

MEETING OF THE PARLIAMENT

Wednesday 3 September 2008

Session 3

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SCOTTISH MINISTERS AND LAW OFFICERS

Office of the First Minister

FIRST MINISTER—Right hon Alex Salmond MSP

MINISTER FOR EUROPE, EXTERNAL AFFAIRS AND CULTURE—Linda Fabiani MSP

MINISTER FOR PARLIAMENTARY BUSINESS—Bruce Crawford MSP

Health and Wellbeing

DEPUTY FIRST MINISTER AND CABINET SECRETARY—Nicola Sturgeon MSP

MINISTER FOR PUBLIC HEALTH—Shona Robison MSP

MINISTER FOR COMMUNITIES AND SPORT—Stewart Maxwell MSP

Finance and Sustainable Growth

CABINET SECRETARY—John Swinney MSP

MINISTER FOR ENTERPRISE, ENERGY AND TOURISM—Jim Mather MSP

MINISTER FOR TRANSPORT, INFRASTRUCTURE AND CLIMATE CHANGE—Stewart Stevenson MSP

Education and Lifelong Learning

CABINET SECRETARY—Fiona Hyslop MSP

MINISTER FOR SCHOOLS AND SKILLS—Maureen Watt MSP

MINISTER FOR CHILDREN AND EARLY YEARS—Adam Ingram MSP

Justice

CABINET SECRETARY—Kenny MacAskill MSP

MINISTER FOR COMMUNITY SAFETY—Fergus Ewing MSP

Rural Affairs and the Environment

CABINET SECRETARY—Richard Lochhead MSP

MINISTER FOR ENVIRONMENT—Michael Russell MSP

Law Officers

LORD ADVOCATE—Right hon Elish Angiolini QC

SOLICITOR GENERAL FOR SCOTLAND—Frank Mulholland QC

PRESIDING OFFICERS

PRESIDING OFFICER—Alex Fergusson MSP

DEPUTY PRESIDING OFFICERS—Alasdair Morgan MSP, Trish Godman MSP

SCOTTISH PARLIAMENTARY CORPORATE BODY

PRESIDING OFFICER—Alex Fergusson MSP

MEMBERS—Alex Johnstone MSP, Tricia Marwick MSP, Tom McCabe MSP, Mike Pringle MSP

PARLIAMENTARY BUREAU

PRESIDING OFFICER—Alex Fergusson MSP

MEMBERS—Michael McMahon MSP, Mike Rumbles MSP, Bruce Crawford MSP, David McLetchie MSP

COMMITTEE CONVENERS AND DEPUTY CONVENERS

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Equal Opportunities	Margaret Mitchell	Elaine Smith
European and External Relations	Malcolm Chisholm	Alex Neil
Finance	Andrew Welsh	Elaine Murray
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Standards, Procedures and Public		
Appointments	Keith Brown	Cathie Craigie
Subordinate Legislation	Jamie Stone	Gil Paterson
Transport, Infrastructure and Climate Change	Patrick Harvie	Cathy Peattie

3 September 2008

Scottish Parliament

Wednesday 3 September 2008

[THE PRESIDING OFFICER *opened the meeting at 09:30*]

Time for Reflection

The Presiding Officer (Alex Fergusson):

Good morning. It is good to see everyone back after the summer recess. Our first item of business this morning is time for reflection, and our time for reflection leader today is Father Kevin Dow of St Mary's church in West Calder.

Father Kevin Dow (St Mary's Church, West Calder): Today in the Roman Catholic Church, and indeed, in a great many other Christian traditions of east and west, we celebrate the feast of St Gregory the Great. He was Pope from 590 AD to 604 AD and is remembered for a whole list of great accomplishments: his sermons, liturgical reforms and letters. Even a style of music—Gregorian chant—is named after him. In these islands, however, he is perhaps better known for being the Pope who sent the first missionaries to convert the pagan Anglo-Saxon kingdoms of the south, and so gave the mandate to St Augustine to found the see of Canterbury.

It is often said incorrectly of Catholics, and other Christians who recognise the saints, that they worship the saints. However, when you walk down Princes Street in Edinburgh and pass the Scott monument, pausing to reflect on the life and works of Sir Walter Scott, or even in Glasgow when you see the statue of Donald Dewar outside the shopping centre, you do not stop and worship them. We celebrate Burns suppers, but we do not worship Robert Burns. We remember them—just as we remember all those who have statues erected in their honour—for who they were and for what they did in life. That same sense of pride and gratitude fills the hearts of Catholic Christians whenever we celebrate a feast day such as today.

The saints were people like you and me—ordinary people who lived ordinary lives—yet they achieved extraordinary things. As members of Parliament, you have been given a mandate by the people of Scotland not just to do the ordinary things of day-to-day government and decision making, but to do extraordinary things for us and on behalf of us.

I leave you with a quote from St Gregory the Great:

“Non enim pro locis res, sed pro bonis rebus loca amanda sunt.”

“Things are not to be loved for the sake of a place, but places are to be loved for the sake of their good things.”

This country of ours is a place that is indeed loved. However, it is in the hands of you, the members of our Scottish Parliament, who have the task of making good things happen, and so make our nation a better and much more loved place.

Amen.

Business Motions

09:33

The Presiding Officer (Alex Fergusson): The next item of business is consideration of business motion S3M-2441, in the name of Bruce Crawford, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, under rule 2.2.3 of standing orders, to allow business to begin at 9 o'clock on Thursday 4 September.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees that "09:00" be substituted for "09:15" in Rule 2.2.3 to allow the meeting of the Parliament on Thursday 4 September to begin at 9.00 am.—[Bruce Crawford].

Motion agreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next item of business is consideration of business motion S3M-2476, in the name of Bruce Crawford, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, setting out a business programme.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees the following programme of business—

Wednesday 3 September 2008

9.30 am Time for Reflection

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

followed by First Minister's Statement: Scottish Government's Programme

followed by Scottish Government Debate: Scottish Government's Programme

2.30 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions

followed by Scottish Government Debate: Scottish Government's Programme

followed by Business Motion

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5.00 pm Decision Time

followed by Members' Business

Thursday 4 September 2008

9.00 am Parliamentary Bureau Motions

followed by Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee Motion on Breach of the Interests of Members of the Scottish Parliament Act 2006

followed by Scottish Government Debate: Getting it Right for Every Child

11.40 am General Question Time

12 noon First Minister's Question Time

2.15 pm Themed Question Time
Rural Affairs and the Environment;
Justice and Law Officers

2.55 pm Scottish Government Debate: Obesity Action Plan

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5.00 pm Decision Time

followed by Members' Business

Wednesday 10 September 2008

2.30 pm Time for Reflection

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

followed by Transport, Infrastructure and Climate Change Committee Debate: 4th Report 2008 Ferry Services in Scotland

followed by Business Motion

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5.00 pm Decision Time

followed by Members' Business

Thursday 11 September 2008

9.15 am Parliamentary Bureau Motions

followed by Scottish Labour Party Business

11.40 am General Question Time

12 noon First Minister's Question Time

2.15 pm Themed Question Time
Finance and Sustainable Growth

2.55 pm Scottish Government Debate: Report of the Scottish Prisons Commission

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5.00 pm Decision Time

followed by Members' Business

Wednesday 17 September 2008

2.30 pm Time for Reflection

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

followed by Scottish Government Business

followed by Business Motion

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5.00 pm Decision Time

followed by Members' Business

Thursday 18 September 2008

9.15 am Parliamentary Bureau Motions

followed by Scottish Government Business

11.40 am General Question Time

12 noon First Minister's Question Time

2.15 pm Themed Question Time
Education and Lifelong Learning;
Europe, External Affairs and Culture

2.55 pm Scottish Government Business

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5.00 pm Decision Time

followed by Members' Business—[Bruce Crawford].

Motion agreed to.

First Minister's Statement: Scottish Government's Programme

The Presiding Officer (Alex Fergusson): The next item of business is a statement by the First Minister on the Scottish Government's programme. The First Minister will take questions at the end of his statement, so there should therefore be no interventions or interruptions.

09:34

The First Minister (Alex Salmond): Fellow members of Parliament, I welcome you back for the new parliamentary session and hope that everyone has returned refreshed after the summer recess. I understand, of course, that not all colleagues have been able to put their feet up. Some were preoccupied—some still are—with leadership elections, and all of us were engaged in a summer by-election.

I warmly welcome Tavish Scott as the new leader of the Scottish Liberal Democrats. *[Applause.]*

It is also right to acknowledge the service to Parliament of Wendy Alexander and Nicol Stephen, who stood down as leaders of the Labour Party and Liberal Democrats respectively. *[Applause.]*

Concerning the matter of the Glasgow East by-election, John Mason pulled off a stunning victory, which sent out the message that there is no such thing as a safe Labour seat any more, any time or anywhere in Scotland.

Before I move on to the detail of this year's legislative programme, I would like to inform Parliament of the tour that the Scottish Cabinet undertook in July and August, visiting Dumfries, Inverness, Pitlochry and Skye. Around each Cabinet meeting, we held local engagements and a national conversation event with community and voluntary sector leaders that allowed people the chance to question Scottish ministers directly and to put forward their main concerns regarding local and much wider matters. My ministers and I are extremely grateful to everyone who was involved for their enthusiasm and engagement. Those discussions helped to make ever clearer to us the aspirations and concerns of the Scottish people. The meetings confirmed, for example, that the Government is right to focus on the impact of rising prices of food and energy, which is causing such concern to every business and household in the country. We are right to take what action we can as a Government, and to press the Government in London to do much more.

The discussions also showed us a confidence and an optimism in our people that seek expression through our political institutions, looking beyond the immediate challenges to the future of this country and to the opportunities that lie ahead. That is the mood to which the Government is determined to respond, and an expectation that it is our duty to meet: not just for us in the Government, but for every single one of us here, as a national Parliament.

It is a pleasure to present this year's legislative statement. It is the second legislative programme of this Government and it sets out a clear, consistent and confident direction for Scotland. I acknowledge that it is, as previously, the programme of a minority Government. We remain, as always, dependent on the support of other parties in the chamber to secure progress.

Over the past year and more, we have secured progress—Scotland is moving forward. Today, we have a stronger Parliament that is more keenly focused on advancing the Scottish national interest and more responsive to the priorities of our people. That view might not be held universally throughout the chamber, but it is the firm view throughout Scottish society. The recent Scottish social attitudes survey showed that 71 per cent of people trust their Government to act in Scotland's interests, which is up from only 51 per cent last year. Just last month, new research found that Scotland reports the third-highest level of life satisfaction—happiness—of any nation in Europe. We see throughout Scotland a more confident nation—a society that is readying itself to take on much greater responsibility for its own destiny. I say to Andy Kerr that there is always one exception to every survey.

Those are important and positive changes, so it is right to record now the contributions that Opposition parties have made in helping to deliver those improvements for Scottish society. For example, Margo MacDonald has been an effective advocate of the position of Edinburgh as a capital city, the Green party has secured progress on public transport and on the climate challenge fund, and the Conservatives are working in partnership with us to ensure effective action on drugs, which are a scourge on Scottish society. The Liberal party joined the Government in the restoration of free education in Scotland.

We have also secured agreement with Labour's leadership candidate Cathy Jamieson that the £400 million of council tax benefit is indeed Scotland's money. *[Applause.]* Indeed, the political ground has shifted significantly in the Labour camp over the summer, with all three candidates at last realising that the current system of council taxation has to change. We look forward to

Labour's support in abolishing the unfair council tax. *[Applause.]*

The Government has a single overarching purpose—to increase sustainable growth. That purpose is supported by our strategic objectives: building a Scotland that is safer, stronger, greener, healthier, smarter, wealthier and fairer. Altogether, this year's legislative programme comprises 15 bills, including a bill on flood risk management that was carried over from last year's proposed programme. In my statement, I will present both the new bills that will support our strategic objectives and some key non-legislative measures, because advancing those goals lies behind all our actions in government—not just the legislation that we pass.

We continue to focus on growing Scotland's economy because that will bring greater prosperity to families and communities throughout Scotland and allow us to invest more to create the rich society that Scotland can be. That is our social democratic contract with the people of this nation.

We seek to build a nation that is wealthier and fairer. Currently, the most powerful lever that any Scottish Government can use is the Scottish budget. However, the budget is fixed and the Scottish Government has no ability to borrow and has limited discretion on taxation, so if we spend more in one area, the consequence is lower spending elsewhere. That is a particular frustration at a time when it is glaringly obvious that the economy requires a substantial fiscal stimulus—a reflation—to boost demand and confidence. That is why our higher ambitions for Scotland and those of our people should be matched by greater responsibility for economic policy.

The Government is determined to use the economic levers that we have to maximise Scottish resilience in this time of global economic challenge. This year's budget bill will seek approval for our spending plans for 2009-10 and will include fast-tracked investment designed to encourage and support key areas of the Scottish economy: full implementation of the small business bonus scheme; record investment in our transport infrastructure; and increased resources to local government as part of the historic concordat between local and central Government in Scotland.

This year, in line with our commitment to a fairer Scotland, we will also introduce a council tax abolition bill. *[Applause.]*

The Presiding Officer: At the beginning of the statement, I said that there should be no interruptions. I now ask that there be no further interruptions.

The First Minister: The Government is committed to replacing the regressive and unfair

council tax with a fair system of local taxation based on ability to pay. The change will help to lift thousands of Scots out of poverty and will, by delivering a net tax cut of £281 million—the biggest tax cut in a generation—provide a vital financial boost to low-income and middle-income households throughout the country. Eight out of 10 Scottish families will be better off. Abolition of the council tax will lift 85,000 individuals from poverty and save the average Scottish family between £350 and £535 a year. I have no doubt that Scotland will judge harshly any MSP who votes to keep the council tax in the face of the overwhelming benefit that would flow to millions of ordinary Scots.

Those two bills on the economy are far from the sum of our intentions. In the face of a global slow-down that has been spurred by high commodity prices and the credit crunch, the Government is acting to uphold our economy's resilience and lay the foundations for a strong recovery. We will make vital investment in affordable housing and ensure the quick and effective deployment of European structural funds. Through the Scottish futures trust, we are ensuring that people in Scotland benefit from modern high-quality infrastructure that supports our public services. We are postponing a review of developer contributions to avoid placing new burdens on development in Scotland.

We are using the opportunity of the homecoming celebrations in 2009 to deliver the maximum benefit for tourism nationwide, and we are taking action to promote energy efficiency and alleviate the effects of rising energy prices on businesses and households.

I have noted many times in the chamber and outside it that others see Scotland as a country on the move, and that we are recognised as Europe's place of the future. The key to fulfilling our country's huge economic potential and to generating truly sustainable growth is to harness Scotland's stock of natural capital, which is why in this year's legislative programme we propose three bills—on climate change, the marine environment, and flood risk management—that seek to build a platform of sustainability for the future of the Scottish economy.

There is no dispute in the chamber—nor should there be—about the fact that climate change is one of the most serious threats that we face. Urgent action is needed to cut the emissions that cause climate change. We know from the Stern report and other studies that the cost of inaction will, ultimately, far outweigh the cost of taking the necessary steps to help to stabilise the climate. The Scottish climate change bill will introduce a target to reduce emissions by 80 per cent by 2050 and a statutory framework to support delivery.

That goal not only substantially exceeds the United Kingdom Government's 60 per cent target but goes further still, placing Scotland at the forefront of global action on climate change.

I referred a moment ago to our stock of natural capital. Annually, Scotland's seas generate at least £2.2 billion of marine industry—excluding oil and gas—and support approximately 50,000 jobs. The seas around our country are home to 40,000 marine species, including 6,500 animal and plant species. There are many competing demands on Scotland's marine and coastal environment from the energy sector, shipping, fisheries, tourism and conservation. As well as simplifying existing marine legislation, the proposed marine bill aims to balance the long-term viability and growth of those industries with enhanced protection of our special marine environment.

Separately, we are conscious of the increased danger of major flooding events in Scotland. In February, we opened a wide consultation on flood management. That valuable exercise garnered wide endorsement for our proposals and I am pleased to announce that in the coming year we will publish a flood risk management bill. The bill is necessary in order to transpose the European Community floods directive. It will help to strengthen co-operation and co-ordination, create a single enforcement authority for the safe operation of Scotland's reservoirs, and help to establish a sustainable risk-based approach to flood risk management.

Each of those bills will help to safeguard the environment. Just as important, they show our commitment to harnessing our economic potential—Scotland's natural capital—to promote sustainable economic growth for current and future generations.

In the past year, we have made significant progress towards making Scotland safer and stronger. We are working with police forces to ensure that, by 2011, an additional 1,000 police officers will be recruited to police our communities. Last year—as we promised—150 officers were recruited and paid for by the Scottish Government and are already working in Scotland's communities. That seemed to come as a disappointment to some members whose manifesto contained no commitment whatever on police numbers. This year, the Government is directly funding the recruitment of another 450 officers over and above the forces' previous plans. As of June this year, we have the record number of 16,339 police officers on our streets keeping Scotland safe.

We will achieve more with three new bills to improve Scotland's justice system. The criminal justice and licensing bill will ensure that prison remains the correct disposal for serious and

violent offenders and will ensure that they are dealt with firmly and effectively in prison. Building on the recommendations of the Scottish Prisons Commission, it will reform the community punishments that are available to the courts and reform criminal law and criminal court procedures. Consolidated by the creation of a sentencing council, the bill will ensure that there is public confidence in sentencing decisions.

As members know, we are consulting on a wide range of measures to challenge Scotland's relationship with alcohol. The consultation, which ends later this month, outlines proposals in several key areas: to prohibit off-sales to under-21s; to set a minimum price for alcoholic drink; and to introduce a social responsibility fee. We will reflect on the results of the consultation and use the bill to effect those proposals, which require primary legislation.

We will also introduce a legal profession bill, which will contain the first significant reform of the legal profession since 1980. It will introduce alternative business structures to the legal profession while maintaining its independence and strength.

The arbitration bill will modernise arbitration law in Scotland, something that has been under consideration for at least 20 years. Ensuring that Scotland has codified arbitration rules in statute will make the arbitration procedure more accessible and user friendly, which will benefit individuals and businesses in Scotland who wish to settle disputes outwith the court system.

The Government is committed to improving the country's health and wellbeing and we can point to good progress in the quality of our health care and in major indicators of health outcomes. Scotland's national health service continues to drive down waiting times; indeed, last week, it announced an all-time low in waiting at accident and emergency departments.

This week, we have ensured that Scotland becomes the first part of the United Kingdom to introduce vaccinations for cervical cancer. Over the next few years, every girl under 18 in Scotland will have received that vital vaccine. I know that that major progress in public health will be supported by every party and every member in the chamber.

In addition to working to abolish prescription charges, we have removed a tax on the sick and those who care for them by scrapping car parking charges in NHS hospitals across Scotland. Unfortunately, however, scrapping car parking charges in private finance initiative hospitals is not within our power, unless we buy out the contracts. At least one of the Labour leadership candidates

might care to reflect on that as he sees this inequity continue in PFI hospitals.

We are clear about the challenges that lie ahead in improving Scotland's health. Our health inequalities task force, which reported in June, set out an action plan to improve health outcomes across Scotland. We have made it clear that we regard that as a moral imperative and as a mission that will bring far wider benefits to our society and, indeed, to the Scottish economy.

