that the member has just outlined. We are considering further options for ensuring that the healthy living centres' good work can be sustained, but I stress the point that I made in my first response, which is that we give resources to health boards and local government to develop at a local level the very services that the member has highlighted.

Ian McKee (Lothians) (SNP): The need for co-ordinated services such as those offered by healthy living centres is just as great in deprived urban areas such as Wester Hailes in my region.

Is the minister able to assure me that her Government will continue to encourage and support the healthy living centre development programme in all areas of Scotland?

The Presiding Officer (Alex Fergusson): The original question was actually about remote and island communities, but I am willing to allow that supplementary if the minister wants to answer it.

Shona Robison: As I said earlier, the future funding of healthy living centres is a matter primarily for local health boards and local authorities. That said, on 25 November last year, the cabinet secretary wrote to all territorial health board chairs, asking them to consider the importance of community health initiatives in their area—whether urban or rural—and the support that can be offered to ensure that valued activities for health improvement in the community are continued. I reiterate that we met representatives of the healthy living centre alliance last week and that we are considering further options to ensure that that good work continues.

National Health Service (Fire Safety)

2. Michael Matheson (Falkirk West) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Executive what progress the NHS is making to improve fire safety in hospitals. (S3O-1949)

The Minister for Public Health (Shona Robison): I believe that current fire safety measures in Scottish hospitals are already highly effective. Indeed, that view is supported by the level of fire incidents reported recently to the Scottish Government as a requirement of the health directorates' fire safety policy for NHS Scotland.

However, I accept the need to maintain a high level of vigilance. In order to keep fire safety issues under continual review, the NHS Scotland fire safety advisory group meets quarterly to address policy and guidance issues and to consider any emerging issues in the United Kingdom health care sector.

Michael Matheson: I draw the minister's attention to concerns expressed by a number of organisations about NHS Forth Valley's intention not to install fire sprinklers in the new Larbert hospital. Is she aware that for more than a year now the local fire authority has asked repeatedly for such sprinklers to be installed? Does she agree with the recent comment of Her Majesty's fire service inspectorate that it would be good practice to install fire sprinklers in hospitals and, if so, does she think that NHS Forth Valley should ensure that the new Larbert hospital complies with that best practice standard?

Shona Robison: I am aware of the concerns that the member raises. A group comprising the

contractors, fire safety and building experts and representatives from Central Scotland Fire and Rescue Service is reviewing fire safety design in each area of the new Larbert hospital. Final decisions on the installation of automatic fire suppression systems have not been made as yet—the process of appraisal and review is ongoing. So far, it has led to automatic fire suppression systems being planned for specific areas that have been deemed to be high risk—for example, the data communication rooms and kitchen extractor hoods. I have asked to be kept informed of the progress that is made and will ensure that the local member is kept up to date.

NHS Fife (Meetings)

3. Dr Richard Simpson (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive when it last met NHS Fife and what issues were discussed. (S3O-2057)

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Health and Wellbeing (Nicola Sturgeon): I meet all NHS board chairs on a monthly basis. I chaired the annual review of NHS Fife on 13 August last year and have met managers and front-line staff during visits to health care facilities in Fife, for example when I opened the new haematology unit at Queen Margaret hospital and the new Linburn Road health centre in Dunfermline on 20 November. Scottish Government officials also meet NHS Fife regularly to discuss a wide range of issues.

Dr Simpson: I ask the cabinet secretary to join me in praising health boards and local authorities generally for the substantial progress that they have made over the past six years in tackling delayed discharges, and I welcome the Scottish National Party Government's "Better Health, Better Care" target to have zero delayed discharges by March 2008.

However, is the cabinet secretary aware of the failure of the SNP and Liberal-led Fife Council to address the rise in the number of delayed discharges from Fife hospitals to a peak of more than 160? Does she know that 140 patients still await funding for community places? Is she aware that Fife NHS Board has already had to commit £4 million of extra funds to prevent acute hospitals in Fife from having major problems with admissions as a result of Fife Council's failure on delayed discharges? Does she wish to amend her statement to the Health and Sport Committee that the rise in the number of delayed discharges in the autumn of this year could be explained as normal seasonal variation? Will she undertake to talk to Fife Council and Fife NHS Board about that major problem?

The Presiding Officer: That is quite a lot of questions. Over to you, minister.

Nicola Sturgeon: I will do my best, Presiding Officer.

If the member cares to look at past trends, he will realise that there is seasonal fluctuation in delayed discharges. For the record, I hope that he will accept that.

Any issues that Fife NHS Board and Fife Council face with regard to social care services have at their root an overspend in the Fife Council budget that was caused by the most recent Labour administration in Fife. That is the reality of the situation that Fife Council and, by extension, Fife NHS Board are dealing with.

Let me explain to the Parliament the action that is being taken to deal with the problems that were caused by that administration. To reduce the number of delayed discharges to which the member referred, Fife NHS Board is funding 40 care home placements at a cost of £3.2 million. In addition, the NHS board and local authority partnership is increasing home care. The council leader and the chair of the NHS board have personally taken leadership of the effort to reduce the number of delayed discharges and to get the partnership firmly back on track. The joint improvement team has recently been invited to Fife to assist—a scoping visit will be made at the end of January. All those measures should provide considerable reassurance to the Parliament that community and social work services in Fife are in better hands now than they were under Fife Council's Labour administration.

Tricia Marwick (Central Fife) (SNP): I thank the cabinet secretary for her extremely full response to Richard Simpson. Is she aware that at a recent meeting, Fife NHS Board made it clear to all the MSPs who bothered to turn up that there have been more discharges this year than in any previous year? She is well aware that the Labour Party left Fife Council with no reserves whatever and an underfunded social work budget, and that any present problems are directly related to the previous administration.

Will the cabinet secretary welcome the positive initiatives of Fife Council and the health board, and will she join me in condemning the scaremongering of some Labour MSPs who should know better?

Nicola Sturgeon: Tricia Marwick is right to point out that there have been more discharges this year than in any other year. I pay tribute to NHS Fife and the local authority for that.

Tricia Marwick is also right to point out the repeated and consistent scaremongering on this and many other issues from an Opposition that is obviously bereft of any positive ideas to put forward in or outwith this chamber.

In Fife, we see a legacy of Labour mismanagement. There are plenty of other examples of that around the country. Perhaps that is one of the main reasons why Fife Council is now administered in part by the SNP and why Scotland is now governed by the SNP.

Claire Baker (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): During the national health service waiting times debate on 27 September, the minister stated that she had sent in a team to examine the situation in Fife. Can she inform the chamber of the findings and recommendations of that team and repeat her commitment that Fife will meet the six-week delayed discharge target later this year?

Nicola Sturgeon: All NHS boards and councils are expected to meet the targets on delayed discharge. I assume that Claire Baker was listening to my answer to Richard Simpson, so she will have heard me detail the action that is being taken by the NHS board and by Fife Council to deal with the problem, which is a legacy of the previous council administration. She will also have heard me say that the joint improvement team has been invited to Fife to provide support and assistance where that is necessary. There will be a visit by the joint improvement team at the end of January.

The council, the NHS board and I will continue to be held to account, as is right, for progress that is made. However, I am absolutely satisfied that the board and the council are getting to grips with considerable problems that were not of their making.

Helen Eadie (Dunfermline East) (Lab): Minister, are you aware that, when Labour left office, just prior to May last year, the number of short-term-stay beds that were blocked was zero and that the number of long-term-stay beds that were blocked had been brought down to 20, after an enormous amount of funding was invested by the then Minister for Health and Community Care? I cannot remember the exact figure, but I know that it was a considerable sum that amounted to millions.

Are you also aware—

The Presiding Officer: I am not aware of anything, Mrs Eadie—I should correct that; I am aware of the odd thing. You should refer to the minister in the third person.

Helen Eadie: I apologise, Presiding Officer.

Cabinet secretary, are you also aware that I am not scaremongering when I raise these issues and that I am responding to the queue of people from all over Fife who are at my door because they are so alarmed? The fact is that there are serious problems in the acute hospital service in Fife.

The Presiding Officer: Mrs Eadie—

Helen Eadie: Minister, are you aware that the hospital service in Fife is on its knees at the moment because of the failure to address the problem of Fife Council not making funding available? Labour dipped into its reserves. Labour always has the capacity to make sure—

The Presiding Officer: Mrs Eadie, that is enough. We have the gist of the question.

Nicola Sturgeon: I am aware that, when Labour left office last May, Fife and the rest of Scotland breathed an enormous sigh of relief. There was, however, one downside to Labour being kicked out of the administration in Fife Council last year, which is that it meant that Labour was not made to stay around to take responsibility for the mess that it had created. *[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Mrs Eadie, order.

Nicola Sturgeon: The upside, of course, is that Fife Council is now led by the SNP and that, in partnership with NHS Fife, we have team of people who are working hard to get to grips with the issue. I think that that team is doing very well and I wish it every success.

Children's Cancer Services (Aberdeen)

4. Lewis Macdonald (Aberdeen Central) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive whether the full range of children's cancer services will continue to be delivered in Aberdeen. (S3O-1905)

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Health and Wellbeing (Nicola Sturgeon): I expect to receive within the next few weeks recommendations from an option appraisal of children's cancer services that will inform the national delivery plan for specialist children's services. The delivery plan will be subject to consultation early this year.

Lewis Macdonald: I am sure that the minister will be aware of the fact that quite different reports have been circulated in the local press regarding both the timetable and the likely outcome of the consideration of the matter.

I will press the minister on the timing a little bit further. She will be aware that, following her decision to move cleft lip and palate surgery away from Aberdeen, there will be intense interest in the decision when it is made. Will she indicate a little more clearly to the families concerned when that consultation process is likely to begin?

Nicola Sturgeon: I confirm, as I did in my initial answer, that I expect to receive the report within the next few weeks—I hope to receive it by the end of the month. I will then need to consider the report, but any changes consequent on it will, of course, be subject to full consultation. The national steering group was set up in 2006—indeed, it was set up by the previous Administration—to develop

a national delivery plan for children's specialist services. That group is leading the work on children's cancer services.

It is important to point out that underpinning that work is a Scottish Government commitment to two new children's hospitals, in Glasgow and Edinburgh, and continued support for existing facilities at Aberdeen children's hospital and the children's hospital in Dundee. It would not be appropriate for me to go into further detail at the moment, given that no decisions have been taken—perhaps that means that people should not put too much store by what they read in the newspapers, because the final decisions will not be taken by newspapers, but by me.

This Government has a clear presumption against centralisation of services—a stance that has been vindicated this week in two independent reports. That does not mean that there will never be any specialisation of services, but it does mean that where such specialisation is proposed, there must be strong evidence to show that it is clearly in the patient interest.

Brian Adam (Aberdeen North) (SNP): I am glad that the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Wellbeing has pointed out another bit of Labour's legacy to Scotland—the initiation of those reviews. I hope that she can confirm for me that they were initiated by the previous Government and that the neurosurgery review and the children's cancer services review stood out as being unusual aspects of the Kerr report, in that they talked about centralisation whereas Kerr talked about other aspects—

The Presiding Officer: Will Mr Adam please ask a question?

Brian Adam: Will the minister tell me what her decision will be based on? Will it be based on evidence of safety and sustainability, or on other factors?

Nicola Sturgeon: I can confirm for Brian Adam that the national steering group on specialist children's services was set up by the previous Administration in 2006. Having said that, however, that group is doing important work, and I hope that every member in the chamber would agree that in the case of all services—but particularly when we are dealing with children, and children with cancer—we must ensure that we have services of the very highest quality that give those children the best possible chance and the best possible clinical outcomes.

I am more than happy to confirm for Brian Adam that, as I said in my previous answer, all decisions that I take about the future of hospital services anywhere will be taken on the basis of evidence. I will want to be assured that any proposed changes are made in the knowledge that they will result in

clear benefit to patients. That is the way in which I will proceed, and I will do so very firmly, in the national interest and in the interests of patients.

Obesity

5. Mary Scanlon (Highlands and Islands) (Con): To ask the Scottish Executive what action is being taken to tackle obesity. (S3O-1875)

The Minister for Public Health (Shona Robison): We are delivering a wide range of actions to support people in achieving and maintaining a healthy weight, including implementation of the Schools (Health Promotion and Nutrition) (Scotland) Act 2007.

Over the next three years, we will be investing a further £14.7 million—in addition to increased spending on healthy eating and physical activity—to tackle obesity.

Government and other sectors all have key roles in creating environments that make it easier for people to be more active in their everyday lives and to make healthier choices in what they eat.

Mary Scanlon: I note the Government's commitment—in the budget and elsewhere—to tackling children's obesity but, given that around 60 per cent of Scottish adults are overweight or obese, what is being done to provide weight management services and support for adults? I must add, Presiding Officer, that the question is intended for the greater good of public health in Scotland, rather than for personal advantage.

The Presiding Officer: I do not know what to say to that. [*Laughter.*]

Shona Robison: I think that that goes without saying, Mary.

We will bring forward an obesity action plan in the near future. On the issue of adults, which Mary Scanlon raised in her question, our thinking is around the roll-out of the counterweight programme, which is an effective programme that is delivered nationally through general practitioners and adult treatment services. At the moment, it is focused on the keep well areas, but we want to take it forward on a national basis. We are also considering how we can take advantage of workplace-based weight monitoring and engage employers to play their part in making such services available to their employees.

I assure Mary Scanlon that we are determined to make progress in tackling obesity, which is one of our major public health challenges. I look forward to sharing more information with her and other members when we publish the action plan in due course.

Aileen Campbell (South of Scotland) (SNP): Does the minister agree that the decision by

Scottish Labour MPs to vote for the transfer of Scottish lottery funds away from good causes—many of which help Scottish youngsters to get fit and healthy—to the London Olympics is deplorable and will in no way assist her with the fight against obesity?

Shona Robison: I agree with Aileen Campbell that the possible loss of £184 million to Scottish good causes as a result of the transfer, for which Scottish Labour MPs voted, will not help to tackle obesity or, more generally, health inequalities in our society. It will certainly not help the weak, dispossessed and vulnerable in our society.

Margaret Curran (Glasgow Baillieston) (Lab): I add that messing up sportscotland has not done anything for the minister's obesity strategy either.

On the question of obesity, is the national co-ordinator post to be continued? If so, will their work be concentrated on deprived areas? On the £14.7 million that the minister said is being spent on tackling obesity, how much of that money is being targeted at deprived communities? Is the budget being increased? Will she continue to increase it during the next three years?

Shona Robison: Margaret Curran will be aware that more than £100 million a year of additional funding is going into health improvement measures due to the Scottish National Party Government's budget. Of course, a lot of the resources will be focused on tackling health inequalities. The Government is giving great priority to that area, which is why I chair the task force on tackling health inequalities. We are considering what additional measures we should put in place to take the agenda forward. We are also considering how to bring together the strands of food and health, physical activity, the obesity action plan and the local co-ordinators to create a more coherent policy to tackle obesity in our society. As I said in my answer to the previous question, obesity is one of the major public health challenges in Scotland.

National Health Service (Low-paid Workers)

6. Hugh Henry (Paisley South) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive what action it will take to help low-paid workers in the NHS. (S3O-1896)

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Health and Wellbeing (Nicola Sturgeon): The Scottish Government is committed to improving the position of lower-paid workers in NHS Scotland. We ensured, for instance, that the 2007-08 pay award was implemented in full with effect from 1 April 2007, and we further increased pay for low-paid NHS workers from 1 November 2007. Taken together, those measures meant that agenda for change staff in NHS Scotland received extra pay of

between £69 and £427 in 2007-08 compared with their counterparts in England.

NHS Scotland has had a long-standing commitment to pay above the minimum wage, first with the 2002 low pay agreement, and more recently with the introduction of agenda for change. As well as the measures that I have outlined, the Scottish Government will continue to participate in discussions with staff representative groups at both Scottish and United Kingdom levels on a wide range of issues, including the concerns of the lowest paid workers in NHS Scotland.

Hugh Henry: The cabinet secretary will be aware of the furore in the NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde area about car parking charges. I welcome the action that the minister has taken so far to curb the proposed charges. However, even with the health board's compromise of limiting the charge to £3 a day, there will be a severe impact on low-paid NHS workers, with £15 a week being deducted from their take-home pay, which will leave many people struggling to make ends meet. Will the cabinet secretary take action to ensure that low-paid health workers are not punished, penalised and left destitute by the health board's proposed actions?

Nicola Sturgeon: I appreciate the importance of Hugh Henry's question. I have said previously that I have concerns about car parking charges that are being applied at some Scottish hospitals in some NHS board areas. Without being too party political about it, I gently point out to Hugh Henry that, with the action that I have taken since becoming health secretary, there is no doubt that car parking charges will be a lot lower under this Government than they were—and would have continued to be—under the Labour Government, of which Mr Henry was a member.

My position is clear. Revised guidance to NHS boards will be issued in the very near future, and it will make it clear that the presumption is for car parking to be free. At a majority of hospital sites in Scotland, car parking is and will continue to be free. In the small number of cases where car parking charges are necessary to deal with congestion problems, charges will be capped at £3 per day. That is vastly better than, for example, the £7 per day charges that would have applied had the Labour Government stayed in office.

On the specifics of Hugh Henry's point about lower-paid staff, when NHS boards are making decisions about the allocation of staff parking permits, they must take into account the personal circumstances of staff and apply the criteria fairly and transparently, ensuring that the right members of staff benefit from permit policies.

Hugh Henry: On a point of order, Presiding Officer. Will you reflect on whether you have the

authority and power to take action when ministers say things in the chamber that are completely untrue? If you do not have that power, will you discuss with the Procedures Committee what can be done to allow you to take action to stop that practice?

The Presiding Officer: Mr Henry, being an experienced politician, will know that he is perfectly free to take that point to the Procedures Committee himself. I will reflect on what he has said.

Jackson Carlaw (West of Scotland) (Con): I congratulate the cabinet secretary on having established the review of car parking charges, and on the announcement that she made just before Christmas and the spirit behind it. Can she confirm that it was the previous Administration that gave a dispensation to health boards to charge for hospital car parking? Does she agree that health boards that continue to charge should not presume that a maximum daily charge should apply to any length of stay, but instead it should be viewed as a maximum, and it should apply only in the most exceptional circumstances?

Nicola Sturgeon: I thank Jackson Carlaw for his constructive question and for the constructive way in which he has campaigned on the issue of car parking charges. He is right to say that the ability of health boards to introduce car parking charges was introduced by the previous Administration, which the members of the main Opposition party, with their selective memories, have chosen to forget.

I can confirm two further points for Jackson Carlaw. First, I repeat that the presumption will be that car parking will be free. Indeed, it is and will continue to be free at the vast majority of hospital sites. Secondly, the guidance that will shortly be issued to NHS boards will not only set a maximum daily charge of £3 but make it clear that, where currently charges of less than £3 are in place for either a whole day or part of a day, they should not be increased.

Paul Martin (Glasgow Springburn) (Lab): I have a very straightforward question for the minister: will the £3 limit apply to all acute service sites throughout Glasgow, including Glasgow royal infirmary?

Nicola Sturgeon: As I said when I made the announcement, the £3 cap will apply to all NHS-run car parks. I have made it clear, and I have never tried to hide the fact, that with privately operated car parks—which were brought about not by the Government of which I am part but by the previous Administration—the existing contracts cannot legally be overturned. However, I want to address that issue moving forward, because I would like there to be fairness and a level playing field for all hospitals and all hospital car parks.

Glasgow Housing Association

7. Sandra White (Glasgow) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what progress has been made in relation to Glasgow Housing Association's improvement plan. (S3O-1957)

The Minister for Communities and Sport (Stewart Maxwell): Glasgow Housing Association submitted an improvement plan to the regulator on 13 November, as required. In line with normal practice, the regulator has been in discussion with GHA since then to finalise the details of the plan. I understand that GHA is already acting on the most pressing findings of the inspection report.

Sandra White: The minister will be aware that problems with GHA still exist, particularly with its actions in relation to members of the community, residents and owner-occupiers. Will he meet me to discuss those urgent issues for the people of Glasgow?

Stewart Maxwell: The inspection process found that GHA had not acted as well as it could have done in relation to the homeowners in Glasgow with whom it deals. The regulator has asked that proper improvement plans be produced in relation to homeowners and I look forward to seeing them. I am happy to meet Sandra White to discuss the issues. I know that she has been a long-term campaigner on the matter, and I am sure that her constituents are grateful for the efforts that she has made on their behalf in the past few years.

Johann Lamont (Glasgow Pollok) (Lab): I trust that I will get an invitation to that meeting, because it would be useful to pursue the issues about homeowners and to consider whether Audit Scotland can examine the improvement plans, about which concerns exist.

Can the minister confirm my understanding that an action plan should have been published and put in the public domain within eight weeks of the production of the inspection report? Is he confident that the action plan as it stands will address the serious questions that were raised in the report? Will he confirm that he holds, or is willing to hold, regular meetings with the local housing organisations and housing associations that have expressed concerns about the progress towards community ownership in Glasgow?

Stewart Maxwell: I am more than happy to extend the invitation to the meeting to Johann Lamont if she wishes to come along. I am more than happy to discuss with any member the issues and problems surrounding GHA, which are a legacy of the previous Administration. GHA has submitted an improvement plan to the regulator but, as I said in my original answer, the normal process is under way of discussing the plan to ensure that it is fit for purpose and that it deals with the problems that were identified in the

inspection report. GHA will have to come to a conclusion and get to the end result that is required in the inspection report. Ultimately, if GHA does not complete that process successfully, the regulator has powers to intervene and it has an intervention strategy in place.

Older People (Lifestyles)

8. Jamie Hepburn (Central Scotland) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what measures it is taking to promote active and healthy lifestyles among older people. (S3O-1946)

The Minister for Public Health (Shona Robison): “All Our Futures: Planning for a Scotland with an Ageing Population” sets out a framework for supporting older people to live life to the full. A healthy and active life is central to that. A range of measures are in place to promote good physical and mental health and active lifestyles among older people, including community walking initiatives for older people, such as the paths to health walking programme.

Jamie Hepburn: Does the minister agree that older people are a vulnerable group in our society? Of late, we have heard much from certain quarters about a concern for vulnerable groups. Although publicly run leisure facilities are primarily a matter for local government, does he share my concern about the removal of discounted swimming for pensioners by Labour-run North Lanarkshire Council? Does that not undermine the health and well-being of vulnerable older people in North Lanarkshire?

Shona Robison: The Government would never want to undermine older people’s health and well-being. Although that matter is for the local authority, we expect local authorities and health boards to take account of the recommendations of “All Our Futures” when they develop leisure and other services for older people, and to ensure that those services are accessible and affordable.

Cathie Craigie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (Lab): I am sure that the minister will agree with me and Jamie Hepburn that older people are some of the most vulnerable and needy people in our communities. Does she agree that pensioners in North Lanarkshire, and in Cumbernauld and Kilsyth in particular, would have been much better off had they received the council tax and water rebate benefits that Labour proposed, rather than the measly 70p a week that is being proposed under the SNP’s council tax freeze?

Shona Robison: That is a bit rich of Cathie Craigie, given that pensioners’ council tax increased by 60 per cent under the good auspices of the Labour Party when it was in government.

Rather than talking a good game like the Labour Party, this Government will actually deliver a good

deal for our pensioners by freezing the council tax and, of course, by moving towards a local income tax, which will be of enormous benefit to older people and pensioners.

Policy Priorities

9. Patricia Ferguson (Glasgow Maryhill) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive what its policy priorities are for 2008 for the health and well-being portfolio. (S3O-1889)

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Health and Wellbeing (Nicola Sturgeon): Our priorities for 2008 include continuing to implement our manifesto commitments as well as those contained in other policy documents such as the “Better Health, Better Care: Action Plan”. We will also take forward a range of initiatives resulting from the firm foundations consultation.

Patricia Ferguson: Through the chairmanship of their respective organisations, Julia Bracewell and Dougie Donnelly presided over Scotland’s greatest ever medal haul at the 2006 Commonwealth games. They were also a key part of Scotland’s success in securing the 2014 games for Glasgow. Can the minister explain how the SNP Government will repair the damage done to Scottish sport by her colleague the Minister for Communities and Sport? Can she explain to Parliament why—if, as is claimed today, Julia Bracewell and Dougie Donnelly were casualties of reorganisation and not victims of petty vindictiveness—the Minister for Communities and Sport did not make the announcement about them to Parliament last week as part of his statement? Can she confirm that there will be no more forced redundancies as a result of the minister’s decision?

Nicola Sturgeon: It would have been pretty invidious for the Minister for Communities and Sport to talk about the positions of individuals in a parliamentary statement before the information had been shared with the individuals concerned. Perhaps that is how the previous Labour-Liberal Government used to operate, but it is not how this Government will treat respected individuals.

Let me make this clear to Patricia Ferguson: Julia Bracewell and Dougie Donnelly were not sacked. It does not take a genius—that should come as good news to members on the Labour benches—to work out that when two boards are merged into one, two chairs are no longer needed. Only one chair is needed for the new merged board, and the appointment process for the position should be open and transparent.

Let me place on record my thanks to both Julia Bracewell and Dougie Donnelly for the enormous contribution that they have made to sport in

Scotland. Let me also confirm to the chamber that both of them are perfectly entitled to apply for the chair of the new organisation.

Patricia Ferguson raises important points about the future of Scottish sport. Like everyone in this chamber, I would like Scottish athletes to win more medals at the Commonwealth games and, indeed, at the Olympic games—if we were allowed to compete in our own right. I want to see Scottish athletes winning medals, and if the question arises whether this Government's decisions will help or hinder that, I prefer to rely on the opinion of people who know what they are talking about. As the First Minister did this morning, let me tell the chamber what Derek Casey—one of the people responsible for winning Glasgow the 2014 Commonwealth games—said about the Minister for Communities and Sport's announcement last week. He said that it was a “win, win, win” situation for Scottish sport, elite athletes and, indeed, the Commonwealth games. Derek Casey is an expert to be listened to. I will not say what I think about Patricia Ferguson.

Norovirus

10. Alex Johnstone (North East Scotland) (Con): To ask the Scottish Executive what action it can take to assist in the elimination of the norovirus from Scottish hospitals. (S3O-1868)

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Health and Wellbeing (Nicola Sturgeon): Officials from the Scottish Government are kept regularly informed by national health service boards of norovirus outbreaks. Health Protection Scotland provides guidance and support to ensure that infection control interventions are as effective as possible, but norovirus enters hospitals from the community and is very contagious, and we must all appreciate that it is difficult to control in our hospitals and other communal settings.

Our multimillion pound investment in a new and more comprehensive national delivery plan on hospital-acquired infection and the Scotland-wide MRSA screening programme will deliver still more effective measures to reduce the risk of infection spreading between patients, lessen the number of ward closures and bring infection rates down throughout Scotland.

Alex Johnstone: I thank the minister for that very comprehensive answer. In addition to the action that she has outlined, will she undertake to assess how the disease is monitored in Scotland? Given that this year seems to be the virus's most virulent year since the peak in 2002, will she take steps to ascertain whether there has been an increase in the level of infection in recent years—the problem has started early this year—or whether an increased level of awareness of the infection and its symptoms among the public and

doctors has led to an increase in the identification of cases?

Nicola Sturgeon: It is likely that the high incidence of norovirus in Scotland this year reflects a recent increase throughout Scotland. The member makes extremely important points about the need for surveillance and monitoring of the infection. I assure him that a range of policies and procedures are in place to prevent and control outbreaks of infections in hospitals. The HAI task force has developed national and local surveillance systems to identify outbreaks as early as possible. The first bodies that will be involved when there are outbreaks of infection are, of course, NHS boards' incident management teams. Where appropriate, those teams will report outbreaks to Health Protection Scotland, which is available for support and advice.

In light of the fact that norovirus is so infectious and so difficult to control within closed settings such as hospital wards, it is extremely important that we have in place the most robust possible infection control procedures—hospitals do have such procedures in place. It is always regrettable when hospital wards are closed, but members should appreciate that closing wards is a function of robust infection control procedures and should not necessarily be seen as a sign that those procedures are failing.

I assure the member that I am being kept closely informed of the norovirus situation. I will keep Parliament informed at any stage that I think it appropriate.

Firearms

The Presiding Officer (Alex Fergusson): The next item of business is a debate on motion S3M-1153, in the name of Kenny MacAskill, on firearms.

14:58

The Cabinet Secretary for Justice (Kenny MacAskill): This debate is long overdue. The misuse of firearms, particularly air weapons, remains a major problem in our communities. There is a distinct problem in Scotland, which we need to address. I regret that, so far, the United Kingdom Government is not moving as far or as fast as we would like and as our communities need. That is why I have written again to Jacqui Smith, the Home Secretary. We as a Government want to host a summit to look at improving the system of firearms regulations.

Hugh Henry (Paisley South) (Lab): I presume that the suggestion of hosting a summit has been well thought out and is not just a political stunt. If that is the case, will the minister explain why *The Herald* reported that the Home Secretary had not received any formal invitation to attend?

Kenny MacAskill: We all know that various matters relating to the Post Office are reserved to Westminster, and they may be involved. I assure Mr Henry that we are dealing with the matter as expeditiously as possible and that the Government has dispatched an invitation. I am not in a position to comment on why that has not arrived, but the member can rest assured that we are viewing the issue most seriously. We are genuine in trying to ensure that we protect our communities because, as I will go on to say, the current legislation is inadequate.

We want a summit to check the current system. Anyone who wants to contribute, including Mr Henry, will be welcome to come. We want to work on improving the current piecemeal system in a collaborative way. This is not about the status of Parliaments or politicians, but about the safety of our communities.

When I meet those who have suffered injury or bereavement through firearms, as I did earlier this afternoon with Sharon McMillan, Andy Morton and Dr Mick North, I am saddened that the action that is needed in our communities has not been taken. They ask not which Parliament has the powers, but what Parliament—any Parliament—is doing about it. As a Scottish National Party member, of course I think that this Parliament should have the powers. Indeed, discussions are taking place among the Opposition parties on the powers that the Parliament should have, and firearms may be part of that. However, we will not be precious or

stand on ceremony. If London wants to take action, and will take action, that is fine—but it must do so. If not, it must give us the powers to act.

Air weapons are not toys. We know perfectly well that such guns can cause serious injury and, as such, they should not be freely available to just anyone. There are good reasons why some people who have a legitimate reason to hold them, such as for pest control or recognised sporting events, should be allowed to retain them. We must stop the people who want an air weapon to take pot shots for what they call fun. We all know that the proliferation of air-guns in our streets is damaging our communities—leaving residents as prisoners in their homes, injuring and maiming people, pets and wild animals, and even tragically claiming lives.

For most firearms, it is for the police locally to decide whether an individual has a good reason and is a fit and proper person to hold a licence. The same arrangements must apply for air weapons. We cannot allow those who would use them for nefarious purposes to buy them over the counter. That is ridiculous and unacceptable. Is it appropriate that a licence is required for the use of a shotgun to deal with pest control while someone does not need a licence for an air-gun? Is it appropriate that someone who wants a hunting rifle has to meet good-reason criteria for each rifle and quantity of ammunition requested, and yet someone who wants a shotgun does not?

If a shotgun licence is refused, the onus is on the chief constable to prove that the applicant has no good reason. An air-gun does not require a licence at all, but, as we all know, any firearm can be lethal in the wrong hands.

Duncan McNeil (Greenock and Inverclyde) (Lab): I am sure that members are glad that we are dealing with the issue seriously and looking to tackle the problems. My question extends the debate from air-guns. The minister may be aware that Sheriff Swanney raised some concerns about ball-bearing guns in the case of a 16-year-old. Such guns are available for £4 and cause serious damage to victims. Does the minister have existing powers to deal with the sale of those cheap weapons and restrict their availability? They can be used to intimidate innocent people in our communities.

Kenny MacAskill: Off the top of my head, I do not know. I presume that we might be able to do something through a licensing regime. I took a call on the point from the *Greenock Telegraph*, and I made it clear that we would discuss the issue. Clearly, it is not simply a matter of air weapons but of the other matters that Mr McNeil raises.

I am happy to look at what we can do, but we need to stop making piecemeal amendments to

legislation and instead pass one all-encompassing act; I will come to that later. We must treat all guns in the same way. Does it make any difference what kind of gun causes the terrible tragedies? The fact is that we need to do all that we can to prevent them from happening again. Moreover, we need to simplify the present convoluted system. We are determined to make the current regime easier to understand and easier for the police to enforce and, as a result, to make our communities safer.

The Home Office published a consultation paper in May 2004 entitled "Controls on Firearms". In the document's foreword, the then Home Secretary David Blunkett stated:

"This consultation is the first step in a comprehensive review of our firearms controls and laws."

He went on to say that he wanted to minimise bureaucracy and to ensure that there were no unnecessary burdens on those who possess and use guns lawfully.

Alex Johnstone (North East Scotland) (Con):

Does the cabinet secretary suggest that the current differentiation between the system for regulating firearms and that for shotguns is likely to end and that shotguns might be regulated as firearms?

Kenny MacAskill: We are having a summit to involve all those who have an interest—whether through sport or farming, or as police. We must have a system that is fit for purpose and which is clear, coherent and understandable. At present, lacunas exist in relation to BB guns and air weapons, for example. A hunting rifle is dealt with differently from a shotgun, as I said. There might be good reason for having a differentiation in the legal system, but we should have one all-encompassing act and sort out what we want as a people. That is why we are driving the issue forward.

The consultation document to which I referred said:

"the legislation has been amended a number of times, and as a result the framework of controls can be difficult to understand and enforce."

We agree about that, which is why we want to take action.

The consultation sought the public's views on an overhaul of the firearms legislation. It is disappointing that, following responses to that consultation in 2004, no comprehensive review has been undertaken. Despite indicating that a wholesale review would follow, the Home Office no longer seems to consider the issue sufficiently important, but I do, the Government does and so do our communities. I therefore asked the Home Secretary to let the Scottish Parliament decide

what is best for Scotland and to do what we can to take the action that many people throughout Scotland demand to tackle the scourge of air weapons. Regrettably, she refused my request, but I have asked her to think again.

I acknowledge the work that has been done in recent years to improve the legislation—most recently by tightening gun laws through the Violent Crime Reduction Act 2006. That is welcome, but it did not go far enough and it falls far short of the comprehensive review that we were promised in 2004 and of a system that will be fit for purpose to protect our citizens in the 21st century.

A consolidated act is needed. As I said, the law must be understandable not just to the specialist few. However, when we are dealing with an act from 1968 that has been amended by something like 21 acts and affected by 13 statutory instruments, it is clear that not only cannot the man and the woman in the street understand the legislation but, often, those with legal expertise and police officers have difficulties, too. It is therefore time for an all-encompassing act that sets out who can buy a gun, for what purpose and from where. The police will tell members how time consuming the current system is, and we do not want the police to be tied up in needless bureaucracy, as Mr Aitken and other Conservative members know.

Communities throughout Scotland are crying out for further action on air weapons and to ignore their calls is simply unacceptable. In every week that passes, further innocent victims are maimed by the use and misuse of such weapons. Already this year, two incidents have been brought to my attention in which an air-gun is alleged to have been fired at houses in North Berwick, which terrified people in their homes and neighbouring residents. In my discussions with Andy Morton, Sharon McMillan and Mick North, other incidents came to light. Unfortunately, such incidents in many parts of Scotland are not rare—they are far too common. That is why we must tackle the misuse of air weapons in our communities.

We need to work with all—with the Association of Chief Police Officers in Scotland, shooting interests and others—on practical measures, whether they are legislative or non-legislative. We need to make the law easier to understand and enforce and, as a result, make our communities safer.

No Government could fail to act when firearms casualties in Scotland rose by a quarter last year, when one in three of those casualties was a child and when the number of cases of attempted murder involving firearms was almost three times what it was a decade ago.

A Government has no greater duty than to protect its citizens. We cannot and must not sit on our hands. Our communities want action, the police want it and we as a Government demand it. It is time to act on the problem of air weapons in our communities. Whether legislation is passed here or in Westminster is incidental. As I said, the issue is about not the status of Parliaments or politicians, but the safety of our communities. Action needs to be taken and action there must be. If Westminster will not do it, Holyrood must.

I move,

That the Parliament recognises the increasing public concern about gun crime; agrees that action is required to give better protection to our communities by effectively banning the ownership and use of all firearms and air weapons other than for recognised and legitimate occupational and sporting interests, and supports the Scottish Government's intention to engage with the wide range of interests, including the Association of Chief Police Officers in Scotland (ACPOS), sporting bodies and gun lobbies, in re-energising the United Kingdom debate started in 2004, but not progressed, on reform of the existing firearms regime into a system that is simpler to understand, administer and enforce and places prime importance on public safety.

15:09

Pauline McNeill (Glasgow Kelvin) (Lab): The strict control of firearms is essential if the public are to be kept safe from violence that involves guns. This afternoon, we will debate how to win the fight against gun crime and whether further measures should be taken to restrict the ownership of guns, and we will set the context of the issue.

Legislation alone will not protect our communities. Robust customs systems and intelligent policing will make the difference across the UK. It is therefore essential that we work across the UK to achieve such things.

The number of injuries and deaths that result from the misuse of firearms is shocking for everybody. In Scotland, the number of such incidents has doubled since 2002. The problem is a UK problem, but there is a distinctly Scottish trend. In recent times, there has been proportionately more air-gun crime in Scotland than there has been in any other part of the UK. For that reason, it is right that we address Scotland's need within the UK.

Kenny MacAskill: Labour's amendment refers to

"retaining consistency across all parts of the United Kingdom".

There seems to be inconsistency in that Northern Ireland has a separate approach. Does the member think that Northern Ireland's approach should now be dealt with by the UK Parliament, or

is she saying that there should be inconsistent approaches in Northern Ireland, which is a constituent part of the UK, and the rest of the UK?

Pauline McNeill: The cabinet secretary is being a wee bit mischievous, as the character of the problem in Northern Ireland is clearly different. There has been generous support from the other parties for a consistent approach. I will come to that matter later.

We have all read—and probably cried over—the reports about young Andrew Morton, who died as a result of being shot by an air-gun. At the time, the convicted murderer—Bonini—was subject to a drug treatment and testing order, and the narrative of the case suggests that he should have been in jail and not in the community.

We need to have a rounded look at how we can reduce violent crime. Indeed, if we want to tackle the causes of crime, we must, as politicians, consider the whole picture rather than simply focus on one aspect of it—the cabinet secretary has said that many times. We must not simply react to tragedies such as the Andrew Morton tragedy.

How should we learn from such tragedies and respond to them? In July last year, the cabinet secretary wrote a letter to the Home Secretary in which he asked her to devolve responsibility for all firearms legislation to Scotland. The First Minister had trailed such an approach in the summer, and it was read as another notch in the battle against Westminster, which was unfortunate. I was pleased to hear this afternoon that the cabinet secretary is not precious about which Parliament takes action to deal with gun crime. The Government's first approach was wrong. If the minority Administration—the Government keeps on going on about the Administration being a minority Administration—had really considered the matter, it would have been clear that its approach in the first instance would have put it at odds with the other main parties, which favour a consistent approach being taken. It was predictable that the Home Secretary would reply to the cabinet secretary in the way that she did. The Government has so far failed to build a coalition for further action, but perhaps we can do something constructive about that this afternoon.

Hugh Henry pointed out that we have heard overnight that the cabinet secretary wants to invite the Home Secretary to a summit to discuss with him and the First Minister an offer that she may or may not refuse. It might have been more appropriate to wait a few hours until this debate had ended and therefore to find out what other parties had to say about the matter before launching into such an initiative.

In all his letters, the cabinet secretary dismisses or does not mention the action that has already been taken to restrict access to air-guns. The previous coalition Government fought hard to persuade the Home Secretary to restrict the possession and control of air-guns—the relevant measures can be found in the Violent Crime Reduction Act 2006. The age at which people can own air-guns was increased to 18 across the UK, and we ensured that there are licensed dealers. However, Labour in Scotland supports the review of those measures at some point with a view to imposing further restrictions on the ownership of air-guns, if doing so is necessary and workable. We made a manifesto commitment to that effect.

The Minister for Community Safety (Fergus Ewing): A central question is whether all members agree that air-guns should be licensed. Does the Labour Party in Scotland support that position?

Pauline McNeill: I will talk about the Labour Party's position and enlighten the member on that matter.

We need to look in greater detail at the workability of any further restrictions and how they would be enforced. We also need to consider the fact that the police have warned us against such an approach, and we must talk to the police about their view on the matter.

On the face of it, it is hard to justify why anyone living in Glasgow, Edinburgh, Aberdeen or any urban area in the UK should ever need to use or have access to a gun or an air-gun. However, where we part company with the SNP on the issue is that we do not believe that it is desirable to have completely separate firearms legislation in Scotland. There are risks in that, as the Home Secretary argues, and it would not be beyond the wit of criminals to obtain an air-gun over the border if Scotland acted alone.

Labour in Scotland believes that the Home Secretary and the Secretary of State for Justice should review the operation of the legislation with a view to imposing further restrictions throughout the UK—action that would perhaps be better described as a presumption against the ownership of guns rather than a ban, as there will always be genuine exemptions for those who have a genuine justification. Anyone who owns an air-gun should be able to justify why that is necessary.