In the coming year, we will introduce a health bill, an objective of which will be to ensure that the future of general practitioner services in Scotland remains within the NHS family and firmly rooted in the traditions of general practice. Moreover, by controlling tobacco's availability and promotion and by introducing a tobacco sales registration scheme and restricting display of tobacco products in shops, the bill will take aim at the problems that are caused by a major factor in health inequality in Scotland and a major cause of the big three killers: cancer, coronary heart disease and strokes. Those reforms will be supported by new resources at the front line: the Scottish Government will commit an additional £9 million over the next three years to support local government and the national health service in delivering measures in the smoking prevention action plan.

I turn now to the measures that we are introducing in education and for our young people. We all know the fundamental importance of a good start in life and a good Scottish education. The early years framework, which has been developed together with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, is an important step in that respect. Through a close partnership between local government, our health service and the Scottish Government, we can help to give our children the best possible start in life.

I am pleased to say that local government is also firmly behind the proposals that will be in the children's hearings bill, which will modernise and strengthen the children's hearings system by bringing 33 separate organisations under one new national body. Children's rights will continue to be properly upheld within the system, which will be more integrated and more effective and will provide consistently good support to volunteers and professionals, which will lead ultimately to better outcomes for children and families.

In Scotland, about 1,000 schools—41 per cent of our primaries and 23 per cent of our secondaries—are classified as rural. Since 1999, more than 50 rural schools have been closed. In that time, three have been kept open by direct ministerial intervention, all as a result of decisions that were made by this Government and the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning. The trend of rural schools closures

causes us concern because such closures can mean real hardship for children and parents in rural areas. As a result, our rural schools bill will introduce a presumption against their closure. Because we recognise that any school closure can be emotive, the bill will improve the consultation process for all proposed closures in Scotland.

We will also introduce amending legislation, through the additional support for learning amendment bill, that will maintain the foundations of the Education (Additional Support for Learning) (Scotland) Act 2004 but enable parents and young people to make out-of-area placing requests. It will allow, in the event of an unsuccessful request, access to mediation and dispute resolution services and will expand the rights of parents and young people to access additional support needs tribunals.

Finally, I will outline three new bills concerning the governance of Scotland. Our aim to introduce a referendum bill on Scottish independence is widely known, so I am delighted to reaffirm to the chamber our intention to introduce it in 2010, in line with our manifesto commitment. I have lost track of the position of the three Labour leadership candidates on this issue. However, I did notice that it was one of the first matters to be addressed by Tavish Scott, following his elevation—[*Laughter.*]—his elevation, even, to the leadership of the Liberal Democrats. I am sure he can levitate as well. Perhaps I was reading too much into his statement, but I detected a chink of light emerging through the fog.

We will continue to work to improve the governance of Scotland through legislative and non-legislative means. The historic concordat with local government is just one such step. The public services reform bill will introduce further substantive improvements in Scottish governance and will help to achieve this Government's commitment to reduce the number of Scottish public bodies by 25 per cent by the end of this session of Parliament. It will also enact Professor Crerar's proposals for reforming the scrutiny landscape in Scotland, set out a framework for reducing the number of scrutiny bodies by 25 per cent, and simplify scrutiny and complaints handling of public services.

We in the chamber know that, like the creative process, the legislative process is not always straightforward. However, I can inform colleagues that the public services reform bill will also give legal status to the proposed creative Scotland—subject, of course, to parliamentary will.

A good example of Government and Parliament working together is the legislative reform bill, which will take forward recommendations that have been made by the Subordinate Legislation Committee and will mean that some important

matters, such as scrutiny of secondary legislation, will finally be covered by Scottish Parliament legislation rather than by transitional orders that were made under the Scotland Act 1998.

Lastly, we will introduce the Scottish Parliament and local government elections bill. I regret to say that we cannot with that bill ensure that Scotland's national Parliament can assume responsibility for Scottish Parliament elections. However, we will enact Ron Gould's recommendation that we separate the timing of Scottish parliamentary and local government elections by extending by one year this and the next term of office in councils. The bill will allow access to voting data at polling-station level, which will help to increase confidence in the overall result. We will also consult on Ron Gould's other recommendations, notably the creation of a chief returning officer for Scotland, as we strive to increase public confidence in the electoral process.

That concludes the presentation of this year's legislative programme. It is a programme that shows that this Government is committed to act on behalf of the whole of Scottish society and that, although Scotland faces many challenges, we are responding to them. As a society and as a nation, we will overcome them. We will build a sound platform for long-term sustainable economic growth and a future in which all can benefit and secure their potential.

There should be no limit to our ambitions for the nation, just as there should be no limit to what we can contribute globally if we take on the mantle of leadership and responsibility and work in favour of the common weal. This legislative programme is an important step towards building that strong and purposeful Scottish society.

On climate change and the environment, the programme will propel us into a new leadership role—a role that we should and can feel comfortable in.

I invite colleagues across the chamber to continue to work constructively with us, to help to implement the programme and to take Scotland forward.

The Presiding Officer (Alex Fergusson): As I said earlier, the First Minister will now take questions on the issues that have been raised in his statement. We have about 45 minutes for this, but a very large number of members wish to ask questions so it would be very helpful if those who wish to do so press their request-to-speak buttons now. I think that not all the names might fit on the screen. I ask everyone to keep questions and answers short, so that we get through as many as we can.

Cathy Jamieson (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (Lab): Thank you, Presiding Officer.

I heard what you said about the length of questions.

I thank the First Minister for the advance copy of his statement. I also thank the journalists who so accurately predicted the number of bills that would be in the programme.

It is perhaps unsurprising that I have a sense of déjà vu. If we look through the Scottish Government's statement, we cannot help but notice what is missing from it as much as what is present in the document—I probably made that point this time last year. Class size reduction is absent; further investment in health is missing; and the end of automatic early release has somehow escaped from the programme. How can anyone believe the entirety of the document, when there has been no progress on so many of last year's pledges and promises?

The programme contains measures on which Labour will look favourably, for example the measures on climate change and arbitration and the proposals on school meals, which were in the Labour manifesto. However, other measures will need detailed scrutiny. The devil is always in the detail, of course. In particular, the measures to do with tackling alcohol and tobacco issues will need to be examined, to ensure that they do not simply sound tough but are workable and will deliver the health benefits that are talked about.

The First Minister said that the three members who are sitting on the Labour front bench agree that reform of the council tax is needed. However, all three of us also agree that local income tax is not the solution to the problem. In saying that, we are in agreement with the Institute of Directors, Unison and the Federation of Small Businesses Scotland—organisations that traditionally are not always in agreement. The reality is that a local income tax would cause misery for people who rely on local services and would cut the legs from local government, making Scotland the highest-taxed part of the United Kingdom. Will the First Minister please stop gambling with people's local services to save his political face? Will he have the humility to listen to the people who criticise the local income tax proposal and will he admit that the proposal was a mistake and work with all parties to come up with a property-based local tax that will be fairer for all?

There was little if any mention of the Scottish futures trust in the First Minister's statement. The First Minister promised to match Labour's school building programme brick for brick, but while he prevaricates on the Scottish futures trust not a single brick will have been laid, which is not good enough. Will he therefore give us a timetable that sets out when the Scottish futures trust will be in place and when we will receive further details of the school building programme and the second

Forth crossing, which was promised but is in doubt while we await details of the Scottish futures trust?

The First Minister: I know that Cathy Jamieson is auditioning today, but there was a sense of déjà vu—she was right to say that she said exactly the same things about the legislative programme last year. I say to her in all reasonableness and humility that the verdict of the Scottish people during the past year seems to have been more resoundingly in favour than has the verdict of Cathy Jamieson.

I welcome Cathy Jamieson's conversion, in which she has been whole-hearted, on £400 million of council tax benefit not being embezzled from Scotland by the Labour London Treasury. I welcome the Conservative party's comments on the matter, too. On that issue, it seems that the Parliament is united. However, in her attack on the replacement of the council tax by a local income tax, notably Cathy Jamieson omitted two points: first, the support of COSLA in the hysteric vote in June—[*Laughter.*] I mean the historic vote in June—I was at the meeting and the reaction of Labour councillors when they lost a vote in COSLA for the first time in 50 years was hysterical. The reaction of our local councillors in favour of a local income tax seems particularly important. Secondly, Cathy Jamieson and the two other auditionees say that they will reform the council tax, but is not that what they said when Labour was in government? Where on earth is the definitive Labour proposal for reform?

On the health service, I point out two things to Cathy Jamieson: there is record spend on the national health service in Scotland and there are record outcomes. What a tribute it is, in this year of the 60th anniversary of the NHS, that a major new hospital in Glasgow—an £800 million development—is being built in the public sector and is not going down the blind alley of PFI. For that reason, our proposals on the Scottish futures trust will come forward as this year goes on, intensifying and reinforcing the capital budget that is being applied in Scotland.

In a nutshell, is this not the position? The Scottish National Party in government during the past year has

“looked and sounded like a party on the side of change while Labour looked and sounded like a party on the side of the way things had always been.”

Those are not my words but the words of Tom McCabe in the *Sunday Herald* on 3 August.

Annabel Goldie (West of Scotland) (Con): It is great to be back. Some things might have changed—some people have gone and others have arrived. I, too, welcome Tavish Scott, fog and all. I hope that the First Minister is pleased to see that I am back and raring to go.

It is clear that the First Minister is also raring to go. It is obvious that he wants to replicate Olympic pace in the political arena. I take this opportunity at the first meeting of the Parliament since the Olympic games to praise and congratulate team Great Britain and our fantastic Scottish contribution to its Olympic success. [*Applause.*] I am looking forward to London 2012. I am certainly looking forward to Westminster 2011.

The Scottish Conservatives in this Parliament will continue to do what we did last year. Our approach will be issue by issue and vote by vote, to do what is best for the interests of Scotland. The Scottish Conservatives will continue to make the difference in Scottish politics. For the avoidance of doubt, will the First Minister confirm that by 2011 police numbers will be 17,261? That was the deal that the Scottish Conservatives secured in the budget.

The First Minister lauds his proposed net tax cuts of £281 million. If he can find that money, I can spend it better and cut the tax bill for every council tax payer in Scotland. What on earth is the point of abolishing the council tax, when the proposed substitute, a national income tax, has been comprehensively rubbished and ridiculed?

On the proposed criminal justice and licensing bill, does the First Minister seriously intend to persevere with the ludicrous proposal whereby a responsible adult aged 20 could buy alcohol at the pub but could not take a bottle of wine home to celebrate the birth of his child?

Finally, can the First Minister confirm that he has given up on his pledges to cancel student debt and reduce class sizes, given their omission from his statement?

The First Minister: I cannot confirm that and if the Conservative party had supported the Government in the abolition of student fees, Annabel Goldie would be in a much better position to attack the Government's education policies.

In all fairness, I must say that Annabel has been a source of great reassurance to me during the recess. She is a living demonstration that it is possible for political leaders to stay in office. I am grateful for that and I join her whole-heartedly in congratulating all the Olympians who competed and those who succeeded in the recent Olympic games. Our Scottish athletes, from all disciplines, will be recognised in a reception at Edinburgh castle on Friday.

Annabel Goldie will join me in welcoming the record number of police on Scotland's streets. It is an established statistic that 1,000 additional officers will be recruited through direct Government intervention.

At some stage, Annabel Goldie and other people who oppose a local income tax will have to reconcile their thoughts to the view that, whatever arguments they make against the local income tax, much more profound arguments can be made against the unfair council tax, which is a hated form of taxation. Opponents of the local income tax will have to try to understand why, in every single test of public opinion—I am talking about the people whom we are meant to serve—local income tax beats the council tax into a cocked hat by margins of two or three to one. If at any stage in future the Conservative party starts to reconnect with public opinion in Scotland, its political prospects will be a great deal brighter in 2010, 2011 or whenever.

Tavish Scott (Shetland) (LD): I thank the First Minister for his statement and for his earlier kind words. I agree with what he said about both Nicol Stephen, my friend and colleague, and Wendy Alexander.

I was struck today by how little of the First Minister's statement was about the big issue facing the people of Scotland today: the cost of living. The past 12 months have seen energy costs rise by 15 per cent, with 30 per cent more to come, food costs rise by £30 a month, and headline inflation up to its highest level for 16 years. It is at times like this that people want to hear how Governments are working together to make their lives easier. They want to know that the SNP Government is not just on the side of spin but on their side.

I know that it is hard for the First Minister to work jointly with London, because the Labour Government is part of what is wrong—dithering, divided, out of touch and on the way out, with Alistair Darling performing some sort of reverse Macmillan, telling us, "You've never had it so bad." However, what is the First Minister doing to make it better? What steps is he taking as a political leader, not as a political commentator, to meet that challenge?

What parts of the First Minister's programme are designed to work consistently with the United Kingdom Government to tackle the crisis in housing? What is happening beyond reannouncing money either side of the border to make buying and renting more affordable? What evidence can he give us that he will put taking action to tackle the rising cost of living ahead of his need to make a political point?

That is what people want to hear; or does the First Minister think that they will understand Governments being tribal when the need to work together has never been so important? It is the economy, Presiding Officer.

The First Minister: I am not sure whether, if I described Alistair Darling and Gordon Brown as dithering, divided, out of touch and going out of office, I would necessarily secure their co-operation. However, if I do so, I shall assure them that I am quoting Tavish Scott rather than making up the attacks myself.

Let me point out to Tavish Scott that the cost of living was the first thing that I mentioned substantively in the statement, covering the concerns that were flowing into not just the Scottish Government and ministers but, I suspect, every MSP and constituency office across the country during the recess. That is what is bearing down on people.

In the landscape of rising food, fuel and other prices, is it not good that one cost—the council tax bill—is not going up across Scotland, unlike in the rest of the United Kingdom? Would it not have been encouraging if the Liberal Democrats had supported the move to freeze the council tax in the budget vote earlier this year? Perhaps under the new leadership of Tavish Scott, the Liberal Democrats' actions will meet their words on containing rising prices.

Tavish Scott should not in any way belittle the efforts that we are making in the housing and construction market to accelerate as best we can the investment that is necessary. Many of the measures that we announced some weeks ago were, in effect, copied by the UK Government in its announcement yesterday.

As Tavish Scott well knows—I hope to secure his support for increasing the economic powers of this Parliament—we are not in charge of the key commanding economic levers. I am delighted that some of the measures, such as those on stamp duty, that John Swinney suggested to the chancellor, in more polite terms than Tavish Scott, were introduced yesterday. However, they are by no means enough to deal with the economic problems facing the country. We need a substantial reflation. This is the time for a Keynesian reflation across the country to increase demand and confidence.

On a fixed budget—[*Interruption.*] Let me explain to Tavish Scott's colleagues that, on a fixed budget, if we increase expenditure in one area, we have to reduce it in another. That is not too complex an equation to understand. However, as the Parliament and the country secure the enhanced economic power that we need, we will be able to meet the economic challenges more comprehensively. Everybody in the chamber who does not accept that should consider the fact that, among the major energy, oil and gas producers in the world, Scotland is the single country that is bearing the pain of high energy costs without the

advantage of billions of pounds rolling into our exchequer.

The Presiding Officer: We come to open questions. I remind members that a four-hour debate follows, so questions should be on points of clarification only. [*Interruption.*] If members would like to listen, they might get it right when they come to ask a question.

Brian Adam (Aberdeen North) (SNP): I welcome today's announced programme. The First Minister rightly talked about confidence in the economy. Will he give us an idea of how he and his colleagues might instil confidence in Scotland's economy, by taking steps unlike those taken by the chancellor, which in the past few days have seen the pound drop to its lowest level ever against the euro and drop 22 cents against the dollar? Those falls will have a major impact on the cost of living, as we have to pay for oil.

The First Minister: I set out a comprehensive series of measures in the Donald Dewar lecture at the Edinburgh book festival last month, and the Government will pursue those measures. Scotland is not immune from global recession and economic forces, but the Scottish economy is performing robustly and resisting those trends. Employment in Scotland is up and unemployment is down. Economic growth in Scotland has matched or exceeded growth in the United Kingdom for the past three recorded quarters—the first time that that has happened in a generation. I hope and believe that some of the Government's steps and the pace that we are setting are contributing to that resilience. I know that John Swinney and I will have Brian Adam's support for those measures; I hope that they will be supported by members throughout the chamber.

Rhona Brankin (Midlothian) (Lab): We offer broad support to the children's hearings bill and the additional support for learning amendment bill, although we will need to see the detail.

The First Minister mentioned a rural schools bill. Is it not ironic that, while the SNP is legislating to protect rural schools, an SNP council in Aberdeen is closing urban schools? We view that as hypocrisy.

On this day a year ago, the First Minister pledged to reduce class sizes in primary 1 to 3 to 18 within the lifetime of the Government. Today, that pledge has disappeared. We are seeing class sizes rising across Scotland, especially in SNP council areas.

The Presiding Officer: Question please, Ms Brankin.

Rhona Brankin: There is nothing in the document today that will give teachers and parents hope. Will the First Minister commit to

legislating to protect smaller class sizes in schools? Today, less—

The Presiding Officer: Very briefly, please.

Rhona Brankin: Today, less than a quarter of last year's probationers have found permanent posts. There is nothing in the statement to address that obscene waste of teaching talent. What does the First Minister intend to do to address that? This Government also—

The Presiding Officer: I am afraid that I have to stop you, Ms Brankin. I call the First Minister.

The First Minister: I welcome Rhona Brankin's welcome in the early part of her question. As she knows, probationers get employment throughout the year, and she will remember that, according to last year's survey, 93 per cent of them moved into employment.

I am sure that Rhona Brankin will have learned word for word the concordat commitment on lower class sizes. It is on page 5 and reads:

"Local government will be expected to show year on year progress toward delivery of the class size reduction policy."

I am pleased that, over the summer, single outcome agreements were signed with every single local authority in Scotland. If Rhona Brankin wants to look at a local authority that is enjoying spectacular success in moving towards that commitment, she will not have to travel far from the chamber. She can go to West Lothian to see an authority that is making substantial progress under the terms of the concordat towards the class size reduction policy. If that council can do it, perhaps Rhona Brankin will join me in exhorting her colleagues in a number of councils that I could mention to put more of a priority on low class sizes.

I have hope on this matter. It was only this time last year that the Labour Party was not sure whether low class sizes were a good idea. Now that it is sure, it will join us in ensuring that councils across Scotland follow West Lothian's example.

Michael Matheson (Falkirk West) (SNP): The First Minister is aware of the widespread concern throughout Scotland about ever-increasing energy prices, with an increasing number of people living in fuel poverty in our energy-rich Scotland. Will he outline what his Government will do in the next year to tackle increasing fuel poverty and will he assure the Parliament that he and his Government will continue to call on Gordon Brown to ensure that the people of Scotland get a fair deal on fuel costs?

The First Minister: As Michael Matheson knows, we have re-established the fuel poverty forum, which I understand will make its

recommendations within the next few days. We expect measures on the substantial matters for which, unfortunately, Westminster has responsibility to be announced next week. We will ensure that Scotland gets the maximum benefit, particularly from measures on energy efficiency, on which we have unfortunately lost out in the past.

The underlying irony of an energy-rich society suffering unacceptable levels of fuel poverty with the risk of great escalation in those levels over the winter should surely concentrate the minds of people who somehow think that Scotland should feel the impact of high energy prices for families and businesses but get none of the benefits of its own vast natural energy resources.