Our amendment allows consideration of what has been done already to restrict the use of air-guns. However, as Duncan McNeil pointed out, it could also allow a focus on other guns such as BB guns, which also cause damage in our communities. Our amendment argues that it may be necessary to complete our work with further restrictions, including consideration of the ownership of air-guns, and Labour will continue to

argue that position with the Home Office. Today, I have written to Jacqui Smith and Jack Straw, outlining my view on the matter as Labour's spokesperson on justice.

We must recognise that, invariably, other issues will underlie gun misuse and that a total ban on all guns would not remove them completely from circulation. In that respect, the Tory amendment makes the valid point that banning anything—be it guns or weapons—will not necessarily make the problem go away. Our poorest-resourced communities live with the threat of violence, the scourge of drug dealing and the use of illegal firearms and weapons of all sorts. The issue is about dealing with the lives of innocent people who deserve safer communities.

That is our position, and we will work constructively with the Government. However, we think that, in the first instance, the Scottish Government must argue the case with the UK ministers to get a sensible approach to the control of guns in the UK and in Scotland.

I move amendment S3M-1153.2, to leave out from "gun crime" to end and insert:

"the unacceptable incidence of gun crime and in particular the illegal misuse of air weapons across Scotland; welcomes the actions of the previous Scottish Executive, working with the UK Home Office, to restrict the sale of airguns and increase the age at which an airgun can be obtained; notes that there is a case for reviewing the effect of these provisions with a view to implementing further restrictions on the ownership of airguns other than for recognised and legitimate occupational and sporting interests; but further believes that improved firearm legislation would be best obtained by retaining consistency across all parts of the United Kingdom, and therefore calls on Scottish ministers to engage constructively with the UK Government to better control and reduce serious and violent crime in Scotland."

15:17

Bill Aitken (Glasgow) (Con): The cabinet secretary was correct in stating that this is a serious issue that we must treat with the utmost seriousness. Much of what he said today was perfectly acceptable. If he continues to research the matter with his usual crusading zeal, we will congratulate him. However, if he does what he and so many of his other colleagues have done in the past few months, and demonstrates that this is just another device to drive the thin end of the wedge between Westminster and the Scottish Parliament, we will not approve of that or accept it.

Let us examine the situation. Clearly there are problems. Man's relationship with guns has always been an uneasy and dangerous one and although that relationship in Scotland is perhaps not as intimate as it is in the United States and in other jurisdictions, there are problems. Those problems are historical and they are growing, as was

brought to our attention by the awful events in Dunblane, which highlighted how weapons can be dangerous, especially in the hands of people who simply should not have them. In that instance, the weapons were licensed, but that was an exception to the rule. As a result of that dreadful incident and the inquiry that was carried out by Lord Cullen, the then Conservative Government legislated the following year, in 1997, and applied the appropriate restrictions. As I recollect, there was unanimous approval in the House of Commons for those measures, although in some parts of the community they were perhaps less popular.

I agree that, despite the fact that the most recent legislation is not of any great antiquity, there must be constant and consistent review of firearms legislation. To that end, I am keen to encourage the cabinet secretary to encourage the Westminster Government to proceed further. However, he must understand that firearms legislation is currently reserved. It might be that such powers will eventually come to Scotland as a result of the views that are taken by the Opposition parties in conjunction with the Scottish Executive. I cannot anticipate whether that will happen, but it might. Until that time, I recommend that the cabinet secretary stay within the ambit of the Scotland Act 1998 and operate accordingly.

What can we do about wider public concerns? We must acknowledge that although we can licence and restrict until we are blue in the face—which is tremendously well intentioned—the people who misuse firearms are not likely to be deterred by licensing requirements or legislation. Such people have shown time and again that they will simply drive a horse and cart through any regulations that we seek to impose.

To some extent, today's debate is a continuation of last week's debate on serious organised crime. Handguns and, in some cases, automatic weapons have been used by gangsters to commit murder. It is clear and simple that that is what happens. The vast majority of the weapons that are used have never been licensed. If members look at the most up-to-date statistics, they will see that of the 600-odd cases in which we were able to convict the person and recover the gun, only a handful of weapons—something like 11—were licensed. That is indicative of the problem.

Fergus Ewing: We accept the point that the law in itself is never a total solution to any problem. That applies in this case. However, does Bill Aitken accept—given that the former Home Secretary thought there were 7 million air-guns in the UK—that to require a licence for those air-guns would be a sensible step that would be likely to afford a serious measure of protection to our communities?

Bill Aitken: All such ideas have varying degrees of merit. Once the appropriate inquiries have been carried out and consultations taken place, there could be a case for licensing air-guns, but let us deal with the situation one stage at a time: as I have said, gangsters in the east end of Glasgow will not be deterred by the absence of a little bit of paper.

It is important to take a cohesive UK approach. Many of the guns that are used are imported not through Scotland's airports, which is fairly difficult, but through the Channel ports by car. That is an established fact. One of the downsides of the iron curtain no longer existing is that eastern European countries, which had a significant arms trade, are now exporting a lot of handguns and automatic weapons. The evidence is clear that many of those weapons end up on the streets of the UK. A border police force, as has been recommended by our colleagues down south, would certainly improve matters.

Although we all recognise that there is a problem and that there is a case for some of the minister's suggestions, at the end of the day it comes down to policing, police resources and enforcement of the current law. That is the direction that we should take.

I move amendment S3M-1153.1, to leave out from "action" to end and insert:

"laws regarding firearms control should be regularly reviewed but notes that firearms legislation is reserved to Westminster; notes also with regret that the great majority of weapons used in gun crime are held illegally in breach of the existing law; acknowledges that the most effective way of making Scotland's communities safer is more effective enforcement of the existing law, and calls on the Scottish Government to support an increase in police resources to improve enforcement of current firearms legislation."

15:24

Mike Pringle (Edinburgh South) (LD): I agree with the minister that there is increasing public concern about gun crime. In 2006-07, the Scottish police recorded 1,245 offences in which it was alleged that a firearm had been used—an increase of 17 per cent on the total of 1,068 such crimes recorded in 2005-06 and the highest number in the past 10 years. Of the total number of firearms offences in 2006-07, 54 per cent, or 675, involved an air weapon, compared to 58 per cent, or 618, in 2005-06. As we all know, firearms legislation is reserved to the UK Government. The Scottish Liberal Democrats have difficulty in accepting that there would not be considerable problems in having separate firearms regulations and penalties in England and Scotland. We share the United Kingdom Government's view that a total ban on some weapons would be unworkable and impractical.

In recent times, there have been a number of improvements in legislation to address gun crime, particularly the misuse of air-guns. Westminster's Anti-social Behaviour Act 2003, which came into effect in January 2004, brought in new provisions to help protect the public from misuse of air-guns, including the raising of the minimum age for ownership from 14 years to 17 years, the creation of a new offence of possessing an air-gun or imitation weapon in a public place without reasonable excuse, and the banning of the future import, manufacture, sale or transfer of air weapons that use self-contained gas cartridges.

Fergus Ewing: Mike Pringle argues that legislation in Scotland that did not exist throughout the UK would be unenforceable. We would prefer UK-wide legislation, but if that is not possible and we have legislation requiring the licensing of air-guns in Scotland, surely it would be perfectly easy to enforce it, just as the separate legislation on knives is enforceable?

Mike Pringle: That is probably right, but I will come on to the considerable number of measures that have been introduced recently—we should give them time to bed in. If there is a summit between the Governments in Scotland and Westminster, I would welcome anything that is done to improve this aspect of the law.

The Liberal Democrats supported the new provisions. As Pauline McNeill said, the Violent Crime Reduction Act 2006 tightened the law on indiscriminate and reckless firing of air-guns from private property. It also brought in a further increase in the minimum age of ownership of air-guns from 17 years to 18 years, along with tougher restrictions on manufacture and ownership of imitation firearms.

That was followed by the Violent Crime Reduction Act 2006 (Realistic Imitation Firearms) Regulations 2007. The regulations were implemented only in October 2007, so surely time is required to establish whether they will be effective. The legislation did a number of things: it introduced a ban on the supply of realistic imitation firearms; it made it an offence to manufacture, import or sell realistic imitation firearms; and, under HM Revenue and Customs controls, made liable to forfeiture imported imitation firearms. It is now also an offence for a person under the age of 18 to purchase an imitation firearm, and to sell an imitation firearm to a person under the age of 18. I therefore suggest that much has been done and is being done to regulate firearms.

I am pleased that the motion recognises that there are legitimate reasons for owning a gun for all sorts of sporting activities, for control of vermin and for other reasons. All firearms in the United Kingdom must be licensed with either a firearms certificate or a shotgun certificate. It is not easy to

obtain a firearms certificate, as several of my friends who live in Edinburgh know—they are constantly badgered by the police to ensure that their firearms certificates are up to date. The police must be convinced that the applicant is a person of sound reason and good standing, and that they can be trusted to own a gun without danger to public safety or to the peace. Under Home Office guidelines, a gun licence is issued only if a person has legitimate sporting or work-related reasons for owning a gun. The penalties are quite harsh. Possession of a prohibited firearm without a certificate carries a mandatory five-year prison sentence and the fine is uncapped.

Guns can, of course, flow freely around the UK. A gun that is used in a crime in Edinburgh might next be used in Manchester or London, or vice versa. The evidence is that guns that are used in crimes are seldom recovered. So I agree with Bill Aitken that we need to be more concerned about controlling illegal guns by preventing their getting into the UK in the first place—the Westminster Government is the Government to do that. My colleague at Westminster, Chris Huhne, is exercised by the issue and has suggested—as Bill Aitken did—that we should have a border police force that would exercise more control over the import of illegal weapons and guns into the UK.

The Liberal Democrats will support the Labour amendment.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Trish Godman): We move to the open debate on the motion.

15:30

Nigel Don (North East Scotland) (SNP): I suggest that we should distinguish clearly between three kinds of weapons: the first are air-guns, the second I will call handguns, and an adequate description of the third would be shotguns.

I liked Pauline McNeill's phrase: a "presumption against" possession. That would be a good way in which to tackle the problem of guns. We can do without them—people who have good reason for needing them could be subject to licence, but everyone else should be unable to get them. That would be the first step on the path.

I listened to the previous speeches and have no intention of repeating what was said. Seven million air-guns are thought to be in circulation in the UK and I am told that half a million of them are in Scotland, which seems a reasonable assumption. Clearly, the numbers are far too high.

Air-guns are not toys. A majority of the offences involving air weapons are attributed to people under the age of 21, and many of those are attributed to people under the age of 15, which

suggests that we have no control over where these weapons are going. As a youngster under the age of 15, I fired an air-gun in the back yard of a friend's home, but I am not sure that we were under a great deal of supervision at the time. It occurred to me that it was rather obvious that I should not point it at people, although that seems to escape others.

I come to the real point, which we all know. If we have dangerous things, occasionally they will get into the wrong hands and occasionally those wrong hands will do something very silly with them. Every now and again, such a silly event will have serious consequences. We should not be surprised if someone is killed by an air rifle every now and again, sad though the event must be. If air guns are out there, they will be abused—every now and then, things will go wrong and someone will get seriously hurt. The only solution is to ensure that air-guns are simply not out there, other than in responsible hands. I note in passing that air-guns are also used to attack animals. That is quite sickening behaviour that I do not understand. The same thing applies: if air-guns are not out there, the animals will be that bit safer.

I turn to handguns, which by and large have no place in civilised society, outside gun clubs. I applaud Bill Aitken's comment that criminals do not worry about the paperwork. We need to keep that thought firmly in mind in any licensing regime.

We also need to be careful not to outlaw everything that may be dangerous. Some of my friends are archers; once upon a time, the bow and arrow was the principal weapon of long-range attack. Should we ban motor racing on the ground that it is plainly dangerous? Come to think of it, we should probably not climb Munros. There is a place for everything and everything in its place.

I turn to the statistics on incidents of handgun use. Principally, such usage happens in our major cities, particularly in the Strathclyde, Lothian and Borders and Tayside police areas. It may surprise some people that not many incidents have happened in the Grampian Police area, and therefore not in Aberdeen. I commend Grampian Police for its approach and I would illuminate the force's approach. Police in Aberdeen have concluded that, although they are fortunate that there are not many guns around, that is unlikely to remain the case. The force notes that the use of handguns is associated in large part with drug supply and by gangs to defend their territory, and has no intention of letting anything like that happen in Aberdeen.

Officers from Grampian Police have visited colleagues in the West Midlands and London to learn from them. According to Detective Superintendent Alan Smith, the plan is

"to create a hostile and unproductive environment for England-based drug dealing syndicates to operate in."

Such an attitude is very commendable and is clearly appropriate for an environment in which guns are not yet available. One must commend the force's efforts and encourage police in other cities to find other approaches to reducing gun crime, which seems to be associated largely with criminal gangs.

I endorse the presumption that guns should not be available, except where there is demonstrable need. I also share the widely expressed view that it does not matter how we tidy up the mess that is Scottish law on this issue. If Westminster wants to do so, that is all well and good—and the sooner, the better, please. I welcome all parties' support in achieving that aim.

15:35

Bill Butler (Glasgow Anniesland) (Lab): I rise in support of my colleague Pauline McNeill's amendment.

Obviously, the safety of communities throughout Scotland is the most important subject that Parliament can debate. There is little doubt that there is understandable public concern about the unacceptable incidence of gun crime and, in particular, about illegal misuse of air weapons. I do not believe that any member will contest that statement.

Certainly there cannot be any member in the chamber who does not recall the impact on Scottish public opinion of the Dunblane tragedy or the horror of the death of young Andrew Morton, who, one week short of his third birthday, was shot in the head with an air-gun pellet in the east end of Glasgow. Such acts of violence against innocents rightly provoke grief and revulsion across society, but they also provoke the commitment to do everything practicable to combat such criminal excesses.

Unfortunately, as members know, such tragedies are not aberrations. The most up-to-date statistics demonstrate clearly that offences involving firearms continue to be a major problem. For example, the number of offences in which a firearm was fired and killed or caused injury to a person increased by a quarter, from 197 in 2005-06 to 247 in 2006-07. Of the 247 victims who were injured in recorded offences, almost a quarter were aged between 11 and 15, and 30—about 12 per cent—were aged 10 or under.

I truly believe that the previous Labour-led Executive's approach to this worrying issue was correct. Its move to secure stricter laws on air weapons through discussions with the Home Office led to legislation in the UK Parliament. In March 2005, the then Minister for Justice stated that we need to

“work in partnership with the UK Government”

because

“Having different systems across the UK could create loopholes that would be exploited by those with criminal intent.”—[*Official Report*, 24 March 2005; c 15676.]

That analysis was correct then and remains so today.

In collaboration with the Home Office, the previous coalition pressed the need for more action and welcomed the enactment of the Violent Crime Reduction Act 2006, which, among other measures, effectively banned the sale of air weapons at car-boot sales, corner shops and outlets not approved by the police. It ended anonymous internet and mail-order sales of air weapons, it increased from 17 to 18 the minimum age for ownership of air weapons and rightly toughened the law on indiscriminate and reckless firing of air weapons from private property.

Those welcome reforms have been progressed in a spirit of co-operation across the various UK Administrations. In that respect, I am genuinely pleased by the terms of the Scottish Government's motion, which recognises that working together is essential if further progress is to be made. I note that Mr MacAskill's motion refers to

“re-energising the United Kingdom debate started in 2004”.

The language is slightly hyperbolic, but I have no real difficulty with it. After all, as the motion goes on to say, we all want

“a system that is simpler to understand, administer and enforce and”—

as we would all agree—

“places prime importance on public safety.”

Given the gravity of the issue, I am encouraged by the fact that we are, as Nigel Don's speech showed, focusing not on constitutional matters but on practical ways and means by which, given the present political dispensation, we can move forward sensibly. I know that my constituents want Parliament to take that approach. They are right to do so.

Public safety—the preservation of life itself—is too profound a matter to become enmeshed in the niceties of constitutional dialogue, as Mr MacAskill recognised when he said in his opening speech:

“we will not be precious or stand on ceremony.”

The debate, he said,

“is not about the status of Parliaments or politicians but about the safety of our communities.”

That is quite right, and it represents a welcome development from Mr MacAskill's position as an SNP back bencher on 24 March 2005, when he declared:

“this Parliament must legislate on firearms and it must do so forthwith.”—[*Official Report*, 24 March 2005; c 15673.]

We all feel that legislation is necessary, but ministerial responsibility has shown Mr MacAskill the correct way to do things co-operatively.

Fergus Ewing: Pauline McNeill said that anyone who wants an air-gun should be able to demonstrate the purpose for which it is required. Does Bill Butler agree with us that that can only really be done if we have a licensing system for air-guns in Scotland?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You are in your final minute, Mr Butler.

Bill Butler: We should have a system that operates across the UK and which militates against—[*Interruption.*] As Duncan McNeil said from a sedentary position, criminals do not recognise borders.

The cabinet secretary should adopt the approach that is suggested in today's press statement, which would involve inviting the Home Secretary to join the Scottish Government in hosting a summit here in Edinburgh or in London to identify how the law on firearms, including air weapons, can best be reformed. That should be actively considered. I have no problem at all with that proposal. The Scottish Labour Party supports the idea that there should be a review of the measures that are contained in the Violent Crime Reduction Act 2006. What we and the people of Scotland are looking for are laws that apply across our United Kingdom because, given the present dispensation, only such legislation can deal coherently and resiliently with the danger that is posed by the illegitimate use of firearms.

On that basis, although I am sympathetic to the stated intent of the Government's motion, I ask members to support Labour's amendment, which I believe deals more precisely with what is a profoundly difficult and extremely serious issue.

15:42

Bill Wilson (West of Scotland) (SNP): No one can deny that we have a problem with gun crime in Scotland. I will give two examples from the west of Scotland to follow the many cases that have already been mentioned. On 11 October 2007, in an article entitled “Sniper Terror”, the *Greenock Telegraph* reported:

“A sniper is terrorising Inverclyde by taking pot shots at homes and businesses.”

The Gun Control Network website, which lists a shocking catalogue of incidents, reported that in May of the same year,

“A pensioner was traumatised after four shots from an airgun were fired through her window as she lay in bed in Paisley.”

Those are just two illustrations of gun crime in this country. The brute statistics are staggering.

There is no harm in reiterating some of the information that we have already been given. In 2006-07, compared with the previous year, there was a 25 per cent increase in the number of injuries caused by firearms. The number of people who were injured rose from 197 to 247. A total of 1,245 firearms offences were committed in Scotland in 2006-07, which represents an increase of 17 per cent from the previous year. Even though the figure is at its highest for 10 years, the Scottish Parliament cannot legislate or take action and is denied the right to protect Scotland's citizens from firearms.

Against that background, although I agree with the Conservatives—it pains me to do so, but sometimes I must—that effective enforcement of existing laws is important, I cannot agree that stricter legislation against air-guns would not be effective in reducing crime.

Alex Johnstone: Will the member attempt to deal with the irony—some people might call it an enigma—that in respect of the pools of illegally held firearms and legally held firearms, which seem to exist quite separately, it is almost exclusively the illegally held firearms that are involved in gun crime? That means that if we regulate air-guns, it will simply be the case that we will know where the legally held ones are, but the amount of gun crime that is associated with them will be unaffected.

Bill Wilson: I do not accept the member's point and I will explain why. He was confused about the fundamental difference that exists between air-guns and firearms.

It is often argued that firearms legislation affects only law-abiding citizens and that criminals will always manage to access weapons, whatever the legislation. That argument may have some validity when it is applied to weapons that use gunpowder, but it is unlikely to be valid for air-guns, most of which enter circulation when they are bought in the shops casually, on a whim.

Let us imagine that, disillusioned by the preference of the UK Government to seek conflict rather than co-operation, and by its refusal to legislate or to allow the Scottish Government to do so, I decided to change career and adopt a life of crime. If I then decided to obtain a weapon for criminal purposes, I would certainly opt for one that fired bullets. I would not seek to begin my life of crime with an air pistol, as somebody said in relation to east end gangsters; I would use a rather more dangerous and aggressive weapon. That is why there is a difference in the circulation of the two types of weapon, and why there is a difference in how we need to legislate.

The distinction between air weapons and other firearms is important. Some 58 per cent of the injuries that were caused by firearms in Scotland in the past year were inflicted by missiles that were propelled not by gunpowder but by air. In the past year, 54 per cent of all firearms offences—nearly 700 offences—involved an air weapon. To give an idea of what that represents on a local level, in the first six months of 2007 in Paisley alone, the police were aware of 20 air-gun incidents. That is perhaps not so surprising when one considers that there are an estimated half a million air-guns in circulation in Scotland.

Yet, even on air-guns—which are responsible, I remind members, for most weapons-related offences in Scotland—the Scottish Government cannot act. I applaud the cabinet secretary's decision to try and work with the UK Government and to request that the necessary authority be transferred to the Scottish Parliament. To say that I am deeply disappointed with the reply that was received from the Home Secretary would be to understate my views. Jacqui Smith, in her letter to the cabinet secretary, tells us that she does not support the transfer of firearms authority. She claims that such a move could result only in further complexity and militate against effective enforcement of the wide range of present controls. She says that the absence of border controls could make enforcement difficult and that organised criminals would not be slow to exploit any differences that might develop over time. That is, quite frankly, a rather silly argument. On the basis of her logic, Jacqui Smith could equally argue that the UK Westminster Government is not competent to legislate on firearms laws and that such legislation should, henceforth, become a reserved matter, with only the Parliament of the Republic of Ireland able to legislate on it. How else could the confusion that is predicted by the Home Secretary be avoided?

I shall explain why that ludicrous scenario follows from her argument. The border with the Republic of Ireland is uncontrolled and criminals can move freely between the two legislative areas. Jacqui Smith's logic would dictate that, if the UK does not surrender its right to legislate on firearms, there is a risk that that failure will be taken advantage of by criminal elements. Why should we stop there? Should firearms legislation not become, according to the logic of the UK Labour Government, a European Union competency? Border controls within the EU are limited or absent. Might not criminals take advantage of the different legislative regimes? Might not confusion arise?

The response from the UK Government amounts to playing politics with the safety of Scotland's people. That is shameful. There is no reason, other than the political posturing of

Westminster, why Scotland should not legislate on firearms. Does Norway look to its bigger Scandinavian neighbour, Sweden, with whom it shares a lengthy and open border, for its firearms legislation? Do all the nations of Europe attempt to emulate their neighbours' firearms laws?

This is a public safety issue: air-guns are a significant cause of injury in Scotland and they are too widely held and too readily available. Scotland should and must have the legislative power to tackle abuse of air-guns. Therefore, I encourage the political parties that have not yet found the courage for independence and which are still frightened by the thought of running their own country to ask—when they go on their away days to London and are tugging their forelocks and humbly beseeching Westminster for scraps from its table—that firearms legislation, at least, be returned to Scotland, if the UK Government continues to obstruct legislation.

It is ludicrous that, while people still suffer injury in this country through misuse of air-guns, we in the Scottish Parliament cannot pass the legislation that is necessary to end the needless misery.

15:48

Hugh Henry (Paisley South) (Lab): At a stroke, Bill Wilson has managed to destroy the efforts of Kenny MacAskill to develop a constructive argument about dealing with something on the basis of consensus. What we heard from Bill Wilson is what Kenny MacAskill and others really believe and puts Kenny MacAskill's current position into perspective.

Fergus Ewing straight-facedly said that the SNP believes in legislation across the UK. However, as Bill Butler pointed out, Fergus Ewing's colleague Kenny MacAskill said in 2005:

"The Scottish National Party's position is clear: this Parliament must legislate on firearms and it must do so forthwith."

In 2005, there was nothing about asking Westminster for more powers or trying to get consensus across the UK. Ahead of an election, that was the bold Kenny's position: the SNP will act and this Parliament will take action. Fergus Ewing was quite right to say that action needs to be taken across the UK.

Kenny MacAskill: I made it quite clear that, as a member of the SNP, I think that this Parliament should legislate. The member is talking about 2005, when I was referring to 2004 and the Home Office review. The fact of the matter is that the problem is probably worse now than it was then, and the actions of the UK Government—which has the powers—have not addressed matters. Does the member, or does he not, support a licensing regime for air weapons? What, precisely, is it that

he will insist that Westminster brings in? We have made our position clear. What is Labour's position on air weapons?

Hugh Henry: Kenny MacAskill said that he has made his position quite clear—far from it. In 2005, he said:

"this Parliament must legislate ... forthwith."—[*Official Report*, 24 March 2005; c 15673.]

Today, we hear nothing about legislating forthwith—indeed, Fergus Ewing says that action needs to be taken across the United Kingdom.

Fergus Ewing: Will the member take an intervention?

Hugh Henry: No thank you, Mr Ewing.

We have both inconsistency and bluster—Bill Wilson was right to condemn playing politics with people's safety and to condemn political posturing.

Bill Wilson: Will the member take an intervention?

Hugh Henry: No thank you, Mr Wilson.

That is what Kenny MacAskill and others have been doing. My view is quite clear. As Pauline McNeill said, I see no valid reason for anyone in this country to have an air-gun. There might be people who might argue that there are sporting or vermin control reasons for having an air-gun. Someone who lives in a city or a town, however, does not have those reasons and has no valid case to make for possessing an air-gun. Like Pauline McNeill, Bill Butler and others, I believe that we should reflect on whether the current legislation is effective and, if it is not, we should make a case for going further. Bill Aitken was quite right to put the issue in the context of the United Kingdom legislation, because if the current legislation is proving to be ineffective and not guaranteeing safety, further action needs to be taken.

It is within those terms of reference that I remain somewhat cynical about what Kenny MacAskill said. If he believes that a summit is the way to advance the argument, why is there no reference whatsoever to the need for such a summit in his motion? His motion is bland in some respects and he has cynically and somewhat cruelly attempted to use emotions in order to make party political—and worse, constitutional—points about a very serious issue.

As Bill Aitken said, if the matter remains with Westminster at the moment, we should be supporting and encouraging initiatives from Westminster, not trying to upstage, pre-empt or undermine its responsibility. Within that context, there is no guarantee that there will be a summit led by Kenny MacAskill because, as Pauline McNeill suggested, he has approached the matter

in the wrong way. Indeed, we could have Kenny MacAskill's summit being Kenny MacAskill talking to himself in a mirror. I am told by many that that is his favourite audience, since he will get nothing back that disputes anything that he says.

Yes, action needs to be taken; yes, there needs to be more clarity around the issue; and yes, we need a UK-wide debate for all the valid reasons that have been given in the chamber today. It is a disgrace—to echo Bill Wilson's sentiments—that Kenny MacAskill has attempted to use the fears, emotions and sadness that many people feel because of what has happened in order to—if one listens carefully—advance a very cynical political point of view.

I support Pauline McNeill in what she says—that is the right way forward.

Bill Wilson: On a point of order, Presiding Officer. The sentiments that Hugh Henry claimed I expressed are not remotely similar to what I actually said.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That is not a point of order.

15:55

Cathie Craigie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (Lab): I speak in support of Pauline McNeill's amendment. I must admit that, when I listened to the radio this morning, I thought that I had missed the debate. A cabinet secretary in a minority Government would be better placed to wait and hear the views of the parliamentarians in the Parliament before taking any decisions or making statements to the press. I hope that Mr MacAskill will reflect on the points that have been made this afternoon by members throughout the chamber.

Like any law-abiding person, I am gravely concerned about gun crime in our communities. The communities that we represent suffer from the scourge of gun crime too regularly. In 2006-07, air weapons were involved in more than half of all offences involving firearms and, alarmingly, almost a quarter of the victims injured in recorded firearm incidents during that period were under 15 years old. The Strathclyde Police area, which covers my Cumbernauld and Kilsyth constituency, accounts for more than half of all offences in which a firearm is alleged to have been used. Sadly, there have been instances of such crimes in my constituency in the past year.

We all know that the Labour Government's decision to ban handguns in the UK has made a difference. The previous Scottish Executive, working with the UK Home Office, took action to restrict the sale of air-guns and increase the age at which an air-gun can be obtained. That has made a difference. However, like Bill Wilson, who

has left the chamber, I looked at the Gun Control Network's website in preparation for today's debate, and I was shocked to see the statistics that it gathers regularly from reports in local newspapers and news media. In October 2007 alone, 16 incidents here in Scotland were reported in the press. I find that quite alarming.

My constituents and the people of Scotland in general would be better protected if the provisions that we have were reviewed. It was always the intention that they would be reviewed with a view to implementing further restrictions on the ownership of air-guns and the sale of BB guns.

Fergus Ewing: Does the member therefore agree that it would be sensible to ensure that, as Pauline McNeill argued earlier, before anyone in Scotland can lawfully own or possess an air-gun, they should have to demonstrate a legitimate purpose?

Cathie Craigie: Pauline McNeill's suggestion about having a presumption against possession is an approach that we should consider, but it is wrong to go into a review having already made decisions. We should consider the available evidence and the circumstances at the time—that is the right way to go into a review. If we are to have the trust of the people who are involved in sport and those who use guns for their legitimate employment, we have to go into a review with open minds.

We can all do more. That is what a review would throw up. I welcome the cabinet secretary's attempt to improve the firearms regime and seek

"a system that is simpler to understand, administer and enforce".

Such a system needs to be introduced UK-wide. It must remain foremost in our minds that we need a comprehensive and co-ordinated approach to gun crime and gun criminals. We will be best served if we introduce such an approach UK-wide. The policy must be consistent across all parts of the United Kingdom.

To be frank, Bill Wilson's example of how things work with gun crime in Ireland was bizarre. If we were to approach the matter in any way other than with a consistent approach across the UK, that would be damaging—I refer to the impediments to cross-border movement. It would be hugely difficult to enforce different regimes, and it would be impossible to prevent organised criminals exploiting any differences. I repeat: provisions must apply across the UK. We must continue to speak with the Home Office and Westminster to pursue a UK-wide solution to a scourge that affects the whole of the UK.

There are a number of families in Scotland who have had to deal with life after tragic gun incidents

involving young people. Most of us cannot understand how people can pick themselves up after such incidents. Although, thankfully, we do not have the slaughter of young people that occurs in cities such as Manchester, Nottingham and London, we face the same challenges to find a system that can protect our communities. I urge the Parliament to support Pauline McNeill's amendment.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Alasdair Morgan): We now come to the winding-up speeches. I must ask members to keep rigorously to their time limits. Time is limited for this and the next item of business. Margaret Smith has six minutes.

16:01

Margaret Smith (Edinburgh West) (LD): The subject of firearms is highly important for the communities that we represent. I support the Scottish Government's calls for a simple and enforceable firearms regime. However, I am concerned that that does not sit well with some of the SNP's past comments about gun control. A simple system would need to be a harmonious system, and the Scottish Government's previous preoccupation with wresting control of gun regulations from the UK Government would seem to be at odds with that aim.

Those members who have read the Steel commission report—I am sure that all members have—will know that the commission was sceptical about the need to devolve control of firearms to the Scottish Government. However, it suggested that there might be an argument for developing a more formalised role in the on-going discussion of policy in that area.

I welcome much of what the cabinet secretary said. I also welcome Fergus Ewing's comment that the Government would prefer legislation to apply across the UK. In that respect, I am pleased that we are all singing from the same hymn sheet. I am also supportive of the Government's call—stunt or otherwise—for a firearms summit. I hope that the Home Secretary will take that up. We believe that the issue must be tackled across the UK, and that the best way—the only way—to do that is by Holyrood and Westminster working together.

As we have heard, there have been a number of pieces of legislation covering firearms and their control: 21 acts and myriad regulations. A case can certainly be made, therefore, for reviewing the legislation and consolidating it—it is certainly confusing. In our 2007 manifesto, we called for a tough licensing system to restrict the availability of air-guns, so we are not at all complacent about the status quo.

Personally, I am inclined towards Pauline McNeill's view that anyone possessing an air-gun

should be able to justify it, and that there should, to some extent, be a presumption against possession. UK-wide, gun crime has nearly doubled in the past 10 years, and the rise of gang and gun culture throughout the country is deeply worrying for us all.

At the heart of the issue is the number of illegal guns on our streets. We need to keep them off our streets. We are simply making it too easy for people to acquire firearms. A YouGov survey last year—I do not always agree with YouGov surveys—found that nearly one in five men in the UK knew how to obtain an illegal weapon if they needed one, and one in eight knew someone who already owned or had owned one. As Bill Aitken and others have said, we can license and we can do all sorts of other things, but there is still a need to tackle the issue of illegal guns and organised and serious crime.

Pauline McNeill referred to customs and the foremost role of the UK Government in dealing with gun smuggling into this country. I believe that, at the moment, nine times as many staff are employed to stop cigarette smuggling as there are to stop gun smuggling into the United Kingdom. That should probably be considered as part of any review or summit.

Closer to home, it is estimated that one firearm incident occurs every day in and around Edinburgh. Police are called to nearly five air-gun attacks every week in the Lothian and Borders area. As Bill Wilson told us—or Wild Bill Wilson, as we will have to call him from now on—no constituency in the country is immune. In 2005, in Muirhouse in my constituency, a six-year-old boy required surgery after he was hit in the head by an air-gun pellet. It was only by the grace of God that he survived the attack and retained his sight. Firearms crime is on the increase in Scotland. As we have heard, overall gun crime rose by 17 per cent between 2005-06 and 2006-07.

Our record in government, along with the Labour Party, is of working with the United Kingdom Government on criminal justice and antisocial behaviour legislation and on the Violent Crime Reduction Act 2006, which is important legislation. As we have heard, it bans the sale of air weapons at any outlet that is not approved by the police; ends anonymous sales, including those over the internet; further increases the age limit for the ownership of an air-gun; and tightens up the law on the indiscriminate and reckless firing of air weapons from private property. Although we appreciate and accept that a case can be made for a review, it is worth remembering that the 2006 act has been in operation for only a short period. The regulations will not have had time to settle in, so now is not necessarily the best time to consider whether, fundamentally, the act has worked.

However, I believe that the measures are definitely moves in the right direction.

The on-going dialogue between the Scottish and UK Governments is to be welcomed. We need a dialogue that involves all the relevant stakeholders, which means everybody from the police—particularly those who tackle organised and serious crime—and customs officers, right through to the victims of gun crime and gun campaigners. I am sure that we all salute the work that they have done.

The increase in gun crime does not have a single cause and therefore it cannot have a single solution. We must address the issues at community level, tackle youth disaffection and gang culture and target areas of deprivation. We need to work in schools to get across to kids the message about the importance of the issue and about the real danger of guns. Let us enter into a dialogue and listen to stakeholders and communities, take stock of current legislation and seek to deliver an effective firearms control system throughout the United Kingdom that tackles all the issues.

16:07

John Lamont (Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con): To repeat comments that the majority of members who have spoken in the debate have made, we firmly believe that firearms laws should remain the responsibility of Westminster. Although I acknowledge that the cabinet secretary has made the right noises by putting a letter in the post to the Home Secretary to ask for a cross-border task force, like many members I remain concerned that that is another example of the SNP Government wanting to focus on the constitutional aspects of gun control, rather than on how it can work with the UK Government to tackle what is an important issue.

In last week's debate about serious and organised crime, I questioned the cabinet secretary's attack on the British Transport Police and expressed concern that he was using that issue as part of his anti-British crusade. This week, the SNP Government seems to be using the recognised problem of air-guns in Scotland as another weapon in its anti-British battle. During a debate in 2005 on the control of firearms, the SNP, which was then in opposition, appeared to suggest that the way forward was to have a different system of gun control in Scotland from that in the rest of the UK. However, there is no doubt in my mind that, as Bill Butler explained, having different systems throughout the UK could create loopholes that would be exploited by those with criminal intent.

Scotland has not had the surge in gun crime and gang warfare that has been witnessed in parts of

England, where gun crime involving banned and legal guns has doubled since 1997. However, it is important to recognise the challenges that we face in Scotland.

Kenny MacAskill: As a member of the Conservative party, the member will be a great believer in the land of the free market in the United States. Does he think it is such an impediment in America that individual states have their own gun laws? Why does the member think that such a system could not operate in Scotland and the rest of the United Kingdom when it can operate in the United States of America?

John Lamont: The cabinet secretary has confirmed my fears. I say to him that Scotland is part of not a federal United Kingdom but a United Kingdom in which this issue is most effectively controlled by being dealt with at Westminster and not at localised Parliaments.

It is important to acknowledge the challenges in Scotland. We would all welcome the fact that the trend in England has not been repeated in Scotland. However, although we have not seen the same surge in gun crime as south of the border, there is no room for complacency. Firearms casualties in Scotland were up by 25 per cent. In 2006-07, the Scottish police recorded 1,245 offences in which a firearm was alleged to have been used. That was an increase of 17 per cent and the highest number of offences recorded in the past 10 years.

Tragically, since 1998 hundreds of murders, attempted murders and robberies have involved pistols and revolvers. As all members know, the vast majority of such weapons have already been banned. Banning the guns did not prevent the crimes. It would be a mistake to confuse legally held firearms with the illegally held firearms that are all too often used to commit crimes. We all know about the increasing number of concerning incidents involving air-guns. However, the problem is not the legally held weapons. It is the illegally held weapons that we ought to focus on.

As the figures demonstrate, bans and legislation on their own do not prevent tragedies or crimes. That point was made in the very good contribution from Nigel Don. Drink-driving is banned but we still have thousands of drink-driving offences; drugs are outlawed but we still have a growing drugs problem.

Bill Wilson: Will the member take an intervention?

John Lamont: I would like to make some progress.

Last year, millions of crimes and offences were committed across Scotland, despite their being outlawed.

The cabinet secretary says that current legislation is not fit for purpose. However, legislation alone will not prevent individuals who are intent on breaking the law from doing so. We will also require a robust enforcement regime. The Scottish Conservatives have continuously campaigned for more police officers on Scotland's streets—walking the beat and being a visible deterrent. In our manifesto for the recent elections to this Parliament, we promised 1,500 newly recruited police officers.

Bill Butler: Will the member take an intervention on that point?

John Lamont: I am in my final minute, almost.

We agree with the Scottish Government that we need to retain serving officers and ensure that their time is being used productively. Officers must be freed from needless paperwork. We also agree that we need to help the police forces to work smarter. On top of all that, we would still provide the forces with the additional 1,500 police officers.

I know that the new SNP Government is battling with the legacy inherited from the previous Administration, but how can having only 140 police officers on our streets at any one time possibly win the battle against gun crime? My conclusion is simple: what we need is not so much more law as more police officers on our streets.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Paul Martin. It would appear that the time constraints are slightly less than I had thought. I will explain the reasons later.

16:13

Paul Martin (Glasgow Springburn) (Lab): We have heard a number of interesting contributions today. I would not call Bill Wilson "Wild Bill Wilson"; I would call him "Honest Bill Wilson". He has set out the situation, which is that this is about a fight with Westminster. That is unfortunate, and I will elaborate on why we believe that.

On the Labour benches, we are clear that our duty is to do what is right. Like others, I as a parent acknowledge the human tragedy that is attached to today's debate. Bill Butler spoke about a young child who was killed by a callous thug who thought that it was fair game to aim his air-gun at local firefighters who were going about their job and serving their local community. I am sorry to say that such attacks are clearly evident in my constituency, as in many other constituencies throughout Scotland. They have been evident for a number of years. In fact, members might recall that in September 2002 I lodged an amendment to the Criminal Justice (Scotland) Bill to provide the same sentencing tariff for an attack on a firefighter as for an attack on a police officer. Over the

years—we heard about this particularly during the passage of the Antisocial Behaviour etc (Scotland) Bill—it has been evident that air-guns are used as a method of terrorising communities and emergency workers, which is unacceptable. I am proud that the Labour Party challenged such antisocial behaviour during the passage of that bill.

The discussion of the possible regulation of air-guns should be considered as unfinished business. We support that and we want to take forward our agenda of attacking this unacceptable antisocial behaviour in our communities. We welcomed the Violent Crime Reduction Act 2006, which was passed by our colleagues at Westminster and which, in effect, outlaws the sale of air-guns at car-boot sales, corner shops and outlets not regulated by the police. It also bans the sale of air-guns over the internet and through mail order catalogues and raises the legal age for owning an air-gun from 17 to 18, which we welcome.

As Pauline McNeill set out eloquently, we cannot see the case for anybody who resides in an urban setting to say that they require to own an air-gun. I can think of many of my constituents who clearly could not make that case. Pauline McNeill is right that we should tip the balance towards requiring the applicant to make the case for owning an air-gun.

Fergus Ewing: We agree strongly with the sentiment, which Pauline McNeill expressed and Paul Martin repeated, that those who wish to possess an air-gun should demonstrate why they need to do so. My question to the Labour Party—I ask this not knowing the answer—is how we can achieve that without some system of licensing. Given that we have quite a lot of time, I invite Paul Martin to opine on that at great length.