Malcolm Chisholm (Edinburgh North and Leith) (Lab): I thank the First Minister for his one, casual, throwaway sentence on culture—which is consistent, I suppose, with his level of attendance at this summer's magnificent festivals. More seriously, I ask him when creative Scotland will be established; whether there will still be detailed, amendable legislation to set it up; and whether the Scottish Government received a report in the past few months that indicated that the cost of establishing creative Scotland would be approximately £7 million rather than the £1 million or so that was stated to the Parliament in June.

The First Minister: As far as my attendance at the festival is concerned, I point out to Malcolm Chisholm that I have had a reasonably starring role at the past two Edinburgh international book festivals, with substantial audiences.

Jeremy Purvis (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD): What does the First Minister mean by “reasonably starring”?

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Sustainable Growth (John Swinney): It is modesty.

The First Minister: I said “reasonably” to acknowledge the fact that I got nothing like the attendance that Sean Connery managed to mobilise. I also know how encouraged Sean was by the birthday best wishes from Lord George Foulkes.

Malcolm Chisholm should have listened more carefully: the legislative basis for the establishment of creative Scotland is in the legislative programme that I mentioned. I hope that, this time, the Labour Party will bring itself to vote for a policy with which it is meant to agree.

Christine Grahame (South of Scotland) (SNP): I refer the First Minister to the announcements on public health initiatives on underage tobacco and alcohol sales. Effective enforcement is the test of robust legislation.

Currently, trading standards officers are the enforcers of the law on tobacco sales, but police officers are the enforcers of the law on underage alcohol sales. I ask the First Minister and his Cabinet to consider making both matters the responsibility of trading standards officers, which seems eminently pragmatic and would free up police officers for other duties.

The First Minister: I will give close consideration to Christine Grahame's suggestion. She will have noticed the substantial stepping-up of the enforcement of the law on underage drink sales that took place over the summer and the variety of campaigns that there were on that.

Her question gives me the opportunity to reflect on the evidence from the various trial runs of the policy on restricting alcohol retail sales to over-21s. We have had pilots in three areas of Scotland: West Lothian, Stenhousemuir and, more recently, Cupar. Each of those experiments has resulted in a decline of almost 50 per cent in antisocial behaviour reported to the police over the period of the trials. Every member of the Parliament should pay close attention to that empirical evidence and, when we come to vote on that aspect of the legislation, bear in mind the welcome that those communities have given to the experiments, before they allow other criteria or prejudices to get in the way of a sensible reform on alcohol consumption, the protection of our young people and civil order in Scotland.

Dr Richard Simpson (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): Why has the First Minister failed to indicate whether expenditure on the health service in Scotland will be overtaken by that in England within the next four to five years because of the reductions that he made in the previous budget and has failed to redress in the proposed budget? Will the tobacco control element of the proposed health bill include a ban on vending machines, a ban on smoking in cars where there are children and a curtailment of product placement? The last of those is a major problem, because the tobacco industry is one of the most sophisticated at overcoming public health measures.

The First Minister: Under the legislation, we will consider carefully the second aspect of Richard Simpson's question. On the first aspect, he is plain wrong in statistical terms because, under present plans, health spending per capita in Scotland will be £2,220 in 2010-11 and health spending per person in England in the same year will be £2,121. A bit less fiddling of the statistical base by the Labour Party might be encouraging for the discourse of political debate in the Parliament.

Richard Simpson is also wrong on political grounds because, only last year, the Labour Party fought an election saying that there should be no consequential increases or efficiency gains for

health in Scotland and that every item of the modest increase in spending should be devoted solely to education. He does not have to be a political genius to work out that if the Scottish people had had the misfortune of having the Labour Party continue in office, health spending in Scotland would have been lower than it is under SNP plans.

David McLetchie (Edinburgh Pentlands) (Con): I was interested in the First Minister's answer to Rhona Brankin's question on class sizes, in which he mentioned single outcome agreements. Is he aware that in 21 of the 32 single outcome agreements that his Government signed with Scotland's councils this summer there is not one word about reducing class sizes to a maximum of 18 and that, in the other 11 agreements, the common denominator is a recognition that the policy cannot be implemented without additional resources and the enactment of legislation? If the SNP Government is serious about the policy, why is there no legislative proposal to reduce class sizes to a maximum of 18—albeit over a period of time—bearing in mind the fact that the current legal maximum is 30?

The First Minister: We need co-operation, not legislation. The reason is that, under the concordat,

"Local government will be expected to show year on year progress toward delivery of the class size reduction policy."

That is the phraseology on such co-operation to which every council in Scotland—even those with the misfortune to be under Conservative influence—has signed up. I am sure that David McLetchie will join me in encouraging his councillors to show the same enthusiasm for the class size reduction policy and the historic concordat as councillors of my party—and, I hope, other parties—will show.

Jeremy Purvis: On 27 June 2007, the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning told the Parliament:

"We will have a school building fund to which local authorities can request access."

She went on:

"the futures trust will provide a very attractive option for local authorities and I think that many are waiting with great anticipation to use it."—[*Official Report, Education, Lifelong Learning and Culture Committee*, 27 June 2007; c 40.]

They are still waiting and not one new school scheme has been put forward since the SNP took office. Will there be a school building fund under the futures trust and how many school buildings will it fund?

The First Minister: Schools are moving forward at present because local government in Scotland has an historically high capital allocation, which is

allowing building and refurbishment to take place. The details of the futures trust will move forward and I am sure that we will enjoy Jeremy Purvis's support as they do so.

As many members know, I spent a great deal of time at Westminster. Anything that I had to say about the private finance initiative was as nothing compared to the condemnation that it received from those on the Liberal Democrat benches in front of me. I could never understand how that vehement argument against the iniquity of PFI that the Liberal Democrats made at Westminster could be reconciled with their policy position in government of moving PFI across the school and hospital building programme. No doubt, as the proposals for the Scottish futures trust come forward, Jeremy Purvis will be able to reconcile that apparent inconsistency between his colleagues here and his colleagues down there.

Aileen Campbell (South of Scotland) (SNP): I welcome the Government's indication that it will implement the areas of the Gould report for which it has responsibility. Does the First Minister agree that it is unfortunate that we do not have responsibility for our Parliament's elections and that, if we did, one way to improve democracy would be to lower the voting age to 16?

The First Minister: I agree with Aileen Campbell on both points. For the voting age to go to 16 would be a reformist policy that would be extremely useful and widely supported in Scotland, in that it would involve more people in the civic process. Of course, it would be easier to achieve that—as it would in many other areas—if the Scottish Parliament had responsibility for its electoral system.

I know that members of the Labour Party and others in the chamber have some doubts about that. However, I cannot see how any self-respecting members of a self-respecting Parliament could believe otherwise than that a Parliament should fundamentally have responsibility for its own election system—its own democracy. What sort of message does it send out on the other areas over which we aspire to govern if members in this chamber seem to lack the confidence in our ability to run our own electoral system? I could perhaps understand it if, when responsibility lay elsewhere, everything was working swimmingly and elections were run with a great degree of efficiency. Clearly, that has not been the case. For goodness' sake, will members across the chamber have the self-respect to demand control of our own democratic process?

Jack McConnell (Motherwell and Wishaw) (Lab): As the First Minister rightly pointed out in his statement, government is about leadership as well as legislation. I hope that he will therefore support all his colleagues in the Parliament who

have consistently attacked sectarianism over the years and join us all in condemning the attack on the Celtic coach Neil Lennon and the threats that have been made to Rangers player Nacho Novo, both of which show clearly that bigotry and religious hatred are not yet in the dustbin of history for Scotland. Why has the First Minister not maintained the progress on tackling sectarianism in Scotland that was made in recent years? Will he commit to reconvene the summit on sectarianism in this coming year, chair it personally, and lead Scotland towards dumping sectarianism in the dustbin of history?

The First Minister: Let me join the former First Minister in the condemnation of the attack on Neil Lennon and concern about sectarianism. This Government, and every member in the chamber, believes and knows that sectarianism is a continuing problem in Scottish society; it is one of the ills that afflicts us. Let him accept that for every member across the chamber tackling that and other ills in Scottish society has the highest priority.

Sandra White (Glasgow) (SNP): I thank the First Minister for his statement. In his contribution, Tavish Scott mentioned housing. Indeed, the First Minister said that support for housing was high on the political agenda, with £100 million being brought forward for housing. What support will the Scottish Government give through shared equity schemes and mortgage support to help people to access housing?

The First Minister: In “Firm Foundations: The Future of Housing in Scotland”, the Deputy First Minister announced exactly the budgets for increasing such support. Those are all aspects of tackling the difficulties in the housing market in Scotland, in particular our drive to increase social ownership. I welcome in particular—Sandra White will welcome it, too—the fact that, for the first time in a generation, local councils now have significant plans to re-enter the social housing market. That is a substantial step forward in Scotland.

The housing plans and things that we are doing can only be a part of a general recovery plan for the economy. In terms of the reflation and expansion of the economy, we are—as Sandra White knows—heavily restricted in our ability to inject demand and confidence into the economy. That is why parties across the chamber should join us in calling for exactly that policy. Right now, it is exactly what is needed.

Paul Martin (Glasgow Springburn) (Lab): The First Minister was quick to remind us that his Government had provided the additional funding to allow police authorities across Scotland to recruit an additional 150 police officers. Can he assure me today that the £580,000 that the Government

provided to police authorities has been spent on new recruits?

The First Minister: The fact that that we now have a record number of police in Scotland indicates that our policy is succeeding. Of course, we can guarantee it because it is direct funding. The 1,000 additional recruits are over and above the plans, which Paul Martin supported last year in the election campaign. It is coming into place. Paul Martin mentioned the additional 150 officers in the last financial year; he should also mention the 350 in this financial year. The Labour Party's position in those matters would carry a great deal more credibility—and I heard an echo of Richard Simpson's misplaced comments on the health service in what Paul Martin said—if the Labour Party had made a commitment in its manifesto last year for a single extra police officer in Scotland. It had no such plan. The basis of the sum of Paul Martin's question seems to be his grudging admission that the SNP's plans for police recruitment, which other parties in the chamber support, are proving to be successful. I am delighted to confirm that.

Mary Scanlon (Highlands and Islands) (Con): Given the proposal for a health bill to keep general practitioner services in the national health service, will the First Minister confirm how many GP services in Scotland are not in the NHS, why the legislation is necessary and whether he plans to extend the proposal to ban dentists from private practice? Also, why has no commitment or support been announced for outdoor education for every child in Scotland?

The First Minister: Among general practitioners and the British Medical Association, there is huge concern that not closing the loophole would enable practices to move outwith the ambit of the national health service. In that regard, health professionals believe that the Government's commitment in this direction contrasts with commitments that Mary Scanlon has supported. I remind her that the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Wellbeing became probably the first minister with responsibility for health in a generation or more to receive not one but two standing ovations at the British Medical Association conference in July. Many former Government ministers, including health ministers, would be delighted to get such a reaction from any of our workers in the national health service.

Robin Harper (Lothians) (Green): I thank the First Minister for his kind words on the Scottish Green Party's contribution to sustainability over the past year and welcome the climate change bill. However, having a climate change bill with an exemption for air transport is a bit like having a diet plan with an exemption for pies, beans, chips and black puddings. There is also the omission of

annual targets. Does the First Minister not welcome the fact that 21,000 people who responded to the consultation asked for annual targets? The Liberal Democrats support annual targets, as do the Greens—indeed, even some members of the Labour Party support them. Does he not agree that it is time for us to consider putting the teeth back into the climate change bill?

The First Minister: I am not an expert on pie and beans; I leave that to Mr McAveety and others, who are the specialists on such matters.

I welcome Robin Harper's welcome for the climate change bill. I am sure that his views will be heard as the agenda comes forward for the legislation. He will have plenty of opportunity to pursue the areas that were made strongly in the consultation. Although Robin Harper and I may not agree on every iota of the policy direction for the bill, I know that he supports the thrust of the moves that we are making, not only on overall climate change targets but as far as renewable energy production in Scotland is concerned.

Like me, Robin Harper has been enormously enthused that over the past five weeks almost £1,000 million of new investment in green energy renewable sources has been announced for Scotland. Renewable energy is one of the strengths of the Scottish economy at present.

David Stewart (Highlands and Islands) (Lab): I will continue on the theme of climate change. I support strongly the points that Robin Harper made. I welcome the First Minister's commitment to bring forward a climate change bill, which is arguably the most important bill that will pass through the Parliament this session. Will the bill include a 3 per cent statutory annual statutory emissions target—a target that was, of course, a SNP manifesto commitment? Will shipping and aviation be included and will we have a basket of all greenhouse gases, not just measures for carbon dioxide emissions? Those measures would make the resulting climate change act an exemplar of best practice not only in Scotland, but in Europe and beyond.

The First Minister: I welcome David Stewart's general support for the legislation, the detail of which will be published when the bill is published. I assure the member that in every respect the legislation will be more ambitious than the Labour Government legislation on which he and I would be voting at Westminster if we were still together there.

Margo MacDonald (Lothians) (Ind): Presiding Officer, you now have a rival for my affections, given the First Minister's kind words. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development has confirmed that we face a recession. Given that the decisions of the Bank of

England monetary policy committee will have a profound effect on how that is dealt with, and given that the MPC is London-centric, will the First Minister seek an alliance with the First Ministers of Wales and Northern Ireland to press for the right to appoint members to the MPC to ensure that the needs of our nations are taken into account fully when its decisions are made?

The First Minister: The member makes an interesting suggestion. The difficulty is that the monetary policy committee has been formed on the basis that it should be independent of political influence. I have great sympathy with my fellow First Ministers in pointing out that the interests of all parts of these islands do not always appear to be uppermost in the minds of MPC members when they consider the economic landscape.

I agree with Margo MacDonald that the Government, which has responsibility for the key levers in the economy, must find a method of injecting demand and confidence into the economy at present. It can do so either through monetary policy or through fiscal policy. If it is not prepared to influence the MPC in that direction, it must support a major fiscal reflation and expansion. Of all periods in the past generation of economic policy management, this is exactly the time for a Keynesian reflation of the economy in order to sustain demand and confidence. The OECD's report should be a rapid warning to every Labour member of the consequences of continued inaction on the general economy by those who have responsibility for it at present.

Johann Lamont (Glasgow Pollok) (Lab): When the First Minister announced that £100 million would be available to address housing issues, was he aware that there was no guarantee that that money had been secured? That was confirmed last night by the Minister for Communities and Sport, who conceded that £40 million was still being discussed with COSLA. Given the importance of social rented housing, will Mr Salmond listen to what the housing sector is saying and jettison the approach that is at the core of "Firm Foundations: The Future of Housing in Scotland", which involves housing associations being forced into the private market at a time of risk and increased rents? If the First Minister wants to address the issue of housing, will he work with housing associations and others, instead of attacking them?

The First Minister: We are not attacking housing associations. Perhaps the member should read the warm welcome that forces and people in that sector have given to the announcements that we have made. In the announcement to which she refers, we made quite clear that £60 million of acceleration was under the determination of the Government and that we were discussing the

other £40 million with local authorities. The member misunderstands and belittles local authorities in Scotland if she does not believe that they are as enthusiastic as we are about this move forward on housing investment. That is part of the partnership that we now have with local government, but which was so lacking when the Labour Party was in office.

Bill Kidd (Glasgow) (SNP): In light of the Scottish Government's welcome abolition of Labour's hospital car parking charges, will the First Minister join me in calling on all trade unions representing hospital staff to realise that the SNP, not the Labour Party, stands up best for their members' interests?

The First Minister: The announcement on car parking charges is very strong and will give great encouragement to workers throughout the national health service. It should provide a salutary lesson to proponents of the private finance initiative, who presided over the signing of contracts that took control over key areas of the health service out of public hands, of how mistaken they were. Hopefully, at some stage—either within or without a leadership contest—they will recant their past iniquities.

Elaine Murray (Dumfries) (Lab): Will the First Minister clarify whether the Government will introduce legislation to establish a Scottish futures trust before the next summer recess?

The First Minister: A Scottish futures trust will be established very shortly. I look forward to receiving Elaine Murray's support for that initiative.

Mary Mulligan (Linlithgow) (Lab): I welcome the First Minister's commitment to retaining an early years framework, but I would do so more if the Scottish Government's actions matched its words. Why is the Scottish Government dropping nursery places for vulnerable two-year-olds? Why is it doing nothing to ensure that health visitor services are retained for all new mothers and babies? Why was there no proposal in the First Minister's statement to introduce a play strategy? Where is the Scottish Government's commitment to improving the lives of our youngest children?

The First Minister: It is in the early years framework, as Mary Mulligan well knows. As the representative for one of the constituencies in the West Lothian Council area, could she not find any word for a council that is moving forward so rapidly on what should be the shared objective of lowering class sizes, which is a critical part of the early years intervention strategy that the Government supports? Hopefully, it will be supported by Mary Mulligan sometime soon.

Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab): I thank the First Minister for his statement, but I am disappointed to note that it did not mention

independent monitoring of hospitals and their compliance with measures to tackle hospital-acquired infections such as clostridium difficile. Does the First Minister agree that the current and planned system of self-assessment by hospitals and boards is woefully inadequate? Will he agree to introduce early legislation establishing a robust monitoring and inspection framework, so that we will never again witness death on the scale that occurred at the Vale of Leven hospital?

The First Minister: I remind Jackie Baillie that we inherited the framework to which she refers from the previous Administration. The action plan that has been agreed is of critical importance in addressing the serious problem of hospital-acquired infections in our health service and in society. When there are tragedies such as that which occurred in the member's constituency, and when we have put in place an action plan that is designed to meet the challenge of hospital-acquired infections in a comprehensive way across Scotland, would it not be best for us to unite behind that action plan, to take our health service into a safer future?

The Presiding Officer: That brings us to the end of the First Minister's statement and questions on the Scottish Government's programme. I thank all members for enabling us to get through the item timeously.

Scottish Government's Programme

The Presiding Officer (Alex Fergusson): The next item of business is a debate on the Scottish Government's programme.

10:48

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Health and Wellbeing (Nicola Sturgeon): It gives me enormous pleasure to open this debate. The First Minister has just laid out a programme for the coming year that is full of energy, commitment, ambition and an unshakeable confidence in Scotland's ability to succeed. He has demonstrated that Scottish National Party members have a clear vision of what Scotland can be. We know that the Government must lead from the front if we are to achieve our potential as a country, but we also know the importance of working in partnership. That is why we are proud of our new and productive relationship with local government—a new way of working that is enshrined in the historic concordat. We are working together as never before to achieve agreed outcomes and to deliver growing success, opportunity and prosperity for the people of Scotland.

Our programme for government sets out how we will build on the success and momentum of our first year in office. It outlines the legislation that we will introduce to Parliament over the coming year, but it does more than that. Our approach to government is about much more than legislation—it is about using all the power and influence of Government to make real progress towards our overriding objective of a Scotland that is safer and stronger, wealthier and fairer, greener, smarter and healthier.