Paul Martin: This is a serious subject. I will give Fergus Ewing an answer, although the Cabinet Secretary for Justice did not give an answer when he was questioned by others. Cathie Craigie set out the position well. We will consider a review so that we can consider all the issues, on which I am sure that the minister will want to elaborate during the summit that will take place. The cabinet secretary said during his speech that he has an open mind and that he wants to take forward a number of reviews and to hear a wide range of views from throughout Scotland. As Cathie Craigie said, surely we should be willing to listen to all points of view on the matter. We are open to how best we can manage the issue to accommodate those who have a legitimate reason for owning an air-gun. We have reiterated that point on a number of occasions.

Kenny MacAskill: The member has not answered the point that my colleague put to him. If we are simply to require people to say that they

need an air-gun for good purposes, who is to be the arbiter? Will it be the shop salesman, which is what happens in some states of America where people can vouch for who they are by showing their driving licence? Surely the only way that we can regulate the ownership of air-guns, so that people have them only for fit, proper and reasonable purposes, such as pest or vermin control, is to have a licensing scheme. If the Labour Party does not think that there should be a licensing scheme, will Paul Martin tell us how it proposes to regulate the ownership of air-guns?

Paul Martin: The Parliament has a proud record of interrogating all possibilities. The minister does not have an open mind. Given that we have to submit freedom of information requests to get information from the minister, it is a bit rich for him to ask me to respond to him. I will not take any lectures from him about providing information—he should practise what he preaches.

Bill Aitken said that, even with legislative remedies, we will not take air-guns out of circulation. The determined individual will access an air-gun. However, my view is that we should not make it easy for them to do so. The determined housebreaker will be able to break into my home, but I do not want to make it easy for him—I want to make it difficult for him, which is why I have a five-lever lock in my front door and an alarm system in my home. In considering a system to take the issue forward, we should look at how we can make it difficult for possible perpetrators.

As our amendment says, we want to work constructively with our colleagues in Westminster. A sign of a good Government, whatever its make-up, is that it demonstrates that it can work with others. Let me also say that I will not take any lectures about delivering justice and legal remedies from a Government that has yet to deliver one piece of justice legislation to the Parliament—it does not look as if it will deliver any justice and legal remedies this year. We will not hear any proposals from the Government for a criminal justice bill for 18 months and yet it lectures us that, if Westminster does not deliver legislation, it will do so. It is unacceptable to take such a lecture from the Government.

We are confident that we have a case to make that will ensure that our colleagues in Westminster agree that a review is needed. I ask the Parliament to support the amendment in the name of Pauline McNeill.

16:21

The Minister for Community Safety (Fergus Ewing): This has been an interesting debate and I am pleased to close for the Scottish Government. I

think that there is more consensus than was immediately apparent during the debate.

Let me start by pointing out to members the legal definition of firearm. It is

“a lethal barrelled weapon of any description from which any shot, bullet or other missile can be discharged”.

Members should note the word “lethal”. We are talking not about harmless objects but about guns that kill people.

I agree with the members who have expressed the view that this is an extremely serious topic and therefore not one for undue levity. We should remember that, as many members have said, we are here to recognise that we can do more to protect individuals and communities against the misuse of firearms. I am sure that Jacqui Smith would agree with that as a general proposition, as would any politician from any democratically elected party, and it would be churlish of me not to accept that. I wanted to set out that general view because it is one with which we can all agree.

Many members—Nigel Don, Bill Wilson and Mike Pringle, to name three from memory—have referred to the statistics about crime in which guns were involved, and it is worth focusing on them. In 2006-07, the Scottish police recorded 1,245 crimes and offences in which a firearm was alleged to have been used, which was an increase of 17 per cent from 2005-06. That is a huge increase and a huge number of offences. In 2006-07, there were 247 crimes and offences in which a firearm was fired and it either killed or caused serious injury. That is not one or two but 247 cases of death or serious injury. One life lost of a child is surely a basis for a Government to take an issue seriously and, if necessary, legislate, but the statistics show a growing problem in which hundreds of people are being killed or injured by lethal weapons. We come to the debate in that context.

With the Cabinet Secretary for Justice, I met some people who have lost a loved one—they are here in the public gallery to listen to the debate. We should think about them and other communities that are or may be affected by such crimes.

Nigel Don said that Grampian has a good record, yet not only are people there not complacent, they are concerned about a growing incidence of gun possession. That is not such a problem in Grampian as it has been in Glasgow, for example, but it is perceived to be growing—I know that from discussions with senior police officers, particularly in relation to the dealing of drugs.

Setting the context is important, because it brings us back to the gravity of the problem and to

the justification for the Government's approach. As I have rather more time than I expected, I will set out our approach at more length than I had expected to just a few moments ago.

It is important to say that of course the Scottish Government wants gun control and regulation of the misuse of firearms to be tightened, in so far as the law can do that, throughout the UK. We are Scottish nationalists, but we want the people of England, Wales and Northern Ireland to benefit from the best and most effective laws possible. We want communities in England to be protected by more effective laws and we do not want toddlers in England to be shot by air-guns or other firearms, so of course it is preferable to improve the law throughout the UK.

I said that the Government's position is that it is preferable for the issue to be dealt with across the UK, as Hugh Henry said, because that is the ideal approach, but that is not where we find ourselves. It may be useful to members, now that I have a prolonged opportunity to set out the position—

Mike Pringle: The minister has 33 minutes to go.

Fergus Ewing: I thank Mike Pringle for that.

It may be useful to take time to set out where we are at present. Many members approach the topic as if the debate is of recent vintage, but it is not. I have the Home Office consultation paper "Controls on Firearms", which dates back to May 2004, when David Blunkett was the Home Secretary.

Mike Pringle *rose*—

Fergus Ewing: I will take an intervention in a minute.

In that paper, David Blunkett helpfully said:

"We want to minimise bureaucracy"

and

"we don't want to impose unnecessary burdens ... But the legislation has been amended a number of times, and as a result the framework of controls can be difficult to understand and enforce."

That was the Home Secretary admitting that the law is difficult to understand and to enforce. His saying that the law was defective in that way is a telling admission that the law must be reformed. He admitted that four years ago.

Pauline McNeill: Will the minister take an intervention?

Fergus Ewing: In a second—we have plenty of time.

The law must be reformed because, for the law to work, people must know what it is. The more complicated a law is, the fewer people can understand it. For example, page 11 of the

consultation paper says that it is an offence to trespass with an air-gun and fire one

"within 50 feet of a public road".

I did not know of that offence before I read the paper. To enforce that law, police officers must go round Scotland with a tape measure that is capable of measuring 50ft, because if someone is within 51ft of the road, they will not commit an offence. That is ridiculous, outmoded and antiquated and needs to be changed. It is not me who says that, but David Blunkett. The SNP agrees with him.

Pauline McNeill: Will the minister give way?

Mike Pringle *rose*—

Fergus Ewing: I give way to Pauline McNeill.

Pauline McNeill: I am sorry, Mike.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: No first names, please.

Pauline McNeill: The minister makes a valid point that Labour members have acknowledged—that we need to have a law that is clear and simple. However, if that is his argument, please will he explain to members why his first pitch to the Home Secretary was for all firearms legislation to be dealt with in Scotland? Would that not make firearms legislation more confusing?

Fergus Ewing: That is an incorrect characterisation of the position. The cabinet secretary has met the Home Secretary, and there have been discussions with Jack Straw. Discussions did not begin in the past week or so—they have gone on for a long time.

Mike Pringle: As we have some time left, I would be grateful if the minister could tell us how the SNP responded to the consultation in 2004. Perhaps he could read out the SNP's response if he has a copy. Did he respond in detail to the consultation? I am sure that he has plenty of time to speak about that.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Time is on the minister's side, but he should not feel the need to filibuster if he does not want to.

Fergus Ewing: I am not easily offended, Presiding Officer.

I will be serious. There can be very few people in Scotland who have not heard Kenny MacAskill campaigning on firearms issues. The idea that we did not contribute to the debate in 2004 is flawed. No one can accuse Kenny MacAskill of not being vocal. [*Interruption.*]

I am getting hints to get to the root of things. The Home Office said in the consultation paper that it was not in favour of licensing air-guns, and it admitted that it had been estimated that there

were 7 million air-guns in the UK, although no one really knew how many there were, as they were unlicensed. The statistical chances of misusing those guns are massive and unacceptable but, despite that, the Home Office was opposed to licensing them in 2004.

I come to the kernel of the debate. In her opening speech, Pauline McNeill stated that the Labour Party believes that no one should possess or own an air-gun unless they have a legitimate reason for doing so and a legitimate purpose. Paul Martin confirmed that. I welcome that statement; there is a degree of consensus in that respect. However, it is now incumbent on the Labour Party to say how that desirable aim should be achieved. We believe that licensing is the way to do that. How else can it be determined and decided that somebody has a legitimate purpose for possessing or owning an air-gun? I have many constituents who are gamekeepers. Gamekeepers plainly need firearms to do their work. If they do not have a licence, they cannot be a gamekeeper. I have a long e-mail that relates to people with sporting interests—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Order. There are too many conversations in the chamber. Members should be here to listen to the debate.

Fergus Ewing: Thank you, Presiding Officer.

Mike Rumbles (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (LD): The minister keeps mentioning legitimate reasons for having an air rifle, but the motion refers to

“legitimate occupational and sporting interests”.

I have a legitimate interest in having an air rifle, but it is neither an occupational nor a sporting interest. It seems to me that what the minister is saying does not relate to the motion.

Fergus Ewing: That is not a correct characterisation or interpretation of our motion, but we will have to disagree about that. We are clearly saying that only those who need a gun of some sort for their work or who desire to have a gun to pursue their sporting interests should be allowed to own a gun. Both reasons for having a gun are legitimate, although the first is probably more pressing than the second. We support, for example, what the Scottish Clay Target Association has said. It has recommended that a person should have safety tuition before they get a shotgun certificate. At the moment, a person can have an air-gun or another gun without having had any safety tuition. That does not seem to me to be sensible.

I return to the main issues. The Labour Party has progressed. It says that before a person can own or possess an air-gun, they must demonstrate that they have a purpose for it. Having admitted

that, Labour has no defence against the argument that licensing is the only method of ensuring that. The Home Office clearly said in its 2004 consultation paper that it was opposed to licensing. That raises the second core issue of the debate: how do we make progress? The unfortunate position—I say this in reply to Hugh Henry—is that the UK Government in 2004 indicated that there would be a firearms consultative committee between the two Governments. We await the formation of that committee. Were Westminster to say again that that committee would be formed, of course the Scottish Government would serve on it, but it has not. It promised to form the committee, but it has not done so. Nor has it indicated any change from its position in 2004, when it said that it was opposed to the licensing of air-guns.

We have reached the clear situation in which perhaps the majority of members in the chamber agree that no one should have an air-gun unless they need it and can prove that they need it. That is the Labour position. I believe that it might be the Liberal Democrat position, although that is not always easy to determine—I hope that it is the Liberal Democrat position.

Margaret Smith: As I think I said in my speech, truncated though it was at that point, our 2007 manifesto position was that we were in favour of a tough licensing regime for air-guns.

Fergus Ewing: As there is consensus on the issue, the question is how we transform that consensus into action and into law. That brings us to the question that Canon Kenyon Wright posed: what happens when Westminster says no? The SNP says that we should not simply lie down and do nothing—we should legislate to protect our communities. That is our position, which I believe is supported by the vast majority of people in Scotland.

We will continue to try to work with the Home Office. We are planning to hold a summit and have asked the Home Secretary to convene that summit jointly with the cabinet secretary. I very much hope that the Home Secretary will accept that invitation and that we can move forward. The Scottish Government is clear that we need to legislate to protect our communities, and we will do that in so far as we can.

Dormant Bank and Building Society Accounts Bill

16:37

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Alasdair Morgan): I inform members that motion S3M-1087, in the name of Jim Mather, on the Dormant Bank and Building Society Accounts Bill, which is United Kingdom legislation, will not be moved by the minister.

The Minister for Parliamentary Business (Bruce Crawford): On a point of order, Presiding Officer.

It will be obvious to members in the chamber who have looked at the *Business Bulletin* that, in respect of Jeremy Purvis's amendment, there was the potential for no agreement to be reached on the legislative consent motion this evening. That is the case as far as I am aware. *[Interruption.]* If members give me a moment to explain why it has been necessary to withdraw the motion, all will understand why.

Hugh Henry (Paisley South) (Lab): It is because the Government was going to lose the vote.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Order.

Bruce Crawford: It is not quite as simple as that.

There is still time within the process at Westminster to bring another LCM back for discussion next week, once the parties have had a chance to have a further look at their positions. I say that because clause 19(2) of the Dormant Bank and Building Society Accounts Bill—a clause that pertains to the Scottish Parliament—states:

"Before making an order under this section the Scottish Ministers shall consult the Big Lottery Fund and such other persons (if any) as they think appropriate."

A requirement for the Government to consult on the issue is built into the UK bill, but Jeremy Purvis's amendment would make that process difficult. Clause 19(3) states:

"An order under this section may not be made unless a draft of the statutory instrument containing it has been laid before, and approved by a resolution of, the Scottish Parliament."

That would be the appropriate time for members to suggest solutions and ideas about how the moneys accruing from the sources mentioned should be used.

I suggest to members that I am trying to act in as reasonable a manner as can be achieved—*[Interruption.]* I hear some members say "Rubbish", but I am trying to build up an effective

relationship with the UK Government—*[Interruption.]* Some members may laugh, but the business of this Parliament needs to be discharged in an effective way, just as the business at Westminster needs to be discharged in an effective way. If we have agreement on both sides, I see no reason for causing unnecessary conflict when that is not necessary. *[Interruption.]*

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Order.

Bruce Crawford: Presiding Officer, I am sure that you agree that, in the circumstances, I am acting in a reasonable way as the Government's business manager. We hope that we will have some time to discuss the matter and to bring it back next week.

Robert Brown (Glasgow) (LD): On a point of order, Presiding Officer.

In nine years in the Parliament I have seldom heard such a weak excuse for sleight of hand by the Government. The reality of the matter is that the Government was set to lose the vote on our very reasonable amendment. All the furore and smokescreens that the Minister for Parliamentary Business has used as an excuse for coming to the Parliament's officials to withdraw the motion some 15 minutes before the debate on it was due to take place does not disguise that reality. The point about conflict with the UK Government is irrelevant; the issue is what will happen when the Westminster bill becomes law and comes into operation in Scotland.

Jeremy Purvis's amendment would do nothing to constrain the requirement for consultation that the bill provides. It would in no way limit such consultation, apart from by setting the direction of travel for the use of the funds on youth services and facilities. I can tell members that there will be considerable outrage across Scotland, in the youth sector in particular, at the withdrawal of the legislative consent motion. The issue is not that we could not reach consensus—that happens on many issues—but that had the Parliament voted on the motion and amendment today, it would have made a decision that would then need to be taken forward.

I will come to the point of order that those points presaged. I seek your guidance, Presiding Officer, on whether, as the Parliamentary Bureau motion states that the debate should take place today during this slot, it would be appropriate for the motion to which the amendment in the name of Jeremy Purvis relates to be moved by a member who is not a minister. If so, I will seek to do that.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Will Mr Brown repeat that last point? I did not catch it.

Robert Brown: Is it possible for another member to move the motion—as happens when

committees consider amendments—to enable it to be debated by the Parliament this afternoon?

Secondly, is whether the debate should be removed from today's agenda not within the control of the Parliament, given that it was included by the Parliamentary Bureau?

Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab): On a point of order, Presiding Officer.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I will respond to Mr Brown before I take the point of order from Jackie Baillie.

The standing orders are quite clear that, in these circumstances, the motion must be moved by the member who lodged the motion or by another member who has expressed approval for it by supporting it by the end of the preceding day.

Jackie Baillie: On a point of order, Presiding Officer.

I think that we need to set the record straight. The legislative consent motion has been withdrawn because the SNP opposes the amendment on youth facilities and it would have lost this evening's vote. I might add that a similar proposal has won support at Westminster. I understand why the Minister for Parliamentary Business is keen to say how reasonable he is—I think that I counted five occasions on which he said that—but his saying so does not necessarily mean that it is the case.

I want to raise four issues. First, is it in order for the SNP to withdraw the legislative consent motion at this late stage, given the business programme that has been approved by the Parliamentary Bureau and the Parliament? Secondly, will you reflect on whether it is in order for any member of the Parliament to move a legislative consent motion? I understand that that is acceptable, so I ask you to reconsider. Thirdly, is it not the case that as the Parliament agreed the business motion, its agreement must be sought for such a motion to be withdrawn? Finally, my esteemed colleague, the Minister for Parliamentary Business, quoted the Dormant Bank and Building Society Accounts Bill. Has the Presiding Officer and the business team, on that basis, misunderstood the bill?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I have read the standing orders on this point. It is acceptable for the minister not to move the motion. It is clear that only the minister can move the motion—or withdraw the motion or not move it, whichever—and it cannot be moved by somebody else at this stage, or at least there is nobody competently qualified to move it at this stage.

It is not my job to express a point of view on what the business team or the Parliamentary

Bureau understood when it had its meeting. That is beyond me.

Jeremy Purvis (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD): On a point of order, Presiding Officer.

I make a point of order under rule 8.2.6 of standing orders. The Minister for Parliamentary Business stated that there has been a lack of consideration of the issue by the Parliament and its committees and by civic Scotland. On 28 June 2007, at First Minister's question time, I raised the Dormant Bank and Building Society Accounts Bill and how the funding will be distributed. I said:

"The UK Government plans to spend that money on voluntary youth services in England. There is no constraint on the devolved Administration spending a consequential amount to guarantee the same level of voluntary youth services provision in Scotland. Will the First Minister confirm to the Parliament that he will do that?"

The First Minister replied:

"I will pursue the issue with the United Kingdom Government. I thank the member for pointing it out to me; he makes a very useful point."—[*Official Report*, 28 June 2007; c 1275-6.]

On 3 October, the Minister for Enterprise, Energy and Tourism, Jim Mather, wrote to me, stating:

"I understand you favour adoption of the spending priorities already identified for England—voluntary youth services."

It simply is not the case—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Order. Mr Purvis, we are getting points of debate. I fail to ascertain a point of order.

Jeremy Purvis: I hoped that you would understand, Presiding Officer. I understand that I have three minutes to make a point of order.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That is precisely the point. You have that time to make a point of order, not to make political points or points of argument. I would be grateful if you could get to the basis of the point of order.

Jeremy Purvis: The basis of my point of order is that I have a case under rule 8.2.6, which I will come to after your intervention, Presiding Officer.

Jim Mather also stated:

"a Legislative Consent Memorandum will be required to allow the UK Parliament to legislate on Scotland's behalf on this issue."

Over the past eight years, SNP spokesmen have attacked the procedure of Sewel motions in the Parliament. In 2004, Bruce Crawford described that process as an abuse of Parliament. The action that has been taken this afternoon has been an abuse of Parliament. Since June—and since October—a case has been developed for the

issue to be addressed today, as was published in the *Business Bulletin*. Civic society, youth services and others have seen that Parliament will debate this vital issue. It would be an outrage if Parliament were denied the opportunity to debate it today. Therefore, under rule 8.2.6 of standing orders, I seek leave to move a motion without notice that we consider the matter—as stated in the *Business Bulletin* and as Parliament deserves.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: In view of the issues that members have raised, I intend to suspend this meeting of the Parliament. I will give members my decision on the points of order immediately prior to the scheduled time for decision time, which is 5 o'clock.

David McLetchie (Edinburgh Pentlands) (Con) *rose—*

The Deputy Presiding Officer: It is my intention to suspend the meeting, but as I have not yet done so I will hear Mr McLetchie if he wishes to make a point of order.

David McLetchie: Further to the point of order, Presiding Officer.

To add to the matters that you may wish to take into consideration—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: And bearing in mind that the time for consideration will get shorter with every minute you speak.

David McLetchie: There is indeed a heavy irony in Mr Crawford's expressed desire for co-operation between the Scottish Parliament and Westminster, given the few opportunities that the Government has wasted to provoke conflict. That said, and in fairness to him—this goes to the heart of the amendment's competence—Mr Purvis's amendment would appear to seek to impose an obligation on the Scottish ministers to pursue a course of action that is inconsistent with the statutory obligation that clause 19(2) would lay on them.

Will you consider whether it is competent to take a motion with notice on an amendment—to a Sewel motion—that would place an inconsistent obligation on the Government?

Bruce Crawford *rose—*

Jackie Baillie *rose—*

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Order. We are having points of debate rather than points of order. A request has been made that the Presiding Officers accept a motion without notice. The Presiding Officer or I will rule on that immediately prior to decision time, when this meeting will reconvene. I suspend the meeting until 5 o'clock.

16:50

Meeting suspended.

17:01

On resuming—

Presiding Officer's Ruling

The Presiding Officer (Alex Fergusson): I ask members to take their seats as quickly as possible. I am aware of the exchanges that took place before I came back into the chair, I have discussed the situation with my Deputy Presiding Officers and with officials, and I would like to make the following brief statement.