Over the past 15 months, we have taken an approach to government that is based on vision, trust and competence. We have worked hard to meet the ambitions of the people of Scotland and we are doing everything in our power to help individuals and families with the rising cost of living. We have used the responsibility that has been vested in us wisely and fairly, and we have empowered local councils and local communities wherever possible. We have taken care to get the big decisions right and have earned a reputation of always putting Scotland's interests first. That is why in the Glasgow East by-election, which was the first-ever electoral contest between two Governments, the Scottish Government won the support and approval of the Scottish people and the Labour Government at Westminster was found badly wanting.

The approach to government that has served us and Scotland well will continue to guide us through our Administration's second year. We will continue to govern responsibly and effectively. Our policies for the economy, society and our environment will continue to embody Scotland's best traditions of enterprise, responsibility and social justice. We believe that success will flow from a broad social partnership that brings together Scottish society as a real partner in a process that builds consensus and helps us work together on what we can achieve as a nation. Innovations such as the Scotland performs website will continue to bring unprecedented transparency to the workings of government, and the public services reform bill will strip back the overwieldy bureaucracy that has developed under past Administrations and allow those who work in both the private sector and the public sector to do business much more effectively.

Over the next year, we will continue to engage with the Scottish people through the national conversation on Scotland's future. The First Minister reported that the Cabinet was privileged to meet people from all over Scotland over the summer and to hear first hand about their concerns and interests and the issues that matter to them. We heard from people who were worried about higher energy, food and fuel bills, people who wanted us to harness the economic potential of Scotland's abundant wave and wind resources, people who needed improved transport links, and people who wanted more and better social housing. Those issues are real and pressing, and the Government will do all that it can within its powers to address each and every one of them, but the reality is that its and the nation's ability to deliver real change on all of them would be much greater with the real powers of independence and a fair share of our oil and gas revenues.

That is why the national conversation has engaged and will continue to engage the people of Scotland and all our civic institutions in the central issue that faces our country: how we will govern ourselves in the future. There is no doubt whatsoever that the national conversation has already been a resounding success. There is now agreement among all Scotland's main political parties that the Scottish Parliament should move on and have additional powers, and there is broad and growing support for a referendum to give the Scottish people the right to decide on Scottish independence. Let me make it clear, as the First Minister has, that we will fulfil our manifesto commitment to introduce a referendum bill in 2010.

Iain Gray (East Lothian) (Lab) rose—

Nicola Sturgeon: Perhaps one of the Labour leadership contenders would like to tell us whether he will back that bill.

Iain Gray: I am sorry that I was unable to attend the national conversation event in Inverness, but I have read interesting press reports on it. Those reports said that the public contribution to the event showed no interest whatsoever in independence or a referendum.

Nicola Sturgeon: Next time Iain Gray should turn up in person rather than rely on press reports. The Scottish National Party trusts the judgment of the people of Scotland. It is for Iain Gray and everyone who opposes a referendum to explain exactly why they fear the judgment of the Scottish people.

Scotland is a country that is clearly growing in confidence and belief in itself, although there are perhaps one or two exceptions in that context. However, as the First Minister said, it is not immune from economic realities. Our economy is proving resilient despite the doom and gloom of the chancellor, but people are feeling the pressure. That is why our policies, as well as focusing on our long-term objective of making Scotland wealthier and fairer, are helping to ease the pressure on family budgets here and now. In the past year, we have introduced the small business bonus scheme to save Scottish businesses up to £165 million in business rates. We have established the fuel poverty forum to consider how we can use our resources more effectively to lift more people out of fuel poverty—we should remember that, under the previous Labour Administration, the rate of fuel poverty doubled in Scotland. Just two weeks ago, we announced a package of measures to help the house building industry and first-time buyers, boost the construction of affordable housing, and give support to people who are in mortgage difficulty. Scottish Labour criticised those proposals, but they were warmly welcomed by stakeholders and copied wholesale by the United Kingdom Government just yesterday. That is more proof—if proof were needed—of how seriously out of touch Scottish Labour is with the needs and aspirations of ordinary Scots.

Johann Lamont (Glasgow Pollok) (Lab): Will the cabinet secretary explain why house builders told me before the summer about their fear that house builders south of the border had an economic advantage because of the positive measures that the Labour Government there—*[Interruption.]* They told me that. The SNP was forced to react by taking the decision that it took. It is nonsense to suggest that the SNP's measures are being copied.

Nicola Sturgeon: Perhaps Johann Lamont will explain to members and the country why house

builders so warmly welcomed the announcement that the First Minister made two weeks ago. They know, as Scotland does, that the Government is on their side and is prepared to do what needs to be done to help an industry that is in difficulty.

Of course, the Government is doing much more to help individuals and families. As part of our historic partnership with local government, we provided the resources to fund the council tax freeze, which was a welcome relief after the sky-high hikes in council tax that Labour presided over for 10 long years and which has been an enormous benefit to households facing rising food and fuel bills.

On the future of local taxation, it has been extremely welcome, as the First Minister has said, to hear over the summer every one of the Labour leadership contenders admit at long last that the council tax is well past its sell-by date. Of course, none has managed to come up with any alternative, but that should not surprise us, as Labour has promised in its previous three manifestos, I think, to make the council tax fairer and has always failed to do so. Instead, the bills went up and up. The good news for Labour is that the SNP has done that bit for it. Today, we have confirmed our commitment to introduce a bill to abolish the council tax and introduce a fairer local income tax that is based on the ability to pay. Our proposals will mean that eight out of 10 households will be better off—the biggest tax cut in Scotland in a generation. We believe that it is the duty of everyone who believes in fair, progressive taxation to back that bill when it comes before the Parliament. In short, we are doing what we can within our powers to build sustainable economic growth for the future and help hard-pressed families in tough times now.

Since May last year, we have taken real steps to help local communities become safer and stronger. We have kick-started a new generation of council house building, funded more police on the beat, and put the proceeds of crime back into communities. We have taken swift and decisive action to strengthen controls on sex offenders and prioritise child protection. Alongside those early actions, we are taking a long, hard look at existing policy and practice. We established the Scottish Prisons Commission to consider the purpose of prisons in modern Scotland, and we have asked Her Majesty's chief inspector of constabulary to review the roles and responsibilities of police forces in Scotland. Earlier this year, we published Scotland's first drugs strategy for almost a decade, and we want to make community sentences more robust, immediate and visible. We will work to achieve a flexible and coherent penal policy that ensures that prison remains the right place for serious and violent offenders. Our forthcoming

criminal justice bill will tackle those and many other issues.

In education, we have concentrated on the urgent steps that are needed to build a smarter Scotland, restoring free education in Scotland by abolishing the graduate endowment and lifting a massive financial burden from the shoulders of students. We have replaced loans with grants for part-time students, published proposals to protect rural schools and set out an ambitious new skills strategy.

In the year ahead, we will work with local government to lead a profound shift in culture and service delivery for the earliest years of a child's life. We will introduce a bill to reform the children's hearings system. We will continue to drive down class sizes—a move that is opposed by Labour, but welcomed by parents and teachers across Scotland.

David McLetchie (Edinburgh Pentlands) (Con): On class sizes, the First Minister praised West Lothian Council on its single outcome agreement. I point out to the Deputy First Minister that the target in the West Lothian single outcome agreement is to have 40 per cent of West Lothian primary schools with classes in primary 1 to primary 3 at 18 or fewer by the end of year 3—that is, in this parliamentary session. If the best that the SNP's best council can do is to fail to achieve the target in 60 per cent of its primary classes, what chance is there of the policy being implemented across Scotland as a whole by 2011?

Nicola Sturgeon: That represents fantastic progress by a council that is dealing with a rising population. If Labour-controlled councils such as Glasgow City Council were prepared to follow suit, class sizes would fall a lot faster for a lot more young people in Scotland. Perhaps Labour and the Tories should get their own houses in order first. We have made great progress in education and we will continue to do so.

We will also continue to take the right steps to protect our environment and ensure that we harness the phenomenal opportunities that it provides to help to make us a world-class economy and an international model for sustainable living.

After a summer that has seen many people suffer distress and loss through flooding of their homes, we will introduce important legislation on flood risk management and bills on Scotland's marine environment and climate change. We believe that Scotland can lead the world in the global effort to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. Our commitment to make a significant reduction and the fact that we plan to place the target into law demonstrates our resolve and our ambition for a greener Scotland.

Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green): Will the minister give way?

Nicola Sturgeon: Not just now.

Realising Scotland's potential means tackling the inequalities that scar our nation. In a week when health inequalities in Scotland have been making headlines across the globe, let me be clear that closing the gap between the richest and the poorest remains our top priority. Over the past year, we have brought together a task force to tackle health inequalities, and our priority for the coming year is to implement its recommendations. We will publish later this year our framework for tackling poverty and deprivation.

The coming year will also see legislation to tackle the major issue of alcohol misuse in Scotland, which costs our country more than £2 billion every year. Subject to consultation, measures such as prohibiting off-sales to under-21s and minimum pricing will be considered because we are determined to change Scotland's relationship with alcohol for good.

Our commitment to high-quality public services, rooted in the public service ethos, will be the hallmark of our second year just as it was for our first. Our social democratic contract with the people of Scotland is based on excellent public services and good social provision. In health, we have protected vital local services, retaining accident and emergency at Ayr and Monklands, keeping and enhancing children's cancer services in four major cities and giving the go-ahead to a new hospital in Glasgow to be built entirely by public capital and not by the scandalous private finance initiative that is so loathed by the public and yet so loved by Labour. We have also reduced waiting times, opened up more flexible access to general practitioners, cut prescription charges and taken steps to secure the policy of free personal and nursing care. In addition, just yesterday we announced the complete abolition of car parking charges at all NHS-run hospital car parks. Already, we have done much to secure the NHS firmly in the public service.

Over the next year, we will do more. As well as our measures to reduce smoking, our health bill will close off the possibility, opened by Labour, of commercial corporations winning contracts to run GP services; it will ensure that general practice continues to be delivered within the NHS and that the creeping privatisation of our health service that was presided over by the last Administration now comes firmly to a halt.

This is a Government that hit the ground running last May; a Government that has maintained its momentum ever since; and a Government that takes decisions purely and simply in the Scottish national interest. Our challenge and opportunity

now is to continue to provide good and effective leadership of our country—to continue to move Scotland forward with confidence and ambition.

11:05

Iain Gray (East Lothian) (Lab): I had a draft of this speech that began along the lines of, “It is traditional to begin this response by welcoming those aspects of the Government’s programme on which we can find consensus and common ground.” However, I fear that a nagging doubt drove me to the *Official Report*, in which I found that I was sadly mistaken and that Ms Sturgeon in opposition usually opened with a paragraph dripping with vitriol and then went negative from there.

Perhaps I was thinking nostalgically of the first session of the Scottish Parliament, in which we passed historic legislation on, for example, land reform and the abolition of 1,000 years of feudalism, embedded the International Criminal Court in Scots law and gave Scotland the best incapacity legislation in Europe and the best homelessness legislation in the world. All those measures were taken through the chamber by the building of consensus, and they were amended and improved throughout the process on a cross-party basis.

There are bills in the Government’s programme that can be welcomed if they are approached in that way, such as the climate change bill, the marine bill and the flooding bill, which are not only welcome but overdue. The test will be whether the Government gets both the principles and the practice right, and whether they will be taken forward in partnership with the Parliament and the rest of the United Kingdom. Those legislative measures will have to be matched by decisions that complement them, including those in the budget. Particularly on the issue of flooding, the concerns of the Rural Affairs and Environment Committee on funding for flood protection measures must be listened to.

There is a determination across the chamber to tackle tobacco and alcohol misuse, but on this side of the chamber we will not support some of the measures in the consultation paper on alcohol, particularly a higher age limit for sales in off-licences. We want stronger enforcement of the 18 age limit, with stronger sanctions against those who ignore the legislation.

One bill that the Government is of course obliged to introduce is the budget bill. If we want to know what the Government really thinks is important, that is where we must look. In the same way, if we want to know what the First Minister really thinks, we should look to what he says in his relaxed, off-guard moments, perhaps in a

comfortable summer interview. That would be when he told a magazine that Scotland did not mind Margaret Thatcher’s economics, just her social policy. In the same piece he said that he did not like saying sorry. Well, like it or not, he should say sorry to Scotland for that crass comment.

The problem is that the SNP actually believes that it can separate economic policy from social policy. That is why last year’s budget bill was prepared to ditch everything else—every promise, every investment and every protection for the vulnerable—in order to deliver two tax cuts. Those economics are already having social consequences that become clearer every day.

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Sustainable Growth (John Swinney): If those measures were so desperately bad, can Mr Gray explain to Parliament why he led the Labour Party into the courageous decision to abstain on the budget?

Iain Gray: The question is really why Mr Swinney was not able to introduce a budget that the whole Parliament could support. The budget that he introduced was unsupportable and, on that basis, we did not support it. The reasons that we gave for not being able to support it, which were that it failed to invest in Scotland’s future and that it would lead to cuts in local services, have been demonstrated day by day. School pupils are back at school this month in unrefurbished schools.

John Swinney: Will the member give way?

Iain Gray: No.

Their classes are not smaller but bigger, and many more pupils are in composite classes. In secondary schools, course choices have been narrowed and closed down rather than opened up. Probationary teachers now face the scrap heap. No sign can be seen of the £34 million for families with disabled children. That money was campaigned and fought for by disability groups and won for the whole of the United Kingdom, but it has disappeared in Scotland. In Aberdeen, projects for the homeless have been closed down, as have services for the disabled. In Fife, the council leader is standing for Parliament on his proud record of raising home care charges from £4 per week to £11 per hour.

However, those who seek solace in the words of the song “The First Cut is the Deepest” are in for a rude awakening, because the worst is yet to come. One cannot have Margaret Thatcher’s economics without her social consequences. If the budget bill again attempts to do that, the price will be paid by the elderly, the disabled and schoolchildren in every part of Scotland.

Instead, this year’s budget bill should begin to reinvest in Scotland’s future. Skills and education

are the bridge between prosperity and social justice. Increased opportunity and access are the keys to unlock the economic success of the country and to provide for the economic wellbeing of Scotland's families. In the face of global economic turbulence, the programme for government needed to demonstrate urgent measures to invest more in Scotland's skills set. In the past year, apprenticeship programmes have been cut back; they need to be expanded and opened up, but there is no sign of that. The SNP knows that the Parliament believes that the Government's skills strategy is inadequate, as we have rejected it more than once. If the strategy was inadequate a year ago, how much more serious is that now in the light of changed economic circumstances?

To talk of the year of homecoming as a major boost for the tourism industry would make more sense if the Government had not just cancelled all adult modern apprenticeship programmes in the tourism industry. The sector has also been left floundering in a reorganisation of the enterprise network that is still generating more questions than answers.

If the lack of urgency on raising Scotland's skills levels is an omission in the programme and damaging to economic growth, the SNP's insistence on pressing forward with its discredited local tax proposals and its unworkable futures trust is a damaging inclusion. The Government's chief economic adviser recently identified low business confidence as the greatest threat to Scotland's economic growth. One might think, then, that the Government would think twice about its cuts-and-higher-income-tax bill—that is what it is—given that the tax has been identified as a threat to the Scottish economy by the Confederation of British Industry, Scottish Financial Enterprise, the Institute of Directors, the Scottish Chambers of Commerce, the Scottish Council for Development and Industry, the Federation of Small Businesses, the Institute of Chartered Accountants of Scotland and PricewaterhouseCoopers.

The proposed tax has been described as "unworkable" by those who would administer it and "unfair" by the Scottish Trades Union Congress. The tax would bring students, student nurses and single pensioners who live on £8,000 a year into its net, but it would let someone living on shares and investments in a mansion house escape scot free.

Such a tax would not only undermine the economy but decimate local services with a shortfall of at least £800 million. Slashing services and trying to dress it up as a tax cut is another Tory trick that Scotland knows of old and will not forgive another time. Frankly, a tax that would undermine the economy and destroy local

services begins to look less like an act of Parliament and more like an act of sabotage. To boost business confidence, that discredited idea should be junked—and junked now.

The Government should have taken the further opportunity today to provide relief to the economy by dropping its unworkable and inexplicable Scottish futures trust. That is yet another flagship policy that is sinking under a tidal wave of criticism, with industry, local government and the trade union movement united in opposition to it. Although we heard warm words today about school building programmes, earlier this week John Stodter of the Association of Directors of Education in Scotland stated clearly:

"There's a lag in the time scale for more investment in school buildings ... waiting for the Scottish Government's decision on the Scottish Futures Trust."

The problem is that our children cannot wait for the school buildings that they need and the construction industry will not wait. The industry is already coming to the conclusion that Scotland is closed for business. If construction companies leave, they will leave lay-offs and redundancies behind them.

Even the First Minister's Council of Economic Advisers has told him to get a move on. That was just before it pointed out to him that the Government's energy strategy is wrong too, when it added its voice to the anxiety that has been expressed by the business community, the trade unions and the entire scientific and engineering community, which are worried about the security of future electricity supply. The Government is succeeding in uniting Scotland in complete opposition to its flagship policies.

Just in case higher taxation, a hiatus in infrastructure development and an insecure energy future were not enough to undermine business confidence and the prospects for jobs and prosperity, the SNP has its very own sword of Damocles hanging over Scotland's future—a referendum on independence two years down the line.

One place where I spent the summer where there is a palpable air of optimism is Rosyth dockyard, where investment has already started in dock 1 in preparation for the carrier contract. The new contract will raise employment at the dockyard, which was facing closure, back up to the highest levels that it enjoyed when it had thousands of skilled jobs and apprentices were taken on in their hundreds. All that work and all that optimism are a direct result of Scotland's place in the United Kingdom. Every one of those jobs would be placed in jeopardy by the uncertainty of the constant desire for separation.

The SNP's programme for government is a programme for a Government determined to carry on regardless—regardless of the economic circumstances, regardless of the worries of the business community and regardless of the cost to the elderly, the disabled and our schoolchildren. The SNP is careless of Scotland's future. The First Minister has prayed Keynes in aid several times today, but Keynes said:

"When the facts change, I change my mind".

The SNP should face the facts now and, for the sake of Scotland's future, change its mind on its discredited local income tax, its unworkable futures trust and its unwanted separatism.

11:18

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

What a summer it has been for spectator sports. I refer not to the confusion, bitterness and infighting at the heart of Gordon Brown's Government nor to the on-going leadership election within the Labour Party in Scotland. I wish all three contenders in that election well. We have already heard from two of them this morning and the third will no doubt set out his stall later in the course of the debate. I dare say that there will not be a hungry caterpillar among them. I refer not even to the leadership election among the Scottish Liberal Democrats, although I will take this opportunity to offer my personal congratulations to Tavish Scott—unfortunately, he has left the chamber—on attaining the leadership of Scotland's fourth political party. I also extend my commiserations to the two losing candidates and assure Mr Rumbles that it will be some consolation that, despite his decline in popularity among the Lib Dem membership, he will now be able to bring his consensual style of politics to the Parliamentary Bureau. The whole Parliament will look forward to that.

Presiding Officer, I am of course referring to the spectacular success of the Beijing Olympics, particularly the outstanding performance of Team GB. Did it not make us all proud to be British to see our boys and girls doing so well, with the union flag being hoisted to the top of the flagpole on so many occasions, and our national anthem being so proudly played? Did it not make our hearts glad to see proud Scots such as Chris Hoy wearing the colours of Team GB and waving the union flag? Indeed, there was much to celebrate and enjoy over the summer.

Well, here we all are back again, having enjoyed the August sunshine, to discuss the Government's programme for the coming term. As in the past, the Scottish Conservatives will work constructively with the minority Government on issues on which we share ambition. We look forward to engaging

with the Government on the bill on the membership of health boards. We look forward to hearing the detail of the proposed legislation for the protection of rural schools, an issue that is dear to my heart.

We look forward, in particular, to my colleague Jamie McGrigor's member's bill to establish a Scottish register of tartans completing its passage through Parliament in the next few months and becoming law.

We will work with the Government in other areas too. We support the plans to decouple the Scottish Parliament and local government elections to reduce voter confusion. We have our own proposals for improving the provision of outdoor education for every Scottish school pupil. We look forward to working with the Government to bring those proposals to fruition.

We will hold the Government to the pledges that it has made thus far. When we supported the SNP Government's first budget, we made it clear that it required to be amended to provide funding for an extra 1,000 police officers in Scotland. I make it clear that we intend to hold the Government to that pledge absolutely. If the Government wants our support on any other issues, it will need to ensure that it keeps its promises and that there is no backsliding on its part.

There are other areas in which we feel that the Government has got it wrong, and we will vigorously oppose it. In this parliamentary term, we will see the end to the Government's consultation on its alcohol strategy and the possibility of new legislation. Although we recognise that Scotland has a problem with alcohol, many of the Government's proposals are draconian and likely to be ineffective. The way to tackle the problem is to enforce the current legislation and tackle areas of abuse rather than adopt a blanket approach that tars everyone with the same brush. Let us have more prosecutions of those who sell alcohol to underage drinkers and less talk about raising the age for buying alcohol from off-sales to 21, thus demonising a whole generation of young people. Let us have more police on the streets to deal with those who are abusing alcohol instead of raising the price of a bottle of wine that a pensioner couple might enjoy with their Sunday lunch.

Margo MacDonald (Lothians) (Ind): Further to the member's point about concentrating on our current laws on the sale and safe use of alcohol, can he explain why licensing boards do not remove licences from those who are found guilty of selling drink to underage people?

Murdo Fraser: I am an apologist for many things, but not for our licensing boards. I sympathise entirely with Margo MacDonald's

point. Before we bring in new laws, we should properly enforce our current laws. The Government needs to learn that lesson.

It is perhaps in the area of local taxation that the Government gets it most wrong. It continues to pursue its proposal to introduce an unfair, unworkable and discredited local income tax despite all the opposition that came out of its consultation. Organisation after organisation queued up to say that the plans were not properly thought through and would not work in practice: the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountability, the CBI, the FSB, the trade unions, the Law Society of Scotland, the Scottish Chambers of Commerce, the SCDI, the National Union of Students Scotland, and many more. How the Government thinks that it will have any credibility left, particularly with the business community, if it pushes ahead with its half-baked plans is beyond me.

I make the Conservative position clear. We do not defend the status quo on local taxation, and we do not defend the council tax as it stands. For years now, we have been proposing a reformed council tax that targets assistance at those who suffer the most from rising bills, namely retired householders. That is why we propose that there should be an automatic 50 per cent discount in the council tax for all pensioner households.

Mike Rumbles (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (LD): Will the member give way on that point?

Murdo Fraser: Yes, I will give way to the new chief whip for the Liberal Democrats.

Mike Rumbles: Is the Conservative party content with the council tax for everyone else who is not retired? While I am on my feet, I ask the member how many votes he received for his deputy leadership ambitions.

Murdo Fraser: The support for my deputy leadership was unanimous.

On the point about the council tax, our priority is to ensure that pensioner households have their bills reduced. If anyone wants to bring us other proposals, we will listen to them with interest, but that is our current priority. The reform to the council tax that we are proposing would be easy to implement, straightforward and simple to understand and it would face none of the legal difficulties that are plaguing the proposed local income tax. It would have widespread support from across Scotland. We will work with any other party to bring that necessary change into being.

I note that, during the summer, the various contenders for the Labour leadership said separately that the council tax had to be reformed or possibly abolished altogether. They were rather

less clear about what they would do to replace it. Today we extend an invitation to the Labour Party to join us in pressing for this important reform of the council tax. However, we need to be clear about how it can be paid for. We have said that we would pay for such a reform by mutualising Scottish Water. If Labour wants to join us but wants to find the money in a different way, it needs to tell us where it will find that money.

If the Government is serious about helping people who are struggling to pay their council tax bills and about helping Scotland's pensioners, it should ditch its plans for an unfair, unworkable and discredited local income tax, and join us in seeking to reform the council tax.

There were some curious omissions from the First Minister's statement today. Where were the plans for legislation to abolish student debt as promised in the SNP manifesto? After all, the Government's assault on Scotland's students thus far—proposing to introduce a local income tax that they would have to pay, and raising the age for purchasing off-sales alcohol to 21—could hardly have put it in a good light with the student population. However, we did not hear one word about fulfilling that manifesto commitment.

Nor was there anything in the First Minister's statement about the reduction in class sizes in primary 1 to 3. As my colleague David McLetchie pointed out, in the single outcome agreements that have been signed, few councils have signed up to that pledge. That is yet another SNP manifesto commitment that is unravelling day by day as local councils are unable to find the money to implement it.

Where, too, is the much-heralded first-time buyers grant that formed part of the SNP manifesto? Sixteen months on from taking office, the Government has realised that it overpromised in its manifesto and is trying quietly to ditch some of its key pledges. We will continue to remind people in Scotland exactly what the SNP promised and where it is failing to deliver.

All of us who enjoyed the spectator sports during the summer know that it is now time for the Government to start delivering. Where it is fulfilling its manifesto pledges and where we have common ground, we will happily support it. Where it is failing to meet its promises, we will expose it. Where it is manifestly taking the wrong course, we will work with any other party to defeat it. That is how the Scottish Conservatives will fulfil our role of a constructive Opposition. We hope that all in the Parliament can engage constructively through the year ahead.

11:28

Jeremy Purvis (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD): And equally, during the past year, where the Government has proposed progressive and well-considered legislation, Liberal Democrats have supported it, been constructive and worked with other parties in affording it proper scrutiny and offering it a fair wind. We will do so again in the year to come.

However, some of the measures that have been proposed during the past year have raised considerable questions about the Government's ability to introduce legislation that does not require a significant amount of amendment and proper scrutiny. For the Graduate Endowment Abolition (Scotland) Bill, which was unprecedented in the Scottish Parliament, a unanimous cross-party statement was provided that questioned its validity and the woeful evidence that was presented to Parliament.

The Creative Scotland Bill was a serious measure for the SNP Government but, when the Finance Committee was scrutinising the bill and questioning the Government on the financial memorandum, Alex Neil said:

"It seems as if you have stuck your thumb in the air and plucked out a figure ... I find it amazing that we are where we are regarding what is not a substantially difficult exercise."

He also condemned

"the total lack of reliable information."

The convener, Andrew Welsh, said:

"I hope that future financial memoranda will, when possible, be much more accurate, to allow Parliament to have accurate financial information before it."—[*Official Report, Finance Committee*, 22 April 2008; c 398, 400-1.]

We hope that the legislation that the Government introduces will be robust and will be accompanied by proper factual evidence. However, the indications are not good. In reply to David McLetchie, the Deputy First Minister said—and it is now official—that a Government policy that fails in 60 per cent of cases will be considered a fantastic success.

Information that the Bank of Scotland released today shows a concerning picture of Scotland's economy. It shows the reality, which has been hard to discern from the various forecasts by the Prime Minister and the chancellor. The bank's indicators are clear. Business confidence in Scotland has slumped by 50 per cent since last year. The construction of new homes is faltering badly—it is down by 9 per cent. For the first time, a clear majority of Scottish businesses are performing at under their capacity.

The First Minister said that the Scottish economy is resilient and can withstand the

international pressure better than can the rest of the UK. The irony is not lost on us that, for eight years, the SNP said that the Scottish economy was in a perilous state and lagged shamefully behind that of the rest of the UK, whereas now it says that the Scottish economy is way ahead and has far more strength than the economy south of the border to withstand the economic downturn.

The SNP Government has been complacent—that has been shown again this morning. The First Minister's remarks on the Bank of England ring hollow when the SNP's policy is to keep the Bank of England after independence and to keep it setting British interest rates.

The Scottish Government has used few of its economic levers. It has powers to affect the labour market, local retail sales, house prices and local housing markets and to change export markets by supporting exporters. Considerable levers exist to exert direct influence over our gross domestic product. The First Minister talks about Keynes. Keynes would have been delighted to have £30 billion of spending power at his disposal. The Government has that, but it has made no statement today about substantial or radical changes that will provide surety that we will be resilient to the economic downturn of which we are on the cusp.

In his statement on the Scottish Government's programme a year ago, the First Minister said that the economy needed to be kick-started. Just a few months later, he said that it was resilient, strong and stable. However, essential decisions that the Government has taken in the past year have created more bureaucratic confusion, uncertainty and waste. At least £16 million is being spent on start-up costs alone for a new national skills quango that will have a regional structure that does not even match Scottish Enterprise's regional structure. The SNP abolished local enterprise companies and the local enterprise networks now have no locus in supporting small businesses whose turnover is forecast to be less than £1 million.

In uncertain times, small businesses need clarity about where to obtain support and need to be able to receive it. However, on a whim—accompanied by the near halving of Scottish Enterprise's budget—the SNP removed any remit for supporting small business from our national economic development body. Scottish Enterprise's chief executive, Jack Perry, told the Education, Lifelong Learning and Culture Committee in a submission of 14 April this year that

"we will no longer proactively support businesses that primarily service local markets."

Given the funding cut, together with the removal of local accountability from the enterprise network,

small businesses will now receive support only from the 32 councils and not necessarily in a co-ordinated way. Any training or apprenticeship opportunities have been moved to a new national quango—Skills Development Scotland—whose regional structure is out of kilter with local enterprise bodies and council structures. The number of business gateway contacts is falling. Information about that is not collated by the enterprise networks; rather, a fragmented approach that involves all the councils is taken.

A year has been lost in reorganisation, bureaucracy, rebranding, rebadging and renaming. We have a skills agency whose areas do not match those of the economic agency and an economic agency that has no responsibility for smaller businesses. What management book did Jim Mather read to bring that ridiculous situation into being?

On 13 September last year, I challenged Jim Mather on the evidence that was behind the plans. He responded that there had been

“constructive and reflective dialogue ... where we gathered around 100 flip-charts of information”.—[*Official Report*, 13 September 2007; c 1734-5.]

On 12 December, he told the Economy, Energy and Tourism Committee:

“Mind maps are useful things. I would never denigrate them.”—[*Official Report, Economy, Energy and Tourism Committee*, 12 December 2007; c 392.]

In one of the drivers of the Scottish economy—our colleges and universities—for the first time since the Parliament was established, a real-terms cut has been made in funding for training and research. We should have fewer flip-charts and no mind mapping. Instead, investment in research in our universities and colleges is needed, as we are on the cusp of an economic downturn.

We do not hear as much about the SNP's much-vaunted model of the arc of prosperity, which formed the headline in “The Government Economic Strategy”. Iceland has received top billing in no fewer than five ministerial blogs as part of the national conversation in the past year. That was all before each country in that model began to perform worse than Scotland—the countries have high interest rates, higher borrowing, higher taxation and slower growth. The Government has gone cool on the Nordic arc.

The Olympics also posed a problem. Few of those countries' Olympic teams came home with medals, so the SNP looked to other small acrobatic nations, as Chris Harvie described them on 7 May. The SNP pointed to Jamaica as the new country that we should emulate. I can inform the Parliament that the Jamaican bobsleigh team has a Norwegian coach, so box number 1 is ticked. Members may also be unaware that—

believe it or not—a member of the Jamaican bobsleigh team is called Stewart Maxwell. I am not sure whether he is the same person as the MSP, but I have never seen them in the same room together.

The past year has been one of spin and bluster, in which key pledges have been binned, sidelined or ignored. We remember the much-heralded 18-week health guarantee that came with a redrafting of the rules and meant that a constituent of mine was dropped from the list altogether. Last year, John Swinney announced in a statement an increase in expected efficiencies. In the name of efficiencies, redundancies, closed beds and amalgamated wards have occurred. In many areas, teaching staff levels have been reduced as class sizes have increased.

All the single outcome agreements were supposed to be signed in the spring, but signatures are being added only now. The Scottish Government recently reassured councils that, now that they have finished drawing up the 2008-09 single outcome agreements, they can have a break of a few days before starting at the end of this month to produce next year's single outcome agreements. Such agreements are a bureaucratic nightmare that do not provide an objective way of assessing whether any targets will be met. Discussions about accounting and auditing have not even taken place. The single outcome agreement for Scottish Borders Council, which is a relatively small authority, contains 317 targets and indicators. If that is read across the 32 councils, the Government has put in place 10,144 targets and indicators. An army of SNP bureaucrats will be needed in that morass of targets from the SNP, which pledged in the past year to reduce the number of targets.

It is interesting that the Government never talks now about public-private partnership schemes, but always refers to the private finance initiative, because it has been highlighted that, as the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Sustainable Growth said, PPP and non-profit-distributing models are all part of the same family.

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning told Parliament last June that

“We will have a school building fund to which local authorities can request access”—[*Official Report, Education, Lifelong Learning and Culture Committee*, 27 June 2007; c 40.]

and local authorities wait with great expectation to use that fund. However, nearly 18 months later, utter confusion remains. When education ministers were in the Borders just 10 days ago, they were asked about how the funding plans would affect school building programmes, but they simply did not have a clue.

At one stage before the summer recess, the Parliament was considering five Sewel motions and four Scottish Government bills. Under the SNP, more devolved legislation was going through the Westminster Parliament than was going through this Parliament. In opposition, Nicola Sturgeon called Sewel motions “discredited”, “an abuse of Parliament” and “undemocratic” and said that they demeaned and devalued the Scottish Parliament, but now, Bruce Crawford for the Government says that they are a key part of the constitutional arrangements and that they respect Parliament’s role.

Respecting the Parliament’s role involves introducing legislation that is clear, robust and backed with evidence. It means less spin and more action. On the Scottish budget, as Liberals, we know and have studied Keynes. The First Minister is no Keynes.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Alasdair Morgan): We move to the open debate, with speeches of six minutes. I call Brian Adam, to be followed by Margaret Curran.

George Foulkes (Lothians) (Lab): Brian Adam for six minutes?

11:39

Brian Adam (Aberdeen North) (SNP): I welcome the encouragement from Lord Foulkes, as indeed I welcome the programme for government for the coming year, which undoubtedly will build on the considerable success of the First Minister and his team in the past year. The evidence for that is the popular position of the Government in objective surveys, polls and elections, in spite of the doom and gloom being spread by the Opposition parties today. Doom and gloom is a speciality of Mr Gray and his former boss, Alistair Darling, who, in his pronouncements from the Western Isles, has almost single-handedly destroyed any confidence in the United Kingdom economy over the past few days. The value of the pound has plunged, which will impact on our economy and, in particular, on the budgets of families throughout the country.

Mike Rumbles: Will Brian Adam take the opportunity to ask his colleague Mr Swinney for help for his constituents in Aberdeen North? Aberdeen City Council has suffered the worst financial settlement per head of population of any council in Scotland. It is at the bottom of the tree. How does that contrast with Alex Salmond’s commitment last year that the north-east would be all right with him?

Brian Adam: I am sure that Mr Rumbles is perfectly capable of asking Mr Swinney directly. We had eight years of a Liberal and Labour-led Executive, in which there was no change in the

funding formula for local government. Mr Swinney has already made a commitment to review that formula, which should result in a change in funding for Aberdeen. I am delighted that I will have Mr Swinney’s support in ensuring that there is a change in the funding formula.

Confidence in the UK economy will have an impact on Scotland’s economy. To some extent, the Scottish economy has been doing better than the UK economy. In particular, the actions of this Government have protected individuals from some of the worst excesses of price increases. The Government will continue to take such actions, for example freezing the council tax, which Mr Rumbles and members of the Labour Party failed to support when the Budget (Scotland) Bill was agreed to earlier in the year. Throughout Scotland, the council tax was raised by more than 60 per cent by the Labour-Liberal Executive. However, in my fair city of Aberdeen it went up by 90 per cent, which suggests that during the time they were in power, neither the Liberal Democrats nor the Labour Party had much interest in protecting the citizens of Aberdeen from the vagaries of council tax rises.

Richard Baker (North East Scotland) (Lab): Given that Aberdeen City Council is making £50 million in cuts to key services, does Mr Adam really believe that the settlement for local government has been constructive? In that context, does he believe that the council tax freeze can be justified?

Brian Adam: I am delighted that Mr Baker still does not support the council tax freeze and the impact that it will have on individuals’ budgets. Various Labour leadership candidates have suggested that the council tax should be replaced and that the £400 million in council tax benefits that the chancellor is threatening to take away should be protected. However, in spite of the bluster from the Labour Party, we still have not heard constructive proposals for a replacement for the council tax. Such questions might be uppermost in the minds of the 80 per cent of the public who, when asked which system they would prefer, say a local income tax. I am delighted that Mr Rumbles and his colleagues will support the local income tax bill that will be introduced in the coming year.

Mr Swinney, Mr Salmond and their colleagues are giving us the confidence that we need. Theirs is a positive kind of leadership, which will ensure confidence in Scotland’s economy going forward. It is in stark contrast to the leadership that is not being demonstrated by Mr Darling and Mr Brown. I am delighted to support the Government’s programme for the coming year.

11:45

Margaret Curran (Glasgow Baillieston) (Lab):

As is evident from the discussion so far, the debate is vital. At the inauguration of the Parliament in 1999, we all concurred with Donald Dewar when he described the Parliament as

“a new voice in the land ... A voice to shape Scotland, a voice ... for the future.”

That future and how we shape it should be the focus of our attention and, I argue, the meat of the programme for government.

The last time I spoke in the chamber I had not anticipated the happenings of the summer. Harold Wilson was wrong when he said that a week is a long time in politics. I have decided that a day is probably stretching it. I learned a number of lessons from my experience during the summer. One that has a bearing on today's debate is the need to develop a new type of politics. Politics should not be politicians talking to each other about each other. It should be driven by an understanding of the day-to-day pressures that individuals and families face and the different experiences and responsibilities of those families. Recognition is abroad that our current economic circumstances are influenced by global economic factors. We are all required to assist those who are affected by those circumstances.

Later, Johann Lamont will pursue the issue of housing, which is critical in the current economic circumstances, but I want to touch on a broader point, which is the importance of public services in this time of economic turbulence. We all appreciate the significance of public services in these times. My argument to the Government is that we need greater transparency and clarity than we have had so far. Thomas Jefferson said:

“Information is the currency of democracy.”

That information should be accurate and should enable us to hold Government to account. The evidence in the debate so far is disappointing in that respect. I say to Alex Salmond and Nicola Sturgeon that it belittles their office when they do not take on the substantial points that are made to them, particularly in relation to class sizes.

In this time of economic turbulence, we must protect investment in public services. The SNP asks us to judge it on what it does. It is proper that we should do that. Whether or not the SNP likes it, the facts speak for themselves. Health boards throughout Scotland are under systematic pressure. They are being forced by the Government to meet new demands but they are not being properly funded to do so. There are real health cuts throughout Scotland, as illustrated by the £42 million of cuts that Greater Glasgow and Clyde NHS Board is required to find. According to that health board:

“The financial allocation is less generous than in previous years.”