I received intimation that the Minister for Parliamentary Business wished to withdraw motion S3M-1087. I reiterate that standing orders are absolutely clear that any member has the right to withdraw a motion in their name up to the point at which that motion is moved in Parliament. As motion S3M-1087 had not been moved in Parliament, under standing orders the Minister for Parliamentary Business had an inalienable right to withdraw it. The motion can therefore no longer be considered.

Following that, Mr Jeremy Purvis sought leave for Parliament to consider a motion without notice. Given what I understand to be a commitment by the minister to bring the matter back to Parliament next week and the fact that that proposal will go through the Parliamentary Bureau and normal parliamentary procedures, I am not minded to accept such a motion.

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: Members may say no as often as they like, but that is the reality of the situation.

Robert Brown (Glasgow) (LD): On a point of order, Presiding Officer.

Obviously, I accept your judgment on all of that, but the Minister for Parliamentary Business did not undertake to bring the matter back to Parliament next week or at any particular time; he said that he would bring it back to Parliament at some point in the future.

The motion is set down in the *Business Bulletin* for debate today, following the consideration of the Parliamentary Bureau, which is set up to deal with such matters. One can only imagine that the Government has a particular problem with its budget, such that it requires to eke out the funding in question in some other way. Against the background of uncertainty about when the matter will be brought back to Parliament, I ask you to review the information on which you have made your judgment.

The Presiding Officer: I would like to give the Minister for Parliamentary Business an opportunity to respond on the commitment that I believe he made earlier.

The Minister for Parliamentary Business (Bruce Crawford): You are entirely correct, Presiding Officer. If I did not make it absolutely clear, let me do so now. It is our intention to bring the legislative consent motion back next week. That will give all parties the chance to discuss the matter and to see whether agreement can be reached.

We are committed to a consultation process that considers all options. I make it absolutely clear that the intended consultation would not exclude support for youth services. I remind Parliament that when the Economy, Energy and Tourism Committee considered the matter, it had no points to make in that regard. It is appropriate for the Parliament to take the opportunity to reflect on the issue before dealing with it next week. I repeat that any consultation that the Government holds will include youth services in as wide a sense as possible.

Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab): On a point of order, Presiding Officer.

The Presiding Officer: I will take the point of order, but I take it from what the minister has said that a commitment has been made to bring the matter back to Parliament next week, as I said in my statement.

Jackie Baillie: I absolutely understand that commitment, but the essential point that the minister made when he withdrew his legislative consent motion was that the amendment acted against the primary legislation. Is it in order to withdraw the motion and bring the matter back to Parliament if inherent in that is a requirement for you to take again a decision on an amendment that the Minister for Parliamentary Business says is not competent? Did you and your team get it wrong—

Members: Oh!

The Presiding Officer: Order. These are serious issues.

Jackie Baillie: I ask that question because the minister is withdrawing the motion on the basis that the amendment acts against the bill.

The Presiding Officer: I do not believe that we have got it wrong, Miss Baillie, and I am not persuaded by your argument. The member has the right to withdraw the motion; there is no doubt about that. If the motion is withdrawn, the amendment is no longer relevant because the motion will not be debated.

Jackie Baillie: Further to the point of order, Presiding Officer.

To be absolutely clear, would you not rule out exactly the same amendment—which means that this is simply a debate delayed?

The Presiding Officer: I certainly cannot rule out its coming back in the same form, if that is what you are asking. Next week's business will be up to next week.

Jeremy Purvis (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD): On a point of order, Presiding Officer.

Of course you have the absolute right to make any determination with regard to the rules—*[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Order. These are serious issues and I would like to be able to hear the points of order.

Jeremy Purvis:—and you need not explain your rulings. The Minister for Parliamentary Business gave a justification for the motion being withdrawn and, therefore, for my amendment becoming unnecessary. The argument was that the minister will return to Parliament next week after consideration and after hearing the views of members, but debates in this Parliament are the opportunity for the views of members to be heard and we had arranged for a properly timetabled debate on a properly consulted upon measure that others outside this Parliament knew would be debated. Indeed, from June, members have expressed views on the issue.

In your role as the Presiding Officer of this Parliament and as the person who represents this Parliament to others outside, can you tell me whether the reputation of this Parliament is to be undermined by a Government that withdraws motions in advance of a proper parliamentary debate at which members' views can be properly aired, after which the Government can make a consideration, based on our views?

The Presiding Officer: I understand where Mr Purvis is coming from, but I do not consider that the actions of the Presiding Officers have negated a debate. This matter will come back to the Parliament next week. It will have to be approved by the Parliamentary Bureau and I would be surprised if the Parliamentary Bureau did not allocate time to ensure that there is at least as much debate as there would have been today.

I suggest that we move on.

Helen Eadie (Dunfermline East) (Lab): On a point of order, Presiding Officer.

The view of Parliament is sovereign in any nation—*[Laughter.]*

The Presiding Officer: Order. That is not helpful.

Helen Eadie: Is it your view that you are unwilling to test the will of Parliament this evening?

The Presiding Officer: My view is what the Parliament decides at decision time at 5 o'clock. I repeat that the minister has the inalienable right, under standing orders, to withdraw the motion—whether anybody likes it or not. That is what has happened.

I strongly suggest that we move to decision time.

Karen Gillon (Clydesdale) (Lab): On a point of order, Presiding Officer.

The Presiding Officer: Clearly my view is not shared.

Karen Gillon: I am genuinely trying to be helpful.

Gil Paterson (West of Scotland) (SNP): That will be a change.

Karen Gillon: It will, indeed.

Presiding Officer, I wish you to reflect on two issues. When did the Minister for Parliamentary Business come to believe that the amendment was not competent, and when did he inform you of his decision therefore to withdraw the motion?

The second issue relates to members signing up to legislative consent motions. Over the past eight years there has been a general understanding that if a Government or a party lodges a legislative consent motion there is no requirement for other members to sign up to that motion and that it will be debated in this Parliament. If that convention is not now to be followed by this Government, I ask you to reflect on that and refer the matter to the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee for its further consideration.

The Presiding Officer: It is not for me to reflect on the member's second point. I have no doubt that the discussion will take place at the bureau next week. It is open to any member to refer matters to the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee if they wish to do so. I have already forgotten what the member's first point was—[*Interruption.*]

I can only go back to the fact that the reasons for withdrawing the motion are not for me to determine. The standing orders are quite clear. I will say this for the last time: the member whose name is on the motion has the right to withdraw that motion before it is moved in Parliament. That is what has happened, whether we like it or not.

Decision Time

17:10

The Presiding Officer (Alex Fergusson): There are nine questions as a result of today's business. I wish to remind members—they might want to listen to this carefully—that in relation to the debate on energy, if the amendment in the name of Lewis Macdonald is agreed to, the amendment in the name of Liam McArthur falls. In relation to the debate on firearms, if the amendment in the name of Pauline McNeill is agreed to, the amendment in the name of Bill Aitken falls.

The first question is, that amendment S3M-1152.2.1, in the name of Gavin Brown, which seeks to amend amendment S3M-1152.2, in the name of Lewis Macdonald, on energy, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

FOR

Aitken, Bill (Glasgow) (Con)
 Alexander, Ms Wendy (Paisley North) (Lab)
 Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Baker, Richard (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Edinburgh Central) (Lab)
 Brocklebank, Ted (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Brown, Gavin (Lothians) (Con)
 Brownlee, Derek (South of Scotland) (Con)
 Butler, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (Lab)
 Carlaw, Jackson (West of Scotland) (Con)
 Chisholm, Malcolm (Edinburgh North and Leith) (Lab)
 Craigie, Cathie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (Lab)
 Curran, Margaret (Glasgow Baillieston) (Lab)
 Eadie, Helen (Dunfermline East) (Lab)
 Fergusson, Patricia (Glasgow Maryhill) (Lab)
 Foulkes, George (Lothians) (Lab)
 Gillon, Karen (Clydesdale) (Lab)
 Glen, Marlyn (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Godman, Trish (West Renfrewshire) (Lab)
 Goldie, Annabel (West of Scotland) (Con)
 Gordon, Charlie (Glasgow Cathcart) (Lab)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Gray, Iain (East Lothian) (Lab)
 Henry, Hugh (Paisley South) (Lab)
 Jamieson, Cathy (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (Lab)
 Johnstone, Alex (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Kelly, James (Glasgow Rutherglen) (Lab)
 Kerr, Andy (East Kilbride) (Lab)
 Lamont, Johann (Glasgow Pollok) (Lab)
 Lamont, John (Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 Macdonald, Lewis (Aberdeen Central) (Lab)
 Macintosh, Ken (Eastwood) (Lab)
 Martin, Paul (Glasgow Springburn) (Lab)
 McAveety, Mr Frank (Glasgow Shettleston) (Lab)
 McCabe, Tom (Hamilton South) (Lab)
 McConnell, Jack (Motherwell and Wishaw) (Lab)
 McGrigor, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 McLetchie, David (Edinburgh Pentlands) (Con)
 McMahon, Michael (Hamilton North and Bellshill) (Lab)
 McNeil, Duncan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (Lab)

McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow Kelvin) (Lab)
 McNulty, Des (Clydebank and Milngavie) (Lab)
 Milne, Nanette (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Mitchell, Margaret (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Mulligan, Mary (Linlithgow) (Lab)
 Murray, Elaine (Dumfries) (Lab)
 Oldfather, Irene (Cunninghame South) (Lab)
 Park, John (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Peacock, Peter (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Peattie, Cathy (Falkirk East) (Lab)
 Scanlon, Mary (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Scott, John (Ayr) (Con)
 Simpson, Dr Richard (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Smith, Elaine (Coatbridge and Chryston) (Lab)
 Smith, Elizabeth (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Stewart, David (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Whitefield, Karen (Airdrie and Shotts) (Lab)
 Whitton, David (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (Lab)

AGAINST

Adam, Brian (Aberdeen North) (SNP)
 Ahmad, Bashir (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Allan, Alasdair (Western Isles) (SNP)
 Brown, Keith (Ochil) (SNP)
 Brown, Robert (Glasgow) (LD)
 Campbell, Aileen (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP)
 Constance, Angela (Livingston) (SNP)
 Crawford, Bruce (Stirling) (SNP)
 Cunningham, Roseanna (Perth) (SNP)
 Don, Nigel (North East Scotland) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness East, Nairn and Lochaber) (SNP)
 Fabiani, Linda (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Finnie, Ross (West of Scotland) (LD)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee West) (SNP)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Gibson, Rob (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Grahame, Christine (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Harvie, Christopher (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Hume, Jim (South of Scotland) (LD)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Lothians) (SNP)
 Ingram, Adam (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 MacAskill, Kenny (Edinburgh East and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Marwick, Tricia (Central Fife) (SNP)
 Mather, Jim (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 Maxwell, Stewart (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney) (LD)
 McInnes, Alison (North East Scotland) (LD)
 McKee, Ian (Lothians) (SNP)
 McKelvie, Christina (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 McMillan, Stuart (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 Morgan, Alasdair (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Munro, John Farquhar (Ross, Skye and Inverness West) (LD)
 Neil, Alex (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 O'Donnell, Hugh (Central Scotland) (LD)
 Paterson, Gil (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 Pringle, Mike (Edinburgh South) (LD)
 Purvis, Jeremy (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee East) (SNP)
 Rumbles, Mike (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (LD)
 Russell, Michael (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Salmond, Alex (Gordon) (SNP)
 Scott, Tavish (Shetland) (LD)
 Smith, Iain (North East Fife) (LD)
 Smith, Margaret (Edinburgh West) (LD)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Lothians) (SNP)

Stephen, Nicol (Aberdeen South) (LD)
 Stevenson, Stewart (Banff and Buchan) (SNP)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Govan) (SNP)
 Swinney, John (North Tayside) (SNP)
 Thompson, Dave (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Tolson, Jim (Dunfermline West) (LD)
 Watt, Maureen (North East Scotland) (SNP)
 Welsh, Andrew (Angus) (SNP)
 White, Sandra (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Wilson, Bill (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 Wilson, John (Central Scotland) (SNP)

ABSTENTIONS

Harper, Robin (Lothians) (Green)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Stone, Jamie (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 59, Against 62, Abstentions 3.

Amendment disagreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The second question is, that amendment S3M-1152.2, in the name of Lewis Macdonald, which seeks to amend motion S3M-1152, in the name of Jim Mather, on energy, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

FOR

Aitken, Bill (Glasgow) (Con)
 Alexander, Ms Wendy (Paisley North) (Lab)
 Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Baker, Richard (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Edinburgh Central) (Lab)
 Brocklebank, Ted (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Brown, Gavin (Lothians) (Con)
 Brownlee, Derek (South of Scotland) (Con)
 Butler, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (Lab)
 Carlaw, Jackson (West of Scotland) (Con)
 Chisholm, Malcolm (Edinburgh North and Leith) (Lab)
 Craigie, Cathie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (Lab)
 Curran, Margaret (Glasgow Baillieston) (Lab)
 Eadie, Helen (Dunfermline East) (Lab)
 Ferguson, Patricia (Glasgow Maryhill) (Lab)
 Foulkes, George (Lothians) (Lab)
 Gillon, Karen (Clydesdale) (Lab)
 Glen, Marilyn (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Godman, Trish (West Renfrewshire) (Lab)
 Goldie, Annabel (West of Scotland) (Con)
 Gordon, Charlie (Glasgow Cathcart) (Lab)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Gray, Iain (East Lothian) (Lab)
 Henry, Hugh (Paisley South) (Lab)
 Jamieson, Cathy (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (Lab)
 Johnstone, Alex (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Kelly, James (Glasgow Rutherglen) (Lab)
 Kerr, Andy (East Kilbride) (Lab)
 Lamont, Johann (Glasgow Pollok) (Lab)
 Lamont, John (Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 Macdonald, Lewis (Aberdeen Central) (Lab)
 Macintosh, Ken (Eastwood) (Lab)
 Martin, Paul (Glasgow Springburn) (Lab)
 McAveety, Mr Frank (Glasgow Shettleston) (Lab)
 McCabe, Tom (Hamilton South) (Lab)
 McConnell, Jack (Motherwell and Wishaw) (Lab)

McGrigor, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 McLetchie, David (Edinburgh Pentlands) (Con)
 McMahon, Michael (Hamilton North and Bellshill) (Lab)
 McNeil, Duncan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (Lab)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow Kelvin) (Lab)
 McNulty, Des (Clydebank and Milngavie) (Lab)
 Milne, Nanette (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Mitchell, Margaret (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Mulligan, Mary (Linlithgow) (Lab)
 Murray, Elaine (Dumfries) (Lab)
 Oldfather, Irene (Cunninghame South) (Lab)
 Park, John (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Peacock, Peter (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Peattie, Cathy (Falkirk East) (Lab)
 Scanlon, Mary (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Scott, John (Ayr) (Con)
 Simpson, Dr Richard (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Smith, Elaine (Coatbridge and Chryston) (Lab)
 Smith, Elizabeth (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Stewart, David (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Whitefield, Karen (Airdrie and Shotts) (Lab)
 Whitton, David (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (Lab)

AGAINST

Adam, Brian (Aberdeen North) (SNP)
 Ahmad, Bashir (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Allan, Alasdair (Western Isles) (SNP)
 Brown, Keith (Ochil) (SNP)
 Brown, Robert (Glasgow) (LD)
 Campbell, Aileen (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP)
 Constance, Angela (Livingston) (SNP)
 Crawford, Bruce (Stirling) (SNP)
 Cunningham, Roseanna (Perth) (SNP)
 Don, Nigel (North East Scotland) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness East, Nairn and Lochaber) (SNP)
 Fabiani, Linda (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Finnie, Ross (West of Scotland) (LD)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee West) (SNP)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Gibson, Rob (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Grahame, Christine (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Harper, Robin (Lothians) (Green)
 Harvie, Christopher (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Hume, Jim (South of Scotland) (LD)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Lothians) (SNP)
 Ingram, Adam (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 MacAskill, Kenny (Edinburgh East and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Marwick, Tricia (Central Fife) (SNP)
 Mather, Jim (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 Maxwell, Stewart (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney) (LD)
 McInnes, Alison (North East Scotland) (LD)
 McKee, Ian (Lothians) (SNP)
 McKelvie, Christina (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 McMillan, Stuart (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 Morgan, Alasdair (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Munro, John Farquhar (Ross, Skye and Inverness West) (LD)
 Neil, Alex (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 O'Donnell, Hugh (Central Scotland) (LD)
 Paterson, Gil (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 Pringle, Mike (Edinburgh South) (LD)
 Purvis, Jeremy (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee East) (SNP)
 Rumbles, Mike (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (LD)

Russell, Michael (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Salmond, Alex (Gordon) (SNP)
 Scott, Tavish (Shetland) (LD)
 Smith, Iain (North East Fife) (LD)
 Smith, Margaret (Edinburgh West) (LD)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Lothians) (SNP)
 Stephen, Nicol (Aberdeen South) (LD)
 Stevenson, Stewart (Banff and Buchan) (SNP)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Govan) (SNP)
 Swinney, John (North Tayside) (SNP)
 Thompson, Dave (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Tolson, Jim (Dunfermline West) (LD)
 Watt, Maureen (North East Scotland) (SNP)
 Welsh, Andrew (Angus) (SNP)
 White, Sandra (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Wilson, Bill (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 Wilson, John (Central Scotland) (SNP)

ABSTENTIONS

Stone, Jamie (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 59, Against 64, Abstentions 1.

Amendment disagreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The third question is, that amendment S3M-1152.1, in the name of Liam McArthur, which seeks to amend motion S3M-1152, in the name of Jim Mather, on energy, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

FOR

Adam, Brian (Aberdeen North) (SNP)
 Ahmad, Bashir (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Allan, Alasdair (Western Isles) (SNP)
 Brown, Keith (Ochil) (SNP)
 Brown, Robert (Glasgow) (LD)
 Campbell, Aileen (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP)
 Constance, Angela (Livingston) (SNP)
 Crawford, Bruce (Stirling) (SNP)
 Cunningham, Roseanna (Perth) (SNP)
 Don, Nigel (North East Scotland) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness East, Nairn and Lochaber) (SNP)
 Fabiani, Linda (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Finnie, Ross (West of Scotland) (LD)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee West) (SNP)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Gibson, Rob (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Grahame, Christine (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Harper, Robin (Lothians) (Green)
 Harvie, Christopher (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Hume, Jim (South of Scotland) (LD)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Lothians) (SNP)
 Ingram, Adam (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 MacAskill, Kenny (Edinburgh East and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Marwick, Tricia (Central Fife) (SNP)
 Mather, Jim (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 Maxwell, Stewart (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney) (LD)

McInnes, Alison (North East Scotland) (LD)
 McKee, Ian (Lothians) (SNP)
 McKelvie, Christina (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 McMillan, Stuart (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 Morgan, Alasdair (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Munro, John Farquhar (Ross, Skye and Inverness West) (LD)
 Neil, Alex (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 O'Donnell, Hugh (Central Scotland) (LD)
 Paterson, Gil (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 Pringle, Mike (Edinburgh South) (LD)
 Purvis, Jeremy (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee East) (SNP)
 Rumbles, Mike (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (LD)
 Russell, Michael (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Salmond, Alex (Gordon) (SNP)
 Scott, Tavish (Shetland) (LD)
 Smith, Iain (North East Fife) (LD)
 Smith, Margaret (Edinburgh West) (LD)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Lothians) (SNP)
 Stephen, Nicol (Aberdeen South) (LD)
 Stevenson, Stewart (Banff and Buchan) (SNP)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Govan) (SNP)
 Swinney, John (North Tayside) (SNP)
 Thompson, Dave (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Tolson, Jim (Dunfermline West) (LD)
 Watt, Maureen (North East Scotland) (SNP)
 Welsh, Andrew (Angus) (SNP)
 White, Sandra (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Wilson, Bill (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 Wilson, John (Central Scotland) (SNP)

AGAINST

Aitken, Bill (Glasgow) (Con)
 Brocklebank, Ted (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Brown, Gavin (Lothians) (Con)
 Brownlee, Derek (South of Scotland) (Con)
 Carlaw, Jackson (West of Scotland) (Con)
 Goldie, Annabel (West of Scotland) (Con)
 Johnstone, Alex (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Lamont, John (Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 McGrigor, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 McLetchie, David (Edinburgh Pentlands) (Con)
 Milne, Nanette (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Mitchell, Margaret (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Scanlon, Mary (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Scott, John (Ayr) (Con)
 Smith, Elizabeth (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)

ABSTENTIONS

Alexander, Ms Wendy (Paisley North) (Lab)
 Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Baker, Richard (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Edinburgh Central) (Lab)
 Butler, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (Lab)
 Chisholm, Malcolm (Edinburgh North and Leith) (Lab)
 Craigie, Cathie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (Lab)
 Curran, Margaret (Glasgow Baillieston) (Lab)
 Eadie, Helen (Dunfermline East) (Lab)
 Ferguson, Patricia (Glasgow Maryhill) (Lab)
 Foulkes, George (Lothians) (Lab)
 Gillon, Karen (Clydesdale) (Lab)
 Glen, Marilyn (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Godman, Trish (West Renfrewshire) (Lab)
 Gordon, Charlie (Glasgow Cathcart) (Lab)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Gray, Iain (East Lothian) (Lab)
 Henry, Hugh (Paisley South) (Lab)
 Jamieson, Cathy (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (Lab)
 Kelly, James (Glasgow Rutherglen) (Lab)

Kerr, Andy (East Kilbride) (Lab)
 Lamont, Johann (Glasgow Pollok) (Lab)
 Macdonald, Lewis (Aberdeen Central) (Lab)
 Macintosh, Ken (Eastwood) (Lab)
 Martin, Paul (Glasgow Springburn) (Lab)
 McAveety, Mr Frank (Glasgow Shettleston) (Lab)
 McCabe, Tom (Hamilton South) (Lab)
 McConnell, Jack (Motherwell and Wishaw) (Lab)
 McMahon, Michael (Hamilton North and Bellshill) (Lab)
 McNeil, Duncan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (Lab)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow Kelvin) (Lab)
 McNulty, Des (Clydebank and Milngavie) (Lab)
 Mulligan, Mary (Linlithgow) (Lab)
 Murray, Elaine (Dumfries) (Lab)
 Oldfather, Irene (Cunninghame South) (Lab)
 Park, John (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Peacock, Peter (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Peattie, Cathy (Falkirk East) (Lab)
 Simpson, Dr Richard (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Smith, Elaine (Coatbridge and Chryston) (Lab)
 Stewart, David (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Stone, Jamie (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD)
 Whitefield, Karen (Airdrie and Shotts) (Lab)
 Whitton, David (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (Lab)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 64, Against 15, Abstentions 45.