Elements of the programme for government are welcome. Continuing our work on smoking—

John Swinney: It is a pleasure to see Margaret Curran here. I appreciate the graceful way in which she returned to Parliament.

There is an inevitability about the funding settlement for the Scottish Government in the period going forward, because we have not received from the UK Government increases in real terms. The budget has not increased as fast as it increased when Margaret Curran was a minister. The Labour Opposition cannot escape that point.

Margaret Curran: I thank Mr Swinney for his comments about my return.

With the greatest respect, what Mr Swinney said is simply not good enough. He cannot take the glories of office while shirking the responsibilities and blaming everyone else. Whether he likes it or not, he has the biggest settlement that the Scottish Government has ever had. The current situation reflects the SNP's decisions, and Mr Swinney should be big enough to face the consequences and be honest with the Scottish people. The SNP argues for tax cuts across the board. Every time the SNP hears mention of a tax it wants to cut it, but it is never honest about the financial implications for public services.

Jeremy Purvis exposed the nonsense that we heard from the First Minister about his supposed conversion to Keynesianism. However, Mr Salmond did say that he was comfortable with Mrs Thatcher's economic policies. There is no getting around that. It explains the logic of the present approach to cutting taxes and public expenditure.

The voice of the Scottish Parliament must be more honest with the Scottish people. The Government's programme should consider the long-term interests of Scotland, rather than the short-term advantages of the SNP.

Many challenges are coming down the track. Within a matter of years, the bill for the long-term care of the elderly will be at least £800 million. We will have to be imaginative and creative in how we develop services for our older people. If we want a health service that is fit for the 21st century—a first-class health service that meets new challenges and takes new opportunities—it is unsustainable always to pass the costs on to somebody else and to blame somebody else. We need a different debate. Of course we have to talk about alcohol and smoking, but we also have other things to talk about. The Government programme has missed some opportunities. The Parliament must ensure that the Government does

its job and faces the challenges of the future rather than consider only short-term interests. Let us look to the long term and truly represent the interests of the people of Scotland.

11:51

Christine Grahame (South of Scotland) (SNP): I, too, welcome Margaret Curran back. Her speech was much more engaging and interesting than those of some other members, which is unfortunate for the contenders for the Labour leadership. I also welcome the tone of her speech, although I would not cast aspersions at Alex Salmond for any alleged remarks about Margaret Thatcher. We should remember that Tony Blair declared himself an arch-admirer, and that Gordon Brown had her round for tea and scones.

I want to discuss the health programme. All members will welcome the vaccination to protect young women from cervical cancer. I also welcome the progress towards the abolition of prescription charges and the abolition of the horrors and nastiness of car park charges in all hospitals apart from those with PFI contracts. Those charges are punitive. In addition, I welcome the move towards the democratisation of health boards. Progress has to be made on the details of the bill, but the policy is very much within the Scottish social democratic ethos, as is the policy of keeping general practitioners' practices within the compass of public services, to which Margaret Curran referred.

After nine years of the Parliament, we have all matured. I am pleased to note that the Government's programme suggests—and this will be reflected in the work of committees—that we will be moving on from firefighting in the health service. Firefighting will always exist, but we will try to shift the balance in favour of preventive measures in public health. As the cabinet secretary has said, we will address the health inequalities of which we are all aware. We will save lives and promote quality of life, which will lead to long-term, substantial savings to the public purse in health care and—because of the bills that are to be introduced—in criminal and civil justice. However, saving money is not the sole purpose: the main purpose is to have a healthier and happier Scottish public.

I want to consider the forthcoming health bill. In particular, I want to consider tobacco sales and the enforcement of the laws on sales to underage people. I have raised and will continue to raise issues to do with trading standards covering alcohol sales and tobacco sales to underage people. Such sales are prevalent in the poorer areas of Scotland. Each year in Scotland, 15,000 young people start smoking. Almost half of 13-year-old smokers and more than 80 per cent of

15-year-old smokers buy their own cigarettes. Generally, they buy them from newsagents and sweet shops. When subjected to test purchasing, between a quarter and a third of shopkeepers were found to be selling tobacco to underage customers, which raises the spectre of how successful or otherwise enforcement has been.

We know that if people start smoking young, their chances of developing cancer and various other terminal illnesses are substantially increased. Quality of life is also affected. In addition, such young people might lead other young people into smoking. We must address the issue seriously. I welcome what the Minister for Public Health has said so far about the registration programme, but she knows from correspondence with me that I will continue to press for positive licensing until I hear the answers to certain questions that I will put on the record, although I am not expecting all the answers today.

If we are to pursue registration, what will require to be registered? Will vending machines in airports and railway stations be encompassed? Who will be the responsible party for registration, and will there be full cost recovery? What are the projected costs? When will registration be required? What system of penalties will be put in place for breaches? Will there be an appeal process? At what level will that process be, bearing in mind the European convention on human rights?

As I have said, across the political spectrum we are now much more mature as legislators, and it will be in the interests of good legislation for us to address issues in such a way that we do not end up with flawed legislation that might come back to haunt us all. My concerns about raising to 21 the age for purchasing alcohol in off-licences are already in the public domain, so there will be no shocks here. I do not think that a blanket approach is appropriate, and I am free to say that as a back bencher. It will be for the cabinet secretaries to consider whether to deal with measures in primary or secondary legislation.

I am delighted that the Minister for Public Health is holding discussions with the new youth commission. I commend the success of the pilots in Armadale, Stenhousemuir and Cupar, but that is what they were—pilots. Street crime was dramatically reduced, but I suggest to the First Minister, the Cabinet Secretary for Justice and the Minister for Public Health that we should build in local flexibility. There may be a role for local authorities in deciding whether to bring in such measures, perhaps only for a short period. That could be done by consensus and with the good will of the public, the young people and the trades. If that happened, legislation might not be required. Some measures might be suitable for urban areas but totally unsuitable for the Yarrow, Ettrick and Tweed valleys.

On all fronts, but particularly in relation to public health, the Government programme marks a watershed in the maturation of this Parliament. Its agenda is radical and sometimes controversial—even for me. Parliamentary committees will have a duty to test the legislation objectively and independently, so that we bring forward legislation that this Government and this Parliament deserves. That will be in the interests of all the political parties in this chamber.

11:57

Ken Macintosh (Eastwood) (Lab): If this morning's uninspiring fare represents the brave new dawn of this SNP Administration, it is little wonder—despite all the bluster and the talk of opinion polls—that the key policy of independence seems to be viewed with little enthusiasm across Scotland. There was little to excite in this morning's statement, but of deeper concern is the lack of a Government programme for our pupils. Where is the programme for our teachers? Where is the programme for our schools?

The SNP was elected on a clear set of promises—promises that began to disintegrate as soon as it took office. Last year, it had the excuse of being new. "Give us time," it said, "Give us time." What is the excuse now?

Some of the developments relating to class sizes over the past year have actually made the supposed target of limiting P1 to P3 class sizes to 18 even more difficult to achieve. At first, local authorities were clearly willing to wait and see what transpired, to see how the local government settlement would allow them to meet the class size goal, and to see what would be in the Scottish futures trust. It has become quite clear that the class size target cannot be reached with the current funding. In evidence to the Education, Lifelong Learning and Culture Committee last year, the directors of education began to put figures on how much it would cost. They estimated the capital cost alone at £360 million.

Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): I thank Mr Maxwell for taking an intervention.

Members: Mr Maxwell?

Kenneth Gibson: I am sorry—Mr Macintosh. They seem so alike to me.

Is it not the case that, in the previous financial year, Glasgow City Council had a £15.3 million surplus? Despite having the lowest level of attainment and high class sizes, the Labour administration made no effort whatever to spend some of that money on reducing class sizes.

Ken Macintosh: I do not recognise Mr Gibson's description of Glasgow City Council's commitment to education at all. If SNP councils were to take a

lead from Labour-led administrations in the priority that they give to education, this country would be in far better shape.

Education directors and others are waking up to the fact that the ending of ring fencing for local government, although welcomed by some, has actually meant that education budgets that were protected and growing during the past decade are now the target of all their colleagues. They are waking up to the fact that everyone wants their hands on the schools budget. That is just one reason why there are education cuts in local authorities across the country, with SNP-led authorities such as those in Aberdeen, Renfrewshire and Edinburgh to the fore.

Moreover, two recent court cases have undermined the very legality of a class size policy. Not only is there no national guidance from the minister stipulating that authorities must move to class sizes of 18, but the existing Labour-Liberal Democrat circular that limits early years classes to 25 has now been called into question and the courts may have to fall back on regulations, dating back to 1999, which set a limit of 30. This is not an insurmountable obstacle, but the situation requires leadership. It requires the Scottish Government to exercise some form of control and take responsibility, not pass the buck to local government. It is unacceptable and unfair to expect local authorities and parents to battle it out in the courts.

Margo MacDonald: Could it not be that education authorities are waking up to the fact that the figure of 18 is just a shibboleth and realising that the size of a class should be determined by who and what is being taught, by whom, and in what conditions?

Ken Macintosh: Not for the first time, Margo MacDonald speaks very sensibly. If only her former colleagues would listen. They made a clear commitment and promoted to the electorate the promise that they would reduce class sizes to 18; yet, even now, neither the minister nor the First Minister will concede that that is an unreachable objective.

If the programme that has been outlined offers little of substance for our pupils, it must come as an even greater disappointment to our probationers. The Government, not local authorities, is responsible for recruiting graduates and others into the teaching profession. Nevertheless, ministers seem to believe that they can absolve themselves of all responsibility for employing those graduates at the end of their training. Despite widespread predictions of the problems that probationers would face come the start of the autumn term, it took until the end of May for the cabinet secretary to take action by finally agreeing to establish a working group—a

group that, we now discover, will not report in time to help this year's newly qualified teachers.

Have the ministers seen the survey that was carried out by *The Times Educational Supplement* last week, which shows that less than a quarter of this year's probationers have found permanent jobs? According to the *TES*, only 45 per cent of last year's probationers have employment of any kind in Scotland, and that is no surprise—it is entirely predictable. If ministers are happy to bask in the internationally recognised success of the teacher induction scheme, they should be more than happy to roll up their sleeves and find a solution to the morale-sapping mismatch between recruitment and employment.

Finally, where is the programme for our schools? The SNP made a crystal-clear commitment to match Labour brick for brick in building new schools. What has happened? Not one new school. Mr Swinney and his colleagues are struggling to make the Scottish futures trust work, while the future of the pupils of Eastwood high school and Barrhead high school is now. Is it not time that the Scottish Government stopped trying to replace one public-private finance scheme with another? Ministers seem happy enough to go around the country opening all the PPP schools and colleges that were commissioned and built by the previous Labour-Lib Dem Administration. It is not good enough that we have had to wait a year and a half for a scheme that is private funding by any other name, or that the Scottish Government has not delivered one project of its own in all that time.

It is time for ministers to stop chasing short-term headlines and start acting like a Government. We need a real programme for pupils, teachers and schools. That will happen only if ministers start making decisions now.

12:03

Bill Aitken (Glasgow) (Con): As one of my council colleagues famously said, it is déjà vu all over again. The First Minister, with characteristic self-satisfaction, trumpeted the Government's achievements, submerged its failures and made no mention of ditched manifesto promises. The more things change, the more they stay the same. He even had a go at the Labour Party for its failure to come up with a remedy for the seeming inequities of local government taxation. I know that Labour are a pretty poor bunch—that goes without saying—but no one has yet been able to come up with a system of local taxation that is likely to improve matters. The Government must be mad to go down the route of seeking to impose a local income tax. Everyone who knows anything about it says that it cannot work—the figures do not stack up. Although much is wrong with the existing

taxation system, there is no other recognisable or credible solution. The existing system should be retained and, as Murdo Fraser said, we should do what we said in the Conservative election manifesto that we would do: make the council tax much more palatable to the poorer sections of society, such as pensioners. I have no doubt that—to paraphrase the First Minister—the Scottish people will judge very harshly a Government that completely ruins the local government finance system, with all the effects that that is likely to have. I thought that the Government had recognised that politics is the art of the possible, but its proposed legislative programme clearly illustrates that it has not done so.

However, not everything is bad. We agree with some of the programme, although sometimes with caveats. The climate change bill must be balanced in order to ensure that it achieves what it seeks to achieve in environmental terms, but also so that any impact that it has on commerce, or on business and employment, is studied very carefully. We can go along with other aspects of the programme such as the marine bill, and we will examine with particular interest the flood risk management provisions, which will bring much-needed relief to certain parts of Scotland.

I turn now to the section of the statement that is headed "A Safer and Stronger Scotland". I pay tribute to the fact that the Government has, to date, appeared to adhere to the promise on police numbers that it made to the Conservatives at the time of the previous budget. Mr Swinney will no doubt note that I have been quiet, if not mute, in respect of criticisms that have been made of the Government on the subject. I stress, however, that there must be no backsliding on that matter, or we will expose the Government's failure to the maximum.

I have strong concerns about the criminal justice and licensing legislation. My concerns about home detention curfews have been proved to be absolutely correct. The super-duper early release system that Kenny MacAskill imposed on the people of this country has resulted in 28 per cent of the people who were released on HDC having to be recalled. Not all of them have been recalled on grounds of reoffending, but most have, which means that there have been many more victims of crime. That is strictly down to Kenny MacAskill and the policy of emptying prisons irrespective of public safety considerations.

Jeremy Purvis: Will the member take an intervention?

Bill Aitken: I am sorry, I am short of time.

It is all very well to say that we should have tough community sentences, but we should

consider the problems that we have with community sentencing at the moment. Community service is not done, fines are not paid—and nothing happens. A situation in which we reduce prison numbers, which has its attractions for us all, will only happen when the non-custodial alternatives have bite, are realistic, and will achieve what we set out to achieve with them.

John Swinney: I welcome Mr Aitken's comments. Do they signal a willingness on the part of the Conservative party to engage in a constructive discussion with the Government about tackling the record prison numbers, and about the more effective alternatives to custody that there could be if there were agreement in the chamber on taking them forward?

Bill Aitken: Mr Swinney might be aware that I have been very much attracted by the system that operates in New York city, where summary justice is just that: summary. Community service is rigorously enforced and fines must be paid as they are deducted from benefits or direct from salaries. Those measures have reduced the nuisance of small-time crime, which affects everybody's lives, by up to 48 per cent in those communities. That system has its attractions, but I do not see how it can be made to work on the basis of the mood that Mr MacAskill and others advance. It seems to me that the entire penal policy is predicated on budgetary considerations and an anxiety to empty prisons irrespective of public concern and safety.

Jeremy Purvis: Will the member give way?

Bill Aitken: I am sorry, I do not have time.

I turn briefly to the licensing system. We all have concerns—I have very real concerns—about Scotland's relationship with alcohol. It is worrying that one sees that the difficulty does not exist to the same extent elsewhere: drink is consumed in such a manner that people behave themselves and violence is kept to a minimum.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Trish Godman): You should be finishing now, Mr Aitken.

Bill Aitken: That is what we want to achieve but, as Murdo Fraser rightly said, it will not be achieved through the scattergun approach that the Government is taking. We will co-operate where we can do so, but there must be a rethink under a number of headings.

12:10

Margaret Smith (Edinburgh West) (LD): I am delighted to take part in my first debate as the new Liberal Democrat spokesperson on education. A few years ago, in discussing the Family Law (Scotland) Bill, I said that I was probably uniquely placed to examine that legislation, having been

single, married, separated, divorced and civil partnered at one time or another in my life. As the mother of a primary school child, two high school children and two students, I hope to be able to bring a certain amount of personal experience to bear on my new role, although I am sure that members will be pleased to know that I have no intention of flirting with early years, and I will have a word with my daughter.

The Liberal Democrats will continue to be constructive in opposition in relation to the education portfolio. When the Government works in the best interests of Scottish pupils, teachers and students, it will have our support, as it did for the Graduate Endowment Abolition (Scotland) Bill. We welcome much of what the First Minister said today, including the announcement of greater support for the children's hearings system, although we will need to see the detail of that to ensure that local voices are heard. I also welcome the First Minister's comments on the proposed additional support for learning amendment bill and the rural schools bill. In both cases, it is essential that parents' voices are heard and that consultation is genuine and meaningful. I say that as somebody who lives in and represents a part of Edinburgh that has been through some difficulties in relation to proposed school closure programmes in the recent past.

For the most part, though, the statement was a disappointing one for Scotland's children and young people. Colleagues have already picked up on one of the issues. The Liberal Democrats remain opposed to the proposed blanket discrimination against 18 to 21-year-olds in relation to alcohol sales. Let us ensure that we enforce the legislation that is already in place. The evidence shows that it is middle-aged men who are most affected by ill health caused by excess alcohol intake, but there are no plans to ban Alex Salmond, John Swinney or anybody else in the Parliament from buying a bottle of wine at the end of a hard day's work. The proposal is a discriminatory, ill-thought-out measure that I am confident the Parliament will throw out, and rightly so.

The SNP went into the last election proclaiming to everyone, "It's time." Well, parents, pupils and students throughout Scotland are still waiting for new schools to be built, for real action and investment to reduce class sizes, and for student debt to be dumped as promised.

David McLetchie: Does the member think that it would help the Government to achieve its objective on class sizes if the SNP and Liberal council in Edinburgh did not close primary schools in which it has already met the class size target?

Margaret Smith: As I suggested at the beginning of my remarks, I have been concerned

about some of the closure programmes. I have made that clear, certainly in relation to my constituency.

I listened with interest to the First Minister, but we are still waiting for answers on three key issues. The SNP said that it would cut class sizes but it has not provided the cash or the legal framework that is needed to do that. It is not good enough to dump the responsibility on councils. The SNP said that it would write off student debt, but in government it has not even published proposals to do so. Instead, it announced a real-terms cut in university funding. It said that it would match brick for brick our school building programme, under which schools were built throughout the country, yet all that the Government has done is to bring the new building programme to a juddering halt, causing confusion and uncertainty all round. The statement was a disappointing one for Scotland's students.

I pay tribute to the work done by my predecessor, Jeremy Purvis, who made an excellent speech. Indeed, one of his other contributions in the chamber was his victorious attempt to amend the motion on the Graduate Endowment Abolition (Scotland) Bill to ensure that the Government will give proper consideration to the introduction of a minimum income guarantee for Scottish students. We want to ensure that, in examining student debt and wider funding issues, we deliver a fair deal for students, whether they are part-time or full-time or whether they study inside or outside Scotland. No Scot who wants to learn should be priced out of education.

Jeremy Purvis also focused—rightly—on the need for an effective skills strategy, particularly in the current economic climate. In April, we secured support to require the Government to bring forward a comprehensive national languages strategy. In this globalising world, we need to equip our young people to be competitive in an international job market, and enhancing their language skills must surely be one of the most important steps that we can take.

We are failing immigrants and native children alike by failing to provide the required number of specialist language teachers to deal with the 15,000 pupils in our schools who have English as an additional language. I urge the Government to deal with the issue as a matter of the utmost urgency and to consider the possibility of establishing short-term, intensive, language immersion schools for new arrivals prior to children entering their local schools. Such a move would not only consolidate our scarce language teachers, but give pupils a certain amount of English before they were placed in mainstream schooling, allowing them to capitalise on and make the best use of those facilities.

The Government's flagship policies are in disarray. For example, the class sizes policy is in chaos as well as in the dock. The pledge itself lacks the necessary funding and a legislative framework, and not one local authority has a strategy in place for meeting it. We have heard about the single outcome agreements, but now is the time for action, not for more delay and bluster.

We take no delight in any of this. We believe that smaller class sizes mean better attainment for the children in our schools. However, any approach must be realistic and must be backed up by the necessary staff and capital resources.

We also need answers about the stalled school building programme. With the Scottish futures trust discredited and in disarray, the Government needs urgently to set out a detailed programme of school building and repairs to ensure that all children in Scotland are educated in a physical environment that encourages achievement. It is not good enough simply to say that things are moving forward.

The Liberal Democrats will continue to support Scotland's pupils, students and teachers in this Parliament and we will do all that we can to ensure that this Government honours the commitments that it has made to them all. It is about time.

12:17

Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP):

I warmly welcome the Scottish Government's ambitious legislative programme. One had only to look at the faces of the three candidates—Chico, Harpo and Iain Gray—who are battling to be Gordon Brown's mouthpiece in north Britain to see that it will resonate with the Scottish people.

The public optimism, confidence and belief in the Scottish Government contrast—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Mr Gibson, I am not totally happy with that comment. I ask you to be careful with your language in the rest of your speech.

Kenneth Gibson:—starkly with the collapse in new Labour support. Labour at Westminster's shockingly inept handling of the UK economy has in only a year led to a dramatic decline in living standards, with the income of every UK household falling to the tune of £2,500. That is no doubt why Labour is desperate to delay the Glenrothes by-election, despite Margaret Curran's motion of 3 July, in which she stated that the by-election in Glasgow was to be held swiftly because

"the people of Glasgow East should not go without a voice for four months".

It is now apparent that the area went without a voice for 29 years.

By any standards, a programme of 15 bills in one parliamentary year is ambitious. The programme itself includes legislation on education, health, criminal justice, public sector reform and the marine environment. Of course, we could do so much more if we had the powers of a normal independent country. Everyone agrees that the impact of rising prices for food and energy and the credit crunch are of greatest concern to families and businesses throughout Scotland, but we do not have the fiscal levers to do everything that we should be able to do for the Scottish people.

In fact, I find it obscene that we should pay the highest fuel duty in the European Union when the North Sea produces almost all the EU's oil. It is Scotland's oil, and the nation should benefit from it. Sadly, a majority in this Parliament have no faith in the Scottish people or in our ability to use those resources for our own country's benefit. However, I have no doubt that, when they are given a say in an independence referendum, the people of Scotland will vote for the normality that so many of our European neighbours enjoy.

Jeremy Purvis: Will the member take an intervention?

Kenneth Gibson: I was just about to mention you, but you can intervene after I have done so, Jeremy.

It was sad and inappropriate that Jeremy Purvis felt the need to attack the arc of prosperity—I think that he was referring to Ireland, Iceland and Norway. Is it not the case that those countries have much lower levels of ill health, much less child poverty and homelessness and a much higher standard of living than we do?

Jeremy Purvis: I was talking more about the failings of the Scottish Government than about the failings of foreign Governments. Given the SNP Government's position on independence, will Mr Gibson explain why SNP policy is to retain the Bank of England's role in setting British interest rates?

Kenneth Gibson: If the member considers the SNP's overall fiscal policy, he will find that we would seek a referendum on whether to move to the euro. The SNP would consider transitional arrangements, but we would put the matter to the people of Scotland.

What is important is that the SNP is acting on behalf of the people of Scotland. If the Liberal Democrats and the Labour Party had done more of that they might not be in opposition. Given that it is quite clear to the Labour Party and the SNP that the Liberals are no longer needed to provide a coherent Administration, the Liberals will no doubt be banished for ever to the political wilderness, where they will battle with the Greens for the fourth place in Scottish politics.

What has the SNP done? We have phased out prescription charges, which will disappear completely by 2011. We have frozen council tax, which increased by 60 per cent under Labour and the Liberal Democrats. We have restored free education in Scotland by abolishing the graduate endowment, which has saved thousands of Scottish students £2,289. We have slashed business rates for small businesses, so that rates for 150,000 small businesses in Scotland have been substantially reduced or removed. That means that many businesses can survive and thrive, which they would not have been able to do under the policies of the previous Government. Perhaps that is one of the reasons why Scotland is starting to ride out the Labour-imposed recession better than many other nations are doing. There is also green investment in Scotland, for example in the new 45MW biomass combined heat and power plant in Markinch.

We heard gloom and doom from Kenneth Macintosh and other members about budgets being cut, but Labour members' previous leader said in her hungry caterpillar speech—the infamous diatribe that we heard just over a year ago—that she wanted 3 per cent year-on-year top-sliced efficiency savings in local government. I assume that that was Labour Party policy and I am not aware that the policy has changed since the speech. We should contrast that policy with the SNP's policy of providing above-inflation increases for local government and allowing local authorities to retain efficiency savings. When people say that there is no money for class size reductions or other local government services, they should consider how much worse the situation would have been if there had been no change in Government last year.

The Scottish Government has had difficulties, in that its budget has been hit by Westminster's spiteful failure to deliver Barnett consequentials, for example in relation to prisons and police pension commutation. There is no agreement from Westminster that it would repay the £400 million that would be lost if a local income tax were to be introduced, although Cathy Jamieson has called for the money to be restored to Scotland, nor is there agreement to repay the £30 million of attendance allowance. It is clear that an attempt is being made south of the border to make the Scottish Government unpopular by starving Scotland of resources.

There has also been scaremongering. For example, during the Glasgow East by-election Labour Party members frightened old people on their doorsteps by telling them that we would abolish the concessionary fares scheme.

The SNP wants to make Scotland brighter, fairer, smarter and more prosperous. This year we will work to do just that.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I remind members to address one another by name or title.

12:24

Pauline McNeill (Glasgow Kelvin) (Lab): The legislative programme that was announced today at least provides a little clarity about the SNP Government's legislative priorities for the coming year. It is a modest programme, which contains some good proposals that we can support.

However, as ever, the SNP's self-congratulatory claims that Scottish people's confidence in themselves is entirely due to the First Minister characterise its style of government so far. Indeed, this week we might have thought that the First Minister invented hydroelectric power.

I say to Mr Gibson that the SNP does not represent the whole of the Scottish interest and should not claim to do so. His party would benefit from just a little bit of humility. Being a minority Government should never be an alibi for lack of delivery, and the year zero approach—that nothing good ever happened before the SNP Administration—does not fit well with the claims made today of partnership working with other parties. If the SNP is serious about working with other parties on things that matter to all Scots, it should recognise that it does not have all the answers. If the SNP truly wants to be in tune with the Scottish people, it should start by facing the facts that Scotland does not want independence and Scots do not wish for a Tory Government. The SNP should use the platform of government to govern—devolved governance is its mandate.

Let me address the detail of the programme. Labour welcomes the introduction of a criminal justice and licensing bill. It is long awaited, and we look forward to seeing it in print. We will robustly scrutinise the detail of the proposed legislation. The SNP Government proposes to reform community sentences, to give public confidence in sentencing and to tackle the abuse culture and its relationship with crime and disorder. Labour agrees that we should tackle the perception that sentencing is inconsistent—although it is a perception only—and we will listen with interest on the detail of the creation of a national sentencing council. However, we will resist overprescription and direct interference with judicial discretion, and we will not allow the Government to duck its responsibilities on sentencing, because we need a further debate on how we deal with knife crime and sentencing for drug dealers.

Margo MacDonald: I am intrigued by whether the Labour Party agrees with the Government that Scotland is a special case as regards the overconsumption of alcohol and the violence that follows or whether it is aware of the number of

Governments in Europe that are concerned about the trend.

Pauline McNeill: Labour has no difficulty in supporting the idea that tackling alcohol misuse should be a key priority of the Government, but we will scrutinise the detail of how it goes about doing that.

There are fatal flaws in the prison strategy. A focus on imprisoning only serious and violent offenders implies the removal of jail sentences for other offenders—I would like clarity on that point. Crucially, there is no evidence that the transition to community sentences will be adequately funded. Without funding, that transition cannot happen, and if the Government wants transparency in sentencing, it must tell us how it will end automatic early release.

The Government is silent on antisocial behaviour, and I am seriously disappointed that it has not followed up the priority that we gave, when we were in government, to tackling antisocial behaviour and low-level, high-volume crime in Scotland's communities and to the resourcing of a community safety strategy, which is fundamental to tackling crime. The existence of community wardens, with the power to issue fixed-penalty notices, has been critical in cleaning up Scotland's communities. Wardens working with police officers have been effective.

The Government knows that police numbers are its Achilles' heel. There are claims that the Government is on track to meet the pledge of an additional 1,000 officers—far from it; it is not. It is a national disgrace that the Government has to date refused to fund hard-working police officers under the new pension rules. As ever, it blames everyone but itself. With the UK Government, Labour helped to prepare the ground to centralise police pensions in the future, but the Scottish Government must act now and live up to its responsibilities on those pensions.

The cost of the retirement of police officers for the next spending year has been known for some time. In Strathclyde, it is more than £50 million. However, the failure to fund retirement costs will leave Scottish police bodies with the burden of the pension bill, which will eat into their operational policing budgets. It will undermine the recruitment of new officers, and it will be detrimental to community safety. I call on the Government to live up to its responsibilities and to pay for police pensions.

As I have said, Labour will work with the Government to tackle alcohol misuse, but I want the Government to persuade us that it will defend the proposals that it is putting out to consultation and that they are not just gimmicks. We called for a summit on underage drinking, which I believe

happened yesterday. To my knowledge, we were not invited to it and I would like to know why not. Like Murdo Fraser, I repeat again Labour's call for tougher action against people who sell to underage drinkers. After three strikes, they should lose their licence.

I will raise a constituency matter in closing. I warmly welcome the abolition of NHS car parking charges, but I urge the minister to do the right thing and not leave us with a two-tier system. In my constituency, patients and staff at Glasgow royal infirmary will pay, although others elsewhere will not. If the SNP believes in the policy of abolition, it should find the resources to go all the way. If it believes in a fairer Scotland, that is what it should do.

12:30

Meeting suspended until 14:30.

14:30

Resumed debate.

The Presiding Officer: We now continue with the debate on the Scottish Government's programme. We are tight for time, so I ask members to stick strictly to the six minutes that they are allocated.

14:30

Alasdair Allan (Western Isles) (SNP): There can be no doubt about the scope and ambition of the Government's legislative programme. The committees that have complained of a shortage of legislative material to get their teeth into will regret their words. Indeed, some on those committees will now long for the days when they could get away with engineering time to take a vindictive stroll on the golf course, so to speak.

The sheer variety of the legislation that is proposed would make it impossible—or, at least, tedious—for every speaker in the debate to try to cover every bill, so I will dwell on only a couple of pieces of legislation that have an immediate resonance in my constituency and which, I am sure, will apply well beyond.

Before I do so, however, I want to say—perhaps surprisingly, given that I welcomed the Shucksmith report on crofting—that I am quite glad that the legislative response to the report is not coming this year. There has been a positive reaction to the report, but I feel that it would be good to allow the full debate that it has engendered in the crofting community to be held before legislating.

I want to talk about the Government's education proposals in particular. Tomorrow night, Comhairle nan Eilean Siar will consider a proposal from its education committee to close all seven of its two-year secondary schools over the next three years, so the Government's education proposals could hardly have been announced at a more emotionally charged time for the communities concerned.

The schools have excellent records and tribute should be paid to the work of staff and the wider community in making them the successes that they are. The council has the right to make its own decision about its closure programme—although we should remember that the ultimate decision on four of the schools will have to come before ministers. However, the council's decision will preempt the bill that will be put before us. Nobody underestimates the hard funding decisions that local authorities are faced with. However, speaking as someone who went to a one-teacher rural primary—a school that closed—my view is that pretty much anything that this Parliament can do to make the task of closing a rural primary more difficult will be welcomed in rural Scotland.

The bill described by the minister contains measures that are likely to find favour throughout rural Scotland. In many respects, it shifts the onus from the community having to explain why a school should remain open to the council having to explain why it should be shut. Things that the bill asks to be considered when a consultation takes place and which are not really considered just now would include the alternatives to closing the school and the impact on the community of closing the school.

Without minimising the difficulties of school closures in general, there is no doubt that the closure of a rural school has an enormous impact on the viability of the community concerned.

I am also delighted that, despite the howls of protest from some on the Opposition benches, Parliament is to be presented with a bill to abolish the now totally discredited council tax. I dare not intrude too far into the private grief that is the Labour Party's likely approach to such a bill, but I hope that Mr Kerr is still of the view that is expressed on his website, which is that his own party's stance on the council tax as recently as the last election was "widely ridiculed".

Whatever the eventual stance of Opposition parties proves to be, when we debate the council tax and its replacement in the context of the bill, I hope that we remember the human facts that lie behind the issues. At a time when fuel costs are rocketing, the council tax represents a real and serious injustice to many pensioners and others on fixed incomes.

The rate of fuel poverty in my constituency was recently measured as being 47 per cent—that is, 47 per cent of people were spending more than 10 per cent of their income trying to stay tolerably warm. Taking rising fuel costs into account, the rate of fuel poverty in my constituency is now probably nearer 60 per cent. Are we seriously going to advance the argument in the Parliament that we should continue to apply a tax that bears no relation to many of those people's ability to pay? The answers that the parties represented in the Parliament give to that question will certainly be remembered as the temperature falls. Pity the politician who advances the case for the council tax this winter.

Many arguments have been advanced to commend the Government's legislative programme to Parliament, but the principle of fair taxation must be among the most compelling. The words "new politics" might have fallen slightly into disrepute, but if they are to mean anything, it is that the Parliament will be prepared to find a replacement for the council tax that recognises people's ability, and inability, to pay.

The Presiding Officer: It was remiss of me not to ask members who wish to speak to press their request-to-speak buttons.

14:35

Malcolm Chisholm (Edinburgh North and Leith) (Lab): I had intended to give a general speech, ending with some words about creative Scotland, but in view of events this morning, I must change the order of my remarks. Very little was uttered by the First Minister—one sentence, I think—about creative Scotland this morning. When I put three questions to the First Minister, none of them was answered—not surprisingly. However, within half an hour, a press release appeared on the Government's website that indicated a major change of policy and direction in relation to the future of creative Scotland. To say the least, that shows the Government acting in an underhand way. From the contents of the press release, it appears more accurate to say that it is treating the Parliament with contempt.

I asked the First Minister this morning when creative Scotland would be established. Of course, he refused to answer that question, as well as my other ones. The press release indicates that the body

"will be in place by April 2009",

although the legislation to enshrine it in law will not be passed until one year later. It is therefore obvious to everyone that the Government is bypassing parliamentary scrutiny on that important piece of future legislation. What is worse, it is giving absolutely no response to the serious financial concerns that were voiced by the Parliament in June. The press release blithely says that the same financial arrangements as those that were announced on 18 June will apply.

The Government has serious questions to answer about creative Scotland, and I hope that, during his winding-up speech, John Swinney will answer the other two questions that I asked the First Minister earlier. First, and crucially, will the public services bill be amendable in relation to creative Scotland? It is a bit odd that the body will have been up and running for about a year by the time the legislation is passed. We must ask ourselves how amendable the bill will be.

The connection between culture and democracy in Scotland is very important, so it is very important that the Parliament gives the body a remit. Parliament unanimously supported the principles of the Creative Scotland Bill, and there is no reason why the Scottish Government could not have lodged a new creative Scotland bill as soon as possible, to be passed well before the set-up date of April next year.

The fundamental concerns about creative Scotland related, first, to finances. As I said, the press release indicates no change in that regard. I asked the First Minister this morning whether the Government had received a report over the past few months indicating that the cost of establishing creative Scotland would be approximately £7 million, or whether the £1 million that was announced to Parliament in June applied. The issue was revealed by *The Times* in August. On 14 August, the Minister for Europe, External Affairs and Culture indicated to the newspaper that “she had no knowledge of the £7million estimate”,

but

“said that revised estimates for the creation of the agency would be delivered by the Creative Scotland interim board next week.”

Perhaps the cabinet secretary can now tell us what those revised costs are. He could perhaps also tell us whether such a report was in fact received—as the *Times* journalist had on good authority. There are serious questions to be asked about the Government’s handling of that piece of legislation, and what it has announced in its press release today is totally unacceptable to Parliament.

I will move on to my more general remarks. I wish to ask three questions. For me, the key issues in politics now, in recent times and, in some cases, for all time, are how the Government’s programme will deliver social justice, how it will deliver on climate change and how it will deliver on economic growth.

What are the social justice measures that will deliver, especially for the most disadvantaged people and communities in Scotland? Such measures are not being taken in my constituency, which is being devastated through massive cuts to the fairer Scotland fund.

Secondly, where is the action to tackle climate change emissions? Of course we welcome the proposed climate change bill and the 80 per cent reduction target, but where are the practical measures? I am sure that Sarah Boyack will talk eloquently about that and suggest some measures. In particular, where is the 3 per cent annual reduction in emissions that was promised in the SNP manifesto; what is being done about aviation emissions; and why will the basket of greenhouse gases not be covered? Those are vital questions.

Thirdly, where are the measures to deliver economic prosperity? Rather than a skills bill, which would be welcomed universally, the flagship bill is on a local income tax, which is opposed by all the major economic bodies in Scotland, from the CBI to the STUC. Other objections apart—there are plenty of them—the bill would lead to

further significant cuts in services, which is far from the born-again Keynesianism that we heard from the First Minister today. Of course, that was to cover up for his interview gaffe—or should I say, his interview letting the cat out of the bag?—in the summer. I have no time to deal with that, but I am sure that we will discuss it a lot in the next few weeks. The First Minister made the fundamental mistake of separating economic and social policies.

Finally, I heard the First Minister make another interesting speech at the Edinburgh book festival, in which he contrasted the work of his Government with that of the Westminster Government, which he said was doing little in the present economic difficulties. I am sure that Johann Lamont will talk about this at much greater length, but the housing package that was announced yesterday in England is far superior to the package that the Scottish Government announced two weeks ago. Of the money in the Scottish Government’s package, £40 million depends on hard-pressed local authorities and only £20 million has been brought forward to this year, when it is required urgently. We have already had a £90 million cut to the social housing budget. I am sure that Johann Lamont will say more about that, but that is the reality that the Government should face, rather than all the time pointing out how it is supposedly superior to Westminster.

14:42

Rob Gibson (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): I am delighted to welcome the Government’s programme. I will first concentrate on the wealthier and fairer aspect. There has been talk about helping disadvantaged communities and the need for social justice. I cannot think of a more immediate way to achieve those goals than by abolishing the council tax.

Johann Lamont: Will the member give way?

Rob Gibson: Not at the moment, thank you. I will develop my argument first.

The people in my part of Scotland who have higher fuel bills, transport costs and food costs and lower incomes will welcome the abolition of the council tax even more than those in many other parts of the country. On the doorsteps during the election a year ago, that issue was first on their minds. In all the opinion polling since then, a majority of those who say that they will support each of the parties in Scotland support a local income tax and want an end to the council tax. That will be achieved in this year by the Government, which I welcome very much.