Amendment agreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The fourth question is, that motion S3M-1152, in the name of Jim Mather, on energy, as amended, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

FOR

Adam, Brian (Aberdeen North) (SNP)
 Ahmad, Bashir (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Allan, Alasdair (Western Isles) (SNP)
 Brown, Keith (Ochil) (SNP)
 Brown, Robert (Glasgow) (LD)
 Campbell, Aileen (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP)
 Constance, Angela (Livingston) (SNP)
 Crawford, Bruce (Stirling) (SNP)
 Cunningham, Roseanna (Perth) (SNP)
 Don, Nigel (North East Scotland) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness East, Nairn and Lochaber) (SNP)
 Fabiani, Linda (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Finnie, Ross (West of Scotland) (LD)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee West) (SNP)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Gibson, Rob (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Grahame, Christine (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Harper, Robin (Lothians) (Green)
 Harvie, Christopher (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Hume, Jim (South of Scotland) (LD)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Lothians) (SNP)
 Ingram, Adam (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 MacAskill, Kenny (Edinburgh East and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Marwick, Tricia (Central Fife) (SNP)
 Mather, Jim (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)

Maxwell, Stewart (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney) (LD)
 McInnes, Alison (North East Scotland) (LD)
 McKee, Ian (Lothians) (SNP)
 McKelvie, Christina (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 McMillan, Stuart (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 Morgan, Alasdair (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Munro, John Farquhar (Ross, Skye and Inverness West) (LD)
 Neil, Alex (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 O'Donnell, Hugh (Central Scotland) (LD)
 Paterson, Gil (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 Pringle, Mike (Edinburgh South) (LD)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee East) (SNP)
 Rumbles, Mike (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (LD)
 Russell, Michael (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Salmond, Alex (Gordon) (SNP)
 Scott, Tavish (Shetland) (LD)
 Smith, Iain (North East Fife) (LD)
 Smith, Margaret (Edinburgh West) (LD)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Lothians) (SNP)
 Stephen, Nicol (Aberdeen South) (LD)
 Stevenson, Stewart (Banff and Buchan) (SNP)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Govan) (SNP)
 Swinney, John (North Tayside) (SNP)
 Thompson, Dave (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Tolson, Jim (Dunfermline West) (LD)
 Watt, Maureen (North East Scotland) (SNP)
 Welsh, Andrew (Angus) (SNP)
 White, Sandra (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Wilson, Bill (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 Wilson, John (Central Scotland) (SNP)

AGAINST

Aitken, Bill (Glasgow) (Con)
 Alexander, Ms Wendy (Paisley North) (Lab)
 Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Baker, Richard (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Edinburgh Central) (Lab)
 Brocklebank, Ted (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Brown, Gavin (Lothians) (Con)
 Brownlee, Derek (South of Scotland) (Con)
 Butler, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (Lab)
 Carlaw, Jackson (West of Scotland) (Con)
 Chisholm, Malcolm (Edinburgh North and Leith) (Lab)
 Craigie, Cathie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (Lab)
 Curran, Margaret (Glasgow Baillieston) (Lab)
 Eadie, Helen (Dunfermline East) (Lab)
 Ferguson, Patricia (Glasgow Maryhill) (Lab)
 Foulkes, George (Lothians) (Lab)
 Gillon, Karen (Clydesdale) (Lab)
 Godman, Trish (West Renfrewshire) (Lab)
 Goldie, Annabel (West of Scotland) (Con)
 Gordon, Charlie (Glasgow Cathcart) (Lab)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Gray, Iain (East Lothian) (Lab)
 Henry, Hugh (Paisley South) (Lab)
 Jamieson, Cathy (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (Lab)
 Johnstone, Alex (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Kelly, James (Glasgow Rutherglen) (Lab)
 Kerr, Andy (East Kilbride) (Lab)
 Lamont, Johann (Glasgow Pollok) (Lab)
 Lamont, John (Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 Macdonald, Lewis (Aberdeen Central) (Lab)
 Macintosh, Ken (Eastwood) (Lab)
 Martin, Paul (Glasgow Springburn) (Lab)
 McAveety, Mr Frank (Glasgow Shettleston) (Lab)
 McCabe, Tom (Hamilton South) (Lab)
 McConnell, Jack (Motherwell and Wishaw) (Lab)
 McGrigor, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)

McLetchie, David (Edinburgh Pentlands) (Con)
 McMahon, Michael (Hamilton North and Bellshill) (Lab)
 McNeil, Duncan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (Lab)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow Kelvin) (Lab)
 McNulty, Des (Clydebank and Milngavie) (Lab)
 Milne, Nanette (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Mitchell, Margaret (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Mulligan, Mary (Linlithgow) (Lab)
 Murray, Elaine (Dumfries) (Lab)
 Oldfather, Irene (Cunninghame South) (Lab)
 Park, John (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Peacock, Peter (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Peattie, Cathy (Falkirk East) (Lab)
 Scanlon, Mary (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Scott, John (Ayr) (Con)
 Simpson, Dr Richard (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Smith, Elaine (Coatbridge and Chryston) (Lab)
 Smith, Elizabeth (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Stewart, David (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Whitefield, Karen (Airdrie and Shotts) (Lab)
 Whitton, David (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (Lab)

ABSTENTIONS

Glen, Marlyn (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Stone, Jamie (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 63, Against 58, Abstentions 2.

Motion, as amended, agreed to.

Resolved,

That the Parliament notes the Energy Bill introduced by the UK Government; welcomes the Bill's provisions in relation to promotion of renewable energy which will allow the Scottish Parliament to determine levels of support for emerging technologies; recognises the potential of carbon capture and storage for reducing carbon emissions and supports further dialogue with the UK Government on exercise of powers in relation to regulation of carbon storage; welcomes the Scottish Government's position that new nuclear power stations are not necessary to meet renewable electricity targets or carbon emissions targets and are not wanted in Scotland; welcomes the UK Government's recognition that the Bill's provisions on nuclear decommissioning should not extend to Scotland, and believes that Scotland can have a secure, low-carbon, non-nuclear energy future through a combination of a growing renewables sector exploiting a range of technologies, including marine energy, cleaner energy from fossil fuels, microgeneration and biomass; acknowledges the important role of the enterprise networks in helping to achieve this and the need for renewables to remain a priority for a well-resourced Scottish Enterprise and Highlands and Islands Enterprise, and further recognises the central importance of improved energy efficiency resulting from better insulated buildings and increased awareness of the benefits that accrue from behavioural change and demand reduction.

The Presiding Officer: The fifth question is, that amendment S3M-1153.2, in the name of Pauline McNeill, which seeks to amend motion S3M-1153, in the name of Kenny MacAskill, on firearms, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

FOR

Alexander, Ms Wendy (Paisley North) (Lab)
 Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Baker, Richard (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Edinburgh Central) (Lab)
 Brown, Robert (Glasgow) (LD)
 Butler, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (Lab)
 Chisholm, Malcolm (Edinburgh North and Leith) (Lab)
 Craigie, Cathie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (Lab)
 Curran, Margaret (Glasgow Baillieston) (Lab)
 Eadie, Helen (Dunfermline East) (Lab)
 Ferguson, Patricia (Glasgow Maryhill) (Lab)
 Finnie, Ross (West of Scotland) (LD)
 Foulkes, George (Lothians) (Lab)
 Gillon, Karen (Clydesdale) (Lab)
 Glen, Marlyn (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Godman, Trish (West Renfrewshire) (Lab)
 Gordon, Charlie (Glasgow Cathcart) (Lab)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Gray, Iain (East Lothian) (Lab)
 Henry, Hugh (Paisley South) (Lab)
 Hume, Jim (South of Scotland) (LD)
 Jamieson, Cathy (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (Lab)
 Kelly, James (Glasgow Rutherglen) (Lab)
 Kerr, Andy (East Kilbride) (Lab)
 Lamont, Johann (Glasgow Pollok) (Lab)
 Macdonald, Lewis (Aberdeen Central) (Lab)
 Macintosh, Ken (Eastwood) (Lab)
 Martin, Paul (Glasgow Springburn) (Lab)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney) (LD)
 McAveety, Mr Frank (Glasgow Shettleston) (Lab)
 McCabe, Tom (Hamilton South) (Lab)
 McConnell, Jack (Motherwell and Wishaw) (Lab)
 McInnes, Alison (North East Scotland) (LD)
 McMahon, Michael (Hamilton North and Bellshill) (Lab)
 McNeil, Duncan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (Lab)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow Kelvin) (Lab)
 McNulty, Des (Clydebank and Milngavie) (Lab)
 Mulligan, Mary (Linlithgow) (Lab)
 Munro, John Farquhar (Ross, Skye and Inverness West) (LD)
 Murray, Elaine (Dumfries) (Lab)
 O'Donnell, Hugh (Central Scotland) (LD)
 Oldfather, Irene (Cunninghame South) (Lab)
 Park, John (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Peacock, Peter (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Peattie, Cathy (Falkirk East) (Lab)
 Pringle, Mike (Edinburgh South) (LD)
 Rumbles, Mike (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (LD)
 Scott, Tavish (Shetland) (LD)
 Simpson, Dr Richard (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Smith, Elaine (Coatbridge and Chryston) (Lab)
 Smith, Iain (North East Fife) (LD)
 Smith, Margaret (Edinburgh West) (LD)
 Stephen, Nicol (Aberdeen South) (LD)
 Stewart, David (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Stone, Jamie (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD)
 Tolson, Jim (Dunfermline West) (LD)
 Whitefield, Karen (Airdrie and Shotts) (Lab)
 Whitton, David (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (Lab)

AGAINST

Adam, Brian (Aberdeen North) (SNP)
 Ahmad, Bashir (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Aitken, Bill (Glasgow) (Con)
 Allan, Alasdair (Western Isles) (SNP)
 Brocklebank, Ted (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Brown, Gavin (Lothians) (Con)
 Brown, Keith (Ochil) (SNP)

Brownlee, Derek (South of Scotland) (Con)
 Campbell, Aileen (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Carlaw, Jackson (West of Scotland) (Con)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP)
 Constance, Angela (Livingston) (SNP)
 Crawford, Bruce (Stirling) (SNP)
 Cunningham, Roseanna (Perth) (SNP)
 Don, Nigel (North East Scotland) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness East, Nairn and Lochaber) (SNP)
 Fabiani, Linda (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee West) (SNP)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Gibson, Rob (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Goldie, Annabel (West of Scotland) (Con)
 Grahame, Christine (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Harper, Robin (Lothians) (Green)
 Harvie, Christopher (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Lothians) (SNP)
 Ingram, Adam (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Johnstone, Alex (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Lamont, John (Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 MacAskill, Kenny (Edinburgh East and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Marwick, Tricia (Central Fife) (SNP)
 Mather, Jim (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 Maxwell, Stewart (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 McGrigor, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 McKee, Ian (Lothians) (SNP)
 McKelvie, Christina (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 McLetchie, David (Edinburgh Pentlands) (Con)
 McMillan, Stuart (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 Milne, Nanette (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Mitchell, Margaret (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Morgan, Alasdair (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Neil, Alex (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Paterson, Gil (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee East) (SNP)
 Russell, Michael (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Salmond, Alex (Gordon) (SNP)
 Scanlon, Mary (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Scott, John (Ayr) (Con)
 Smith, Elizabeth (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Lothians) (SNP)
 Stevenson, Stewart (Banff and Buchan) (SNP)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Govan) (SNP)
 Swinney, John (North Tayside) (SNP)
 Thompson, Dave (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Watt, Maureen (North East Scotland) (SNP)
 Welsh, Andrew (Angus) (SNP)
 White, Sandra (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Wilson, Bill (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 Wilson, John (Central Scotland) (SNP)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 59, Against 64, Abstentions 0.

Amendment disagreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The sixth question is, that amendment S3M-1153.1, in the name of Bill Aitken, which seeks to amend motion S3M-1153, in the name of Kenny MacAskill, on firearms, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

FOR

Aitken, Bill (Glasgow) (Con)
 Brocklebank, Ted (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Brown, Gavin (Lothians) (Con)
 Brown, Robert (Glasgow) (LD)
 Brownlee, Derek (South of Scotland) (Con)
 Carlaw, Jackson (West of Scotland) (Con)
 Finnie, Ross (West of Scotland) (LD)
 Goldie, Annabel (West of Scotland) (Con)
 Hume, Jim (South of Scotland) (LD)
 Johnstone, Alex (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Lamont, John (Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney) (LD)
 McGrigor, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 McInnes, Alison (North East Scotland) (LD)
 McLetchie, David (Edinburgh Pentlands) (Con)
 Milne, Nanette (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Mitchell, Margaret (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Munro, John Farquhar (Ross, Skye and Inverness West) (LD)
 O'Donnell, Hugh (Central Scotland) (LD)
 Pringle, Mike (Edinburgh South) (LD)
 Purvis, Jeremy (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD)
 Rumbles, Mike (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (LD)
 Scanlon, Mary (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Scott, John (Ayr) (Con)
 Scott, Tavish (Shetland) (LD)
 Smith, Elizabeth (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Smith, Iain (North East Fife) (LD)
 Smith, Margaret (Edinburgh West) (LD)
 Stephen, Nicol (Aberdeen South) (LD)
 Stone, Jamie (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD)
 Tolson, Jim (Dunfermline West) (LD)

AGAINST

Adam, Brian (Aberdeen North) (SNP)
 Ahmad, Bashir (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Allan, Alasdair (Western Isles) (SNP)
 Brown, Keith (Ochil) (SNP)
 Campbell, Aileen (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP)
 Constance, Angela (Livingston) (SNP)
 Crawford, Bruce (Stirling) (SNP)
 Cunningham, Roseanna (Perth) (SNP)
 Don, Nigel (North East Scotland) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness East, Nairn and Lochaber) (SNP)
 Fabiani, Linda (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee West) (SNP)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Gibson, Rob (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Grahame, Christine (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Harper, Robin (Lothians) (Green)
 Harvie, Christopher (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Lothians) (SNP)
 Ingram, Adam (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 MacAskill, Kenny (Edinburgh East and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Marwick, Tricia (Central Fife) (SNP)
 Mather, Jim (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 Maxwell, Stewart (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 McKee, Ian (Lothians) (SNP)
 McKelvie, Christina (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 McMillan, Stuart (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 Morgan, Alasdair (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Neil, Alex (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Paterson, Gil (West of Scotland) (SNP)

Robison, Shona (Dundee East) (SNP)
 Russell, Michael (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Salmond, Alex (Gordon) (SNP)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Lothians) (SNP)
 Stevenson, Stewart (Banff and Buchan) (SNP)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Govan) (SNP)
 Swinney, John (North Tayside) (SNP)
 Thompson, Dave (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Watt, Maureen (North East Scotland) (SNP)
 Welsh, Andrew (Angus) (SNP)
 White, Sandra (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Wilson, Bill (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 Wilson, John (Central Scotland) (SNP)

ABSTENTIONS

Alexander, Ms Wendy (Paisley North) (Lab)
 Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Baker, Richard (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Edinburgh Central) (Lab)
 Butler, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (Lab)
 Chisholm, Malcolm (Edinburgh North and Leith) (Lab)
 Craigie, Cathie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (Lab)
 Curran, Margaret (Glasgow Baillieston) (Lab)
 Eadie, Helen (Dunfermline East) (Lab)
 Ferguson, Patricia (Glasgow Maryhill) (Lab)
 Foulkes, George (Lothians) (Lab)
 Gillon, Karen (Clydesdale) (Lab)
 Glen, Marlyn (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Godman, Trish (West Renfrewshire) (Lab)
 Gordon, Charlie (Glasgow Cathcart) (Lab)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Gray, Iain (East Lothian) (Lab)
 Henry, Hugh (Paisley South) (Lab)
 Jamieson, Cathy (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (Lab)
 Kelly, James (Glasgow Rutherglen) (Lab)
 Kerr, Andy (East Kilbride) (Lab)
 Lamont, Johann (Glasgow Pollok) (Lab)
 Macdonald, Lewis (Aberdeen Central) (Lab)
 Macintosh, Ken (Eastwood) (Lab)
 Martin, Paul (Glasgow Springburn) (Lab)
 McAveety, Mr Frank (Glasgow Shettleston) (Lab)
 McCabe, Tom (Hamilton South) (Lab)
 McConnell, Jack (Motherwell and Wishaw) (Lab)
 McMahon, Michael (Hamilton North and Bellshill) (Lab)
 McNeil, Duncan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (Lab)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow Kelvin) (Lab)
 McNulty, Des (Clydebank and Milngavie) (Lab)
 Mulligan, Mary (Linlithgow) (Lab)
 Murray, Elaine (Dumfries) (Lab)
 Oldfather, Irene (Cunninghame South) (Lab)
 Park, John (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Peacock, Peter (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Peattie, Cathy (Falkirk East) (Lab)
 Simpson, Dr Richard (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Smith, Elaine (Coatbridge and Chryston) (Lab)
 Stewart, David (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Whitefield, Karen (Airdrie and Shotts) (Lab)
 Whitton, David (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (Lab)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 31, Against 49, Abstentions 44.

Amendment disagreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The seventh question is, that motion S3M-1153, in the name of Kenny MacAskill, on firearms, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.**FOR**

Adam, Brian (Aberdeen North) (SNP)
 Ahmad, Bashir (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Aitken, Bill (Glasgow) (Con)
 Allan, Alasdair (Western Isles) (SNP)
 Brown, Keith (Ochil) (SNP)
 Campbell, Aileen (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP)
 Constance, Angela (Livingston) (SNP)
 Crawford, Bruce (Stirling) (SNP)
 Cunningham, Roseanna (Perth) (SNP)
 Don, Nigel (North East Scotland) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness East, Nairn and Lochaber) (SNP)
 Fabiani, Linda (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee West) (SNP)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Gibson, Rob (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Grahame, Christine (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Harper, Robin (Lothians) (Green)
 Harvie, Christopher (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Lothians) (SNP)
 Ingram, Adam (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 MacAskill, Kenny (Edinburgh East and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Marwick, Tricia (Central Fife) (SNP)
 Mather, Jim (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 Maxwell, Stewart (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 McKee, Ian (Lothians) (SNP)
 McKelvie, Christina (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 McMillan, Stuart (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 Morgan, Alasdair (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Neil, Alex (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Paterson, Gil (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee East) (SNP)
 Russell, Michael (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Salmond, Alex (Gordon) (SNP)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Lothians) (SNP)
 Stevenson, Stewart (Banff and Buchan) (SNP)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Govan) (SNP)
 Swinney, John (North Tayside) (SNP)
 Thompson, Dave (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Tolson, Jim (Dunfermline West) (LD)
 Watt, Maureen (North East Scotland) (SNP)
 Welsh, Andrew (Angus) (SNP)
 White, Sandra (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Wilson, Bill (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 Wilson, John (Central Scotland) (SNP)

AGAINST

Alexander, Ms Wendy (Paisley North) (Lab)
 Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Baker, Richard (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Edinburgh Central) (Lab)
 Brocklebank, Ted (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Brown, Gavin (Lothians) (Con)
 Brown, Robert (Glasgow) (LD)
 Brownlee, Derek (South of Scotland) (Con)
 Butler, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (Lab)
 Carlaw, Jackson (West of Scotland) (Con)
 Chisholm, Malcolm (Edinburgh North and Leith) (Lab)
 Craigie, Cathie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (Lab)
 Curran, Margaret (Glasgow Baillieston) (Lab)
 Eadie, Helen (Dunfermline East) (Lab)
 Ferguson, Patricia (Glasgow Maryhill) (Lab)

Finnie, Ross (West of Scotland) (LD)
 Foulkes, George (Lothians) (Lab)
 Gillon, Karen (Clydesdale) (Lab)
 Glen, Marlyn (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Godman, Trish (West Renfrewshire) (Lab)
 Goldie, Annabel (West of Scotland) (Con)
 Gordon, Charlie (Glasgow Cathcart) (Lab)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Gray, Iain (East Lothian) (Lab)
 Henry, Hugh (Paisley South) (Lab)
 Hume, Jim (South of Scotland) (LD)
 Jamieson, Cathy (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (Lab)
 Johnstone, Alex (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Kelly, James (Glasgow Rutherglen) (Lab)
 Kerr, Andy (East Kilbride) (Lab)
 Lamont, Johann (Glasgow Pollok) (Lab)
 Lamont, John (Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 Macdonald, Lewis (Aberdeen Central) (Lab)
 Macintosh, Ken (Eastwood) (Lab)
 Martin, Paul (Glasgow Springburn) (Lab)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney) (LD)
 McAveety, Mr Frank (Glasgow Shettleston) (Lab)
 McCabe, Tom (Hamilton South) (Lab)
 McConnell, Jack (Motherwell and Wishaw) (Lab)
 McGrigor, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 McInnes, Alison (North East Scotland) (LD)
 McLetchie, David (Edinburgh Pentlands) (Con)
 McMahon, Michael (Hamilton North and Bellshill) (Lab)
 McNeil, Duncan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (Lab)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow Kelvin) (Lab)
 McNulty, Des (Clydebank and Milngavie) (Lab)
 Milne, Nanette (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Mitchell, Margaret (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Mulligan, Mary (Linlithgow) (Lab)
 Munro, John Farquhar (Ross, Skye and Inverness West) (LD)
 Murray, Elaine (Dumfries) (Lab)
 O'Donnell, Hugh (Central Scotland) (LD)
 Oldfather, Irene (Cunninghame South) (Lab)
 Park, John (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Peacock, Peter (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Peattie, Cathy (Falkirk East) (Lab)
 Pringle, Mike (Edinburgh South) (LD)
 Purvis, Jeremy (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD)
 Rumbles, Mike (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (LD)
 Scanlon, Mary (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Scott, John (Ayr) (Con)
 Scott, Tavish (Shetland) (LD)
 Simpson, Dr Richard (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Smith, Elaine (Coatbridge and Chryston) (Lab)
 Smith, Elizabeth (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Smith, Iain (North East Fife) (LD)
 Smith, Margaret (Edinburgh West) (LD)
 Stephen, Nicol (Aberdeen South) (LD)
 Stewart, David (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Stone, Jamie (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD)
 Whitefield, Karen (Airdrie and Shotts) (Lab)
 Whitton, David (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (Lab)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 51, Against 73, Abstentions 0.

Motion disagreed to.

The Presiding Officer: For what should be fairly obvious reasons, there were seven questions rather than nine. I apologise.

Defence Aviation Repair Agency (Almondbank)

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Trish Godman): The final item of business today is a members' business debate on motion S3M-969, in the name of Roseanna Cunningham, on the Defence Aviation Repair Agency at Almondbank—no to privatisation.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament respects the important role played by the DARA rotary wing and components business at Almondbank near Perth which provides in-depth maintenance, repair and overhaul of components for the UK's military helicopter fleet; applauds the management and workforce at DARA for creating what has become a world-class centre of excellence; recognises the important role played by helicopters at the front line of modern conflicts; notes that an announcement is expected in Westminster on 15 December 2007 on the future of DARA; regrets that, far from protecting the critical work that DARA does to keep its helicopters flying, the Ministry of Defence (MoD) seems set to sell the organisation to the private sector with the sole bidder being the small Canadian company, Vector Aerospace, in a decision which would mean the permanent loss of helicopter support to the MoD and would be effectively exporting the intellectual property and design skills required to maintain operational sovereignty; welcomes the proposals submitted by the joint trade unions which, through measures such as mobile repair teams, integrating service personnel into the business, funding for capability rather than fixed pricing and directing MoD work into the business, would ensure the long-term viability and success of the business inside the MoD; notes that Baroness Taylor of Bolton is the minister responsible for the decision, and believes that support should be given to the unions' proposals which will protect jobs, technologies and armed forces personnel.

17:20

Roseanna Cunningham (Perth) (SNP): It would probably be helpful if I gave a little background to the motion. DARA Almondbank, which is in my constituency, is part of the wider Defence Aviation Repair Agency, whose principal centres are in south Wales, north Wales and Fleetlands near Portsmouth. DARA does what it says on the tin: it maintains, repairs and overhauls aircraft, including helicopters, for the Ministry of Defence, and has done so since the 1940s, albeit under different guises. The work is extremely technical, as members will imagine, and very highly skilled. Currently, DARA Almondbank employs about 350 people, including a number of apprentices. Many of the skills are not replicated anywhere else in the United Kingdom, much less in Scotland, so Almondbank is significant well beyond my constituency.

Currently, DARA's rotary wing and components business, which includes Almondbank, is up for privatisation. The process has been going on for quite a while. To date, the only bidder for

Almondbank is Vector Aerospace. For some reason, the sale is being pushed by senior civil servants at the MOD, who see it as an alternative to managed decline. The presumption is that Vector—if the sale goes ahead—will be better able to secure commercial work, and therefore to safeguard jobs. However, DARA, and therefore Almondbank, is already permitted to contract for non-MOD work, and it has been very successful in doing so, for example Boeing is on Almondbank's customer list.

It is not so long since some major investment was made in Almondbank. I last had a members' business debate on DARA in September 2003, only one month prior to which the new hydraulic test facility was officially opened. That £5 million investment was supposed to guarantee the future of the plant and its employees, but only weeks later it was clear that the uncertainty that had hung over the plant for many years was going to continue. It was magnified by the announcement not long after that privatisation was being viewed as the best way forward.

We are now nearing the end of that process. I have had many meetings with local trade union representatives, with employees of DARA, with members of the local chamber of commerce and with officials from Perth and Kinross Council, all of whom have expressed concern. The council long ago prepared a local impact survey to assess Almondbank's importance to the surrounding area, and it has kept updating it because of the continued uncertainty. The most recent update was in 2006, although the council is now having to reconsider the survey, as a crucial point has now been reached.

In 2006, Almondbank accounted for 6.4 per cent of total employment in the area, and DARA's presence contributed about £38.4 million to the local economy. More important, however, is the type of work that can be found at Almondbank. The economy of Perthshire, like that of many other areas of Scotland, is overly dependent on tourism and the service industry. I do not decry either of those areas of employment, but any one of us would want a wider variety of work to be available in our local areas. Tourism in particular is notoriously poorly paid and seasonal, and many of the jobs that are available in the service industry are equally low paid.

It is not the general image of Perthshire—I am fed up saying this in the chamber, and I know that others have said it too—but Perth and Kinross wage rates are among the lowest in the UK. People generally find that difficult to accept or understand, but it is the truth, therefore the availability of well-paid, highly skilled technical jobs is vital for the area. People come to work at Almondbank from quite far afield—from all parts of

Perthshire and Kinross, Fife, Dundee, Stirling and even further. It is not just the fully trained jobs that are important. DARA Almondbank is enthusiastic about taking on apprentices, and its continued commitment to that is important locally.

True, at the moment we are not discussing closure. The Westminster Government was meant to make an announcement on DARA's future before Christmas, but it has been delayed for reasons we know not—I cannot even begin to guess why. The single bidder for the Almondbank site, Vector Aerospace, is a very small Canadian company that would double in size should it succeed in the purchase—that is how small it is. If Vector ownership does not work out—frankly, given its size, that remains a pretty major question for all the employees—then what? What will happen to the defence work that still needs to be done? What will happen to the employees and who will protect them in the future? Many questions are still hanging over us.

The end-to-end review of logistics, which was the subject of my 2003 debate on DARA Almondbank, recommended that helicopter work should be rolled back into DARA, therefore that Government review did not support what the current Government proposes. The trade unions are opposed to the sale and they have put a proposal to Baroness Taylor, who is the relevant minister. In an echo of the approach that the Government has taken to the Post Office, it has directed work away from DARA, thus bringing about the very situation that it wishes to use to justify privatisation. For example, that has included getting service personnel to do some of the work, on the basis that they are somehow a free resource, which of course is a mistaken way to view the matter.

The joint trade unions—the Public and Commercial Services Union, Unite and Prospect—have proposed the creation of mobile repair teams to service helicopters at bases or at the front line; a change in funding from output funding to contracting for capability; and integrating service personnel into the business. The joint trade unions need to hear that they have the support of as many people as possible, which is what this debate is really about. That support needs to be communicated to the trade unions.

The future of DARA Almondbank is important to me and my constituents, many of whom work there. The issue is at the forefront of Perth and Kinross Council's attention and Perthshire Chamber of Commerce maintains a watching brief. The three trade unions are jointly involved in proposing a different outcome from the one that the Government is considering. I want the Scottish Government at least to do what the Welsh Assembly Government has always done and give

full backing to the DARA workforce and to the joint trade union proposals. I am extremely pleased that the debate will be responded to by my colleague the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Sustainable Growth, who also has many constituents who work at DARA Almondbank.

17:27

Elizabeth Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife)

(Con): I welcome the debate and I pay tribute to Roseanna Cunningham, the member for Perth, who has consistently supported DARA Almondbank and raised its profile. As a regional member for the area, I am acutely aware of DARA Almondbank's important role as a world-class centre of excellence and as part of the fabric of the local economy, as Roseanna Cunningham said. DARA provides the expertise and ability to strip completely, replace, repair and rebuild everything, from systems, components and equipment to whole aircraft, for military and commercial organisations. As Roseanna Cunningham outlined, it has an impressive record in providing component support for the Sea King and Tornado aircraft, which has rightly given it an unparalleled national and international reputation. Over the years, DARA Almondbank has achieved state-of-the-art status and I join Roseanna Cunningham in paying tribute to the outstanding professionalism of all those who work at the site.

Everyone knows that the helicopter forces are among the most pressed of our military resources in Iraq and Afghanistan. Because insufficient numbers of helicopters are available—as evidenced by the recent hurried Government decisions to buy six Merlins from Denmark and to convert eight Chinooks that had been intended for special forces into so-called standard configuration—those that are being deployed at present are being used at a rate that is far in excess of what was planned. Scottish Conservatives therefore support the retention of DARA Almondbank so that, at this critical time, the expertise that is available to Her Majesty's forces is in no way impaired.

Although our first concern must be for the national interest, we want the site to develop a strong future within Scotland's manufacturing industry. There is no doubt that the closure of DARA Almondbank or any scaling down of operations at the site would have a devastating effect on the Perthshire economy. We must approach the issue of how best to provide for DARA's future in the United Kingdom with that in mind. It is clear from Roseanna Cunningham's comments that the activities that DARA Almondbank currently undertakes will continue to be required to provide essential services to our military capabilities, especially when there is a

growing need for those military capabilities to be enhanced to meet the extensive demands of our foreign policy. The challenge therefore is to ensure that the potential is achieved not only in the short term but in the long term.

The UK Government's indecision over DARA is unacceptable. It cannot be right to put in jeopardy a vital support operation when our troops are engaged in some of the most demanding military operations since world war two. The great uncertainty that that poses for the workforce in Perthshire is likely to undermine the workers' morale as they do their very best to provide support for our troops on the front line.

The role played by DARA in the supply of helicopters to the front line is critical, and the military logistics that it provides are pivotal. Our front-line forces are currently at full stretch. They need to be confident that the essential back-up is in place. DARA Almondbank has demonstrated on many occasions that it can meet the challenge.

The Scottish Conservatives welcome any moves designed to make the logistics back-up for our armed forces more efficient. We shall resist any measures that so cut our logistics capability that they starve the front line of vital support.

It is vital that SNP ministers are in close contact with the MOD on this and other defence issues that are important to the Perthshire economy. I hope that the cabinet secretary will be able to tell Parliament this evening about the approach that the SNP Government has taken and about any meetings that he intends to have with UK ministers about DARA Almondbank's future.

17:31

John Park (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): I congratulate Roseanna Cunningham on securing the debate. I am also pleased to see that John Swinney, the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Sustainable Growth, is here to sum up.

In situations such as the one at Almondbank, it is important that Parliament is given the opportunity to express a view and highlight the concerns of the workforce. I, too, have met the shop stewards to discuss the situation. I must stress to Parliament that they are a pragmatic set of individuals who are very keen to find a sensible resolution to the predicament in which they find themselves. They are conscientious and are doing an excellent job of representing the workforce at Almondbank. From a trade union perspective, they are providing a robust and proportionate defence of their members and using their expertise and knowledge to influence the decision-making process. I commend them for that and look forward to working with them on the proposals as they develop.

It is fitting, during trade union week, that we consider and highlight this approach to trade unionism. This brand of trade unionism has been championed here in Parliament over the past week; it is a brand of trade unionism that will ensure a vibrant, relevant and effective trade union movement in Scotland in years to come.

Of course, such situations are never easy. I have been through them myself as an individual, I have represented people who were moving into the private sector from the MOD, and I have been part of a management team helping people to adjust to the private sector after a move from the MOD.

Trade union proposals for an alternative to the sale have come late in the process. I understand that the proposals were at the request of former MOD minister Lord Drayson. It is vital that the trade union proposals are given maximum consideration by the MOD. There has now perhaps been a period during which the proposals have been considered in more detail with the MOD, and I really hope that they will play an important part in whatever future DARA has.

From the taxpayer's point of view, it is only fair that the trade union proposals be given the same sort of weighting as the proposals from the private company. As Roseanna Cunningham said, the unions have also flagged up legitimate concerns about the potential new owner. I hope that the MOD will factor those concerns into any final decision.

I have worked with the MOD over a number of years and I know that the organisation is always sensitive about the transfer of employees into the private sector. The MOD works closely with private sector employers to ensure that standards continue to be met following any transfer. However, we are not talking about minimum and statutory protection should a sale go through; we are talking about ensuring that high-quality standards of employment are maintained, and we are talking about recognising the importance of effective industrial relations in high-performing workplaces.

What about the future? Concerns remain over a possible secondary transfer; there are fears that a transfer between two private sector companies would be very different from a transfer between the MOD and the private sector. I would be very happy to work on a cross-party basis over the next few weeks—in particular with Roseanna Cunningham and Elizabeth Smith—to see what we can do. We have to try to ensure the best possible future for DARA.

Today I spoke to Gordon Banks MP, who told me that he had secured an adjournment debate in Westminster next week. He has also made

representations to Des Browne and Baroness Taylor on the importance of visiting the site to see at first hand the excellent job done by the workforce. I hope that they will pay such a visit in the near future.

It is also important to acknowledge that the First Minister has signalled his intention to visit the site, which I welcome. I stress to the First Minister that there have been a number of job losses in Scotland over the past few weeks. I hope that he can support the individuals involved as we move forward.

I wish the unions the best of luck over the next period, which is important for them. I have been through a similar process and I know that this is a worrying time. The unions are pragmatic and are doing a really good job of defending their members. I look forward to giving them my support in future.

17:35

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Sustainable Growth (John Swinney): This is the first occasion on which I have had the opportunity to close a members' business debate and I am delighted to do so for two reasons. First, I am delighted to close a debate that was led by my dear friend and colleague, the member for Perth, Roseanna Cunningham. Secondly, the subject of the debate is one in which my constituency of North Tayside has an interest, given how close the plant is to the constituency boundary. The DARA plant can be only about two miles away—*[Interruption.]* Two minutes, as I hear Ms Cunningham saying.

The plant employs many people in Roseanna Cunningham's constituency and many people in my constituency, so I am delighted to be able to close the debate and set out the Government's position.

I congratulate Roseanna Cunningham on securing the debate and on providing the opportunity for members to put on public record their views and their recognition of the vital role of the workforce of the Defence Aviation Repair Agency Almondbank as it, once again, faces an uncertain future.

I welcome the contributions that were made by Elizabeth Smith and John Park. On John Park's comments, it is of course appropriate that the debate is taking place during trade union week. It has been a pleasure to see so many of our trade union colleagues involved in the events that have been taking place in and around the Parliament. We have had the opportunity to engage with the trade union movement and to address an issue of concern in this debate.

I say to Mr Park and to other members that the First Minister has taken a close interest in the situation at DARA Almondbank and will be visiting the plant shortly. I say to Elizabeth Smith that the Government welcomes the points that she put on the record. We, as a Government, have made a number of representations on Almondbank to the United Kingdom Government. I wrote to the Secretary of State for Defence in August, following his notification letter to the Scottish Government about the selection of Vector Aerospace as the preferred bidder for DARA's rotary-wing business. I reminded him of the community's concerns about the implications of the proposed sale of Almondbank. In continuing with those representations, I will ensure that the Ministry of Defence is brought up to date on the views that members have expressed today.

Although no final decision has been taken about the future of DARA's rotary-wing and components business at Almondbank, the threat of privatisation is real. I understand that an announcement on the way ahead will be made soon. I have to say that the Scottish Government questions the Ministry of Defence's belief that a decision to sell DARA Almondbank to a private bidder would be in the best interests of defence and of the workforce at Almondbank. As Roseanna Cunningham said, there was a debate on the subject in 2003, when the focus was on the threat of closure that hung over DARA Almondbank. We face a new challenge at this stage, which has to be addressed with the same vigour with which members pursued the concerns that they raised in the previous debate.

It could be argued that the closure of DARA Almondbank has been avoided and that privatisation is the saviour and the cure for the site and its workforce, but the Scottish Government does not take that view. Our concern is that the potential transfer to a private bidder does not guarantee permanence and stability for the workforce. Such permanence and stability would be much more likely if the Ministry of Defence were to give whole-hearted consideration to the proposals that have been put forward by the various unions that represent the Almondbank employees. I appeal to the MOD to undertake that whole-hearted consideration.

Although, as Mr Park correctly said, the unions intervened at a fairly advanced stage of the process, in the circumstances it would be a reasonable response to ensure that their propositions were fully and adequately considered before a final decision was reached by the MOD. Not to do so would cast doubt on the MOD's commitment to the trade unions that there will be a level playing field in considering in-house and external solutions.

The text of both the 2003 motion and the one that we are debating today makes clear the importance of DARA Almondbank and its employees. With their technical and specialised skills, the management and workforce at DARA Almondbank have created not just a Scottish or UK but a world-class centre of excellence. The last time I visited the plant, I encountered individuals whose skills and depth of knowledge on the individual specialisms reassured me of the strength of the engineering skills base that exists in Scotland.

In his speech, Mr Park—who is making a formidable contribution to Parliament on skills policy in general—recognised the significance of the skills resource and asset that is contained in the workforce at Almondbank. It would be folly to move in a direction that potentially undermined the availability of such a skills base to the Perthshire and Scottish economies.

The economic impact of DARA Almondbank is significant to the local economy, which is the preoccupation of Roseanna Cunningham and me—as the constituency members in the local area—and the other members who have spoken tonight. DARA Almondbank is one of the largest employers in the Perth and Kinross area, and the nature of its work is truly unique. If DARA Almondbank were to see a reduction in the number of workers, particularly high-skilled engineers, that would have a significant multiplier effect on the local economy.

In drawing my remarks to a close, I congratulate Roseanna Cunningham on the tenacious way in which she has pursued the issue in Parliament over many years. Let me reassure her of the Scottish Government's firm support for the workforce at Almondbank and of its determination to ensure that the Ministry of Defence takes adequate account of the views of the Scottish Government and Parliament in ensuring that DARA Almondbank and its workforce can continue to make a formidable contribution to the Perthshire and Scottish economy.

Meeting closed at 17:42.

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