Johann Lamont: Will the member give way?

Rob Gibson: No, thank you—not just now.

We must get away from the kindergarten attacks about property versus income. Eventually, we will have a chance to discuss the issue in more detail, but I cannot think of a better way of dealing with the unfair council tax and its increases than the freeze that started this year and its abolition in due course. We may have to revisit the issue in future if we give local government more powers.

I move on to two issues with which I am particularly involved in the Parliament and which are to do with the greener aspect as well as the wealthier and fairer one. I am delighted that we will have a climate change bill and a marine bill. The linkage between the two is important in the area in which I live. The First Minister, in describing the conflicts on the sea, said that the

“demands on Scotland’s marine and coastal environment”

affect

“the energy sector, shipping, fisheries, tourism and conservation.”

We must find ways in which to accommodate each of those issues. I echo the points that have been made that the forthcoming climate change bill must be as effective as possible, but I believe that the Parliament will find a means to achieve that. In the committee system, we will reach a consensus and find practical ways to measure and make progress.

I will give a little example to show how we will resolve problems through the proposed marine bill. At present, in trying to give effect to the EU birds directive, the Government has asked Scottish Natural Heritage to consider extensions to some of the special protection areas. It is proposed that one such area in the Pentland Firth, covering Duncansby, Dunnet Head and Stroma, should include the coastal waters 2km offshore into the inner sound. The proposal has been criticised locally because of its potential to interfere with the development of tidal power schemes. The proposed marine bill has the capacity to deal with those conflicts. Indeed the Government will consider the extension of such special protection areas to make sure that the environment, birds—in the case of the Pentland Firth—and tidal power development can be accommodated. That is entirely possible given our geography.

As we become more capable in the Parliament and the country of being at ease with the environment and development—economic development is at the centre of the Government’s programme—we see in the proposed climate change bill the ability to take a front-facing role on global action. We and our neighbours have a great opportunity to contribute to the wider European picture. I suggest to the chamber that through non-legislative measures, such as the extension of

renewable energy production in our country, we can contribute to meeting not only our own electricity needs but those of our neighbours in the south—England, Wales and Ireland—and in Europe.

The energy resources of the far north, which I represent, could deliver cheaper electricity for us in the long term if investment in renewables is seen as a national priority. Guess which Government values the energy potential of the Pentland Firth? It is certainly not the UK Government. A fortnight ago, it stamped down hard yet again on allowing favourable grid-connection charges so that electricity generated here can be sent to market. Someone has to tackle the Office of Gas and Electricity Markets; clearly, the British Government is not doing so.

Last year, Malcolm Wicks, the UK energy minister, and David Cairns, assured the Caithness renewables conference that they were right behind them in developing renewable energy. People have seen right through that. Significantly, Gordon Brown’s Government warned off the Scottish Government from talking to Norway about a super grid. Surely that is an inhibitor of the development of clean energy in Scotland to enhance our opportunities to reduce climate change. It is a good, practical example of where Scotland needs to be in control, where we need to work with our neighbours and partners and why the Scottish Government has to be in charge of our energy development. That is possible through the Government’s programme and I commend it to Parliament.

14:48

Des McNulty (Clydebank and Milngavie)
(Lab): This morning, Nicola Sturgeon, who is not with us this afternoon, spoke eloquently about the inequalities that scar our nation and her determination to tackle them. That is a commendable aspiration, but it is not borne out in the measures announced today. In her portfolio, resources are being redirected away from the NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde area—the area with the worst mortality and morbidity statistics. It is all very well for the cabinet secretary to refer to the £848 million investment in acute services at the Southern general hospital, but that goes with a near 50 per cent depletion of the capital budget for other projects, including health centres, over the next eight years.

Every decision has consequences. The problem for Nicola Sturgeon is that for each of the populist measures that she is so happy to announce there are consequences for the health improvement measures that are designed to tackle the very inequalities that she deprecates.

It is not just from health that people in my part of the world see resources being taken away. In West Dunbartonshire, we have a dearth of housing investment, a council cutting back savagely on services for the elderly, devolved school budgets and, most recently, the spectacle of SNP councillors voting to withhold backpay from council workers—amounts to which each employee had been told in writing they were entitled.

On page 9 of the Government's programme for Scotland, reference is made to

"the Golden Rules of Solidarity, Cohesion and Sustainability"

and to

"enabling greater levels of social, regional and inter-generational equity."

That follows a claim that the Scottish Government is

"prioritising learning, skills and well-being".

We have talked about wellbeing, but priority for learning and skills apparently translates into providing no money to meet the Government's own target of reducing class sizes, having fewer apprenticeships—not just in the tourism industry but across a wide range of areas, especially construction—and reducing support for the most vulnerable. The thousands who marched recently in support of the St Margaret of Scotland hospice in Clydebank bore witness to their concern about the consequences of the removal of funding for vital services. If solidarity, cohesion and sustainability are to be the touchstones of public policy, surely they should have been reflected in the legislative programme. Regrettably, they were not.

To be fair, some of the measures brought forward meet those tests. Although it was not mentioned in today's statement, I would like to draw attention to the Damages (Asbestos-related Conditions) (Scotland) Bill, which covers pleural plaques. The bill was published in the final week before the summer recess, and my party and I strongly support it. We support the flood risk management, marine and climate change bills in principle, and we will engage constructively on them in the interests of making the legislation as good as possible.

Despite my inclination to seek consensus in the best interests of Scotland, I believe that there were huge omissions in what the First Minister presented this morning. We believe that the SNP's proposed income tax—an SNP additional income tax—will be unfair on families, problematic to implement and disastrous for local government and, in particular, for those who are reliant on council services. People are being given figures

for the additional income tax that are deliberate underestimates. The serious experts in the field have predicted that the actual SNP tax will be twice the 3 per cent that the SNP is claiming, and the format of the tax will make it particularly difficult to retain.

The £400 million that Scottish pensioners and people on lower incomes receive in council tax benefit is not a subsidy for the Scottish Government that is available to it to translate into an alternative scheme. The money goes directly to councils to offset revenue that they would otherwise have to raise from individual taxpayers. It is their money, not Alex Salmond's. To help Scottish councils, Scottish pensioners and people on low incomes retain the entitlement and the money involved and to ensure that the money supports the least well-off in our society—rather than the tax cuts that the SNP wants to provide—we need reforms to the council tax structure that increase equality and deal with some of the anomalies in the present system. We should not introduce an SNP additional income tax.

I would have liked to say a lot more about transport, but I am mindful that the Presiding Officer requires speeches to be relevant to the subject chosen for discussion and there is little in the programme announced and the document released today for Scottish transport users. There is nothing for train passengers, whose fares have increased faster under this Government in one year than at any time in the past 10 years and who face still higher increases from January. There is nothing for bus passengers, whose fares have increased because the Scottish Government has refused to increase the bus service operators grant to offset fuel prices. There is also no legislation on buses in line with the bus action plan, which the SNP signed up to in opposition but has neglected once in government—perhaps following the receipt of its largest donation from Brian Souter.

Ferry passengers in the Western Isles are getting a pilot scheme, but what about people in Argyll, on Cumbrae and Arran for example, and in other parts of Scotland, whose ferry fares have increased under the SNP and who are being disadvantaged because of discriminatory policy? The reality is that the Government says one thing and does something else. We are not getting an attempt to tackle inequality or an approach to solidarity, cohesion and sustainability. The golden rules are empty, and so is the legislative programme.

14:54

Elizabeth Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife)
(Con): It was good to hear the First Minister speaking this morning about the importance of a

good-quality Scottish education. I have absolutely no problem with most of the comments on education that he made this morning, specifically when it comes to the children's hearings bill and the rural schools bill, but I have serious concerns—as will every parent, teacher and pupil across Scotland—about what he did not say.

Although I do not doubt the Government's commitment to our young people—my goodness, we get told about it often enough—the Government has missed a huge opportunity to focus on the most pressing issues in our classrooms.

For more than a year, rather than address our schools' problems, its obsession with the flagship policy of smaller class sizes has caused schools more trouble. I refer most especially to the imposition of artificial and unworkable targets instead of policies that would allow Scotland to deploy better the outstanding professional talent that it has in the teaching profession, too many members of which cannot get a job at the moment, and to deal with the pressing issue of discipline in our classrooms. I am in no doubt that parents, teachers and pupils want the focus to be on providing the best teaching and educational opportunities that are available and on developing policies that will remove from our classrooms the persistent troublemakers who stop other children learning properly.

I will now deal specifically with two of the Government's policies—the class size policy and the policy on physical education—and explain why the Scottish Conservatives believe that radical change is required on both fronts. A year ago in the Parliament, I raised serious concerns about the ability of my local authority in Perth and Kinross to deliver the class size policy, citing the implementation costs estimated by the council's department of education. At the same time, Glasgow City Council and the City of Edinburgh Council stated their concerns, and it was not long before other councils expressed the same views. Witnesses who have appeared before the Education, Lifelong Learning and Culture Committee and members of the media have made it plain that the majority of local authorities cannot implement the policy within the given timetable with the extremely limited resources that have been provided. It is our contention that they should never have been forced to attempt to do so.

Of course smaller class sizes help the learning process—that is a given in virtually every educational institution in the land—but the decision about numbers should rest with a headteacher, who is best placed to know what his or her school is getting up to, rather than with a Government or a local authority that wants to impose a rigorous one-size-fits-all policy that pays

no heed to local circumstances or to different teaching experiences.

What do we say to the parents of the twins in East Lothian who have had to face the threat of their family being split apart because of the bureaucracy of a Government target, to the teachers in rural primary schools who might lose an outstanding colleague because of a Government target, or to the pupil in a secondary school in the Borders who finds that his advanced higher courses will not run because of the priority that the Government gives to meeting class size targets? That is not my idea of what good-quality education is all about, and I am pretty sure that it is not what parents and teachers think it should be all about, either. The class size policy is not working and it is time that the Government admitted that.

I turn to PE, outdoor education and the Government's manifesto pledge to give children two hours of PE a week. The situation did not look too promising when Maureen Watt suggested that the two hours might involve walking to school. That was followed by an embarrassing Fosbury flop when the Government got itself in the most unbelievable muddle about whether PE activities would be undertaken by specialist PE teachers. That does not sit well with one of the five great mantras of the Scottish Government—to foster a healthier Scotland—nor does it sit well with what our Olympic gold medal winners are saying. They are pressing the case for far greater commitment in that area, particularly at grass-roots level. Every child, no matter who they are, should have the opportunity to participate fully in PE, in sport and in outdoor education.

Robin Harper (Lothians) (Green): Does Elizabeth Smith agree that the two weeks of outdoor education that she has requested all pupils in Scottish schools should receive—a request that I strongly support—is a minimum or a starting point and that, in the long run, we should push for the embedding of outdoor education in the school curriculum from primary through to the end of secondary?

Elizabeth Smith: Absolutely. I agree entirely with what Mr Harper says. Having such a target is simply the beginning.

I have been extremely encouraged by the noises that have been made by the Government and by other parties in the Parliament on our proposals on outdoor education, which represent a start. It is every child's right to participate in outdoor education. That is why the Scottish Conservatives made new proposals for an outdoor education policy that would cost £10 million, which we believe could easily be funded through a combination of Government and private sector resources. Such a policy would mean that outdoor

education would be available to every pupil in Scotland at least once between primary 7 and secondary 3.

In the previous session, the Government took what it said was the bold step of allowing local authorities to have more scope over the running of our schools. However, the reality is that that principle is totally undermined by the obsession with an unworkable, centralist class size policy. This session, the Government should take the even bolder step of allowing headteachers to run our schools and deliver excellence and discipline in our classrooms. That really would be getting it right for every child.

15:00

Jamie Hepburn (Central Scotland) (SNP): The debate provides members with the opportunity to debate the Government's programme for the coming year and also to reflect on the Government's achievements thus far, a few of which I will touch on.

Our Government, in conjunction with our local authorities, has put in place a council tax freeze. The council tax increased by some 60 per cent over the past decade and in the current climate of increased living costs it was surely a relief to hard-pressed Scottish families that their council tax bill did not increase this year.

The second achievement is the reintroduction of free university education. The abolition of the graduate endowment was the fulfilment of a long-standing SNP position in favour of free education; a campaign that I have long supported. It is right that a society that benefits from an educated population should provide such support.

Last year we welcomed the Government reprieve for Monklands and Ayr accident and emergency departments. Many of the people whom I represent in the Central Scotland constituency rely on the A and E department at Monklands and had serious concerns about the prospects for local health care should Monklands A and E be closed. Those concerns were eased when the Government decided to save the department.

The last achievement that I will highlight is the universal free school meals pilot for primary 1 to P3 pupils in five local authority areas.

Johann Lamont: The member may have more information than I do on the subject. The report on the pilot was due to be published in June. Does he have any idea when we will see the findings?

Jamie Hepburn: I am sure that the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning can enlighten the member better than I can. I will shortly return to the point.

In its programme for 2008-09, it is clear that the Government is seeking to build on its achievements thus far. As welcome as the council tax freeze is, that unfair, regressive and obscure form of taxation remains in place. The next logical step is its abolition. I am glad that all three candidates for the Labour Party leadership now support that move. Having frozen the council tax, the next logical step is to introduce a fairer replacement—the local income tax.

Although the abolition of the graduate endowment was a monumental step in the right direction, the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning said at the time that it was a down payment on efforts to increase support for Scotland's students. I welcome the commitment in the Government's programme to consult and develop further student support measures on top of the reintroduction of free education.

Having saved Monklands and Ayr A and E departments, surely it was right for the Government to remove the unnecessary and unfair levy on staff and patients that car parking charges at national health service hospitals represented.

Earlier, I mentioned the Government's free school meals pilot, on which Johann Lamont intervened. This is another area where the Government is building on its work thus far. I welcome the commitment in the programme to extend entitlement for free school meals to disadvantaged pupils. I also welcome the commitment to provide free, nutritious meals to all P1 to P3 pupils if the evaluation shows that the pilot was a success. I hope that the minister who closes for the Government will tell the chamber when the results of the evaluation will be published and what the prospects are for further expansion of the entitlement to free school meals.

It is clear that in its 2008-09 programme the Scottish Government is seeking to build on the work of 2007-08. Both the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister have made clear the nature of the Government's social democratic contract with the Scottish people.

Over the recess, I had the very great pleasure of visiting Sweden. This morning, Jeremy Purvis suggested that the SNP had somehow fallen out of love with the Nordic model. I say to him and all other members that I am very much enamoured with the country. In Sweden, I saw a society that is visibly healthier, wealthier and more equitable than ours. It is the embodiment of social democracy in action.

John Park (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): Like the member, I am interested in Sweden. Does he support the Swedish priority of nuclear power?

Jamie Hepburn: No, I do not. We can learn many things from Sweden, including some things that we should not do. I thank John Park for his kind intervention.

Unlike Scotland, Sweden is an independent country. Like Sweden, Scotland needs to be independent to fulfil its potential as a vibrant social democracy. In his statement this morning, the First Minister correctly identified the limitations on our devolved Government in meeting the challenges that face our society, especially in current economic circumstances. We need independence to meet those challenges. However, under this Government there is a palpable sense of optimism among Scotland's people. Work has been undertaken to renew our social democracy. I congratulate the Scottish Government on its programme, which seeks to continue that agenda.

15:06

Mike Rumbles (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (LD): Over the past 16 months, the SNP Administration has governed Scotland more by ministerial decree than by addressing issues by consensus here in Scotland's Parliament. It is true that it has talked to the Liberal Democrats about its flagship bill—to replace the council tax with a national income tax—but the problem is that it has not listened. Is that really consensus? I think not. *[Interruption.]* It would be helpful if Mr Swinney would listen to the debate before commenting. I believe that the SNP Administration has no intention of introducing a local income tax.

Today the First Minister outlined just how out of touch with the mood of the country he is. How successful has he been in his Cabinet's summer tour of the country, about which he talked this morning?

The Minister for Transport, Infrastructure and Climate Change (Stewart Stevenson): Superbly.

Mike Rumbles: Allegedly, the First Minister was listening to people. Ministers should listen now.

The Presiding Officer: I ask front-bench spokespersons not to make sedentary interventions.

Mike Rumbles: This morning the First Minister said that his summer tour had

"showed us a confidence and an optimism in our people"

and that that

"is the mood to which the Government is determined to respond."

Excuse me, but that does not fit with the experience of everyone else in the real world of Scotland today. There was hardly a mention of the credit crunch, and no mention of exactly what ministers intend to do when they

"focus on the impact of rising prices for food and energy".

That is not good enough from the First Minister of Scotland.

There are real and serious delays in many of the projects that were initiated by the previous Executive and on which the Government seems to have lost focus entirely. As the MSP representing the people of West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine, I want to know where the First Minister's plans are for getting on with the western peripheral route around Aberdeen. Where are his plans to continue the investment that is needed to build new schools across Aberdeenshire? In my patch, during the previous Administration a new academy was built at Portlethen and new primary schools were built at Hill of Banchory and Lairhillock. What has happened to the funding for the new academies that we so desperately need in Laurencekirk and Kemnay? Those cannot proceed unless funding is forthcoming from the Scottish Government, but it is not. This morning, my colleague Jeremy Purvis asked the First Minister where the promised schools fund is, as part of the Scottish futures trust. The First Minister answered that there is no such fund. Indeed, where is the promised Scottish futures trust? Our children are being taught in substandard schools while the First Minister and his team do nothing.

What has happened to the First Minister's promise from May last year that the good times for the north-east are now here?

Stewart Stevenson: Yes, they are.

Mike Rumbles: The minister says yes, but there are not a lot of good times for the people of Aberdeen, as Mr Swinney has allocated to them the lowest share of council funding per head of population. If the Scottish Government provided the city of Aberdeen with the same level of grant per head of population that Glasgow receives, Aberdeen would be £158 million better off. If the city received even the average Scottish level of funding per head of population, it would have an additional £66 million pounds each and every year—more than enough to deal with the £50 million deficit that Aberdeen City Council currently faces. That is causing real hardship to many people who are affected by the massive cuts in services that have become necessary because of the SNP Government's feeble settlement.

I suppose that we in Aberdeenshire have to be thankful for small mercies. Aberdeenshire receives not the lowest settlement of Scotland's 32 local authorities, but the fourth lowest.

Joe FitzPatrick (Dundee West) (SNP): Will the member take an intervention?

Mike Rumbles: I will in a moment.

In reality, the so-called historic concordat to which the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Sustainable Growth constantly refers has succeeded only in reverting Aberdeenshire Council's grant settlement to a historically low position. In 1999, Aberdeenshire received 88 per cent of the Scottish average grant per head of population. As a result of lobbying over the years, that figure improved to 92 per cent by the previous Scottish Executive's final year. In John Swinney's budget last year, the figure was ruthlessly cut back to 88 per cent. Despite the steady and positive progress that was made under the previous Executive, Aberdeenshire is back to square one under the SNP. These are hardly the good times that the First Minister promised on taking office, as headlined in the Aberdeen *Evening Express*.

In conclusion, the people of Scotland, and the people of the north-east in particular, do not have much to cheer about from the Government. Once we discount the cheap and easy-sounding measures—the First Minister mentioned many—there is nothing much that will last. The statement was disappointing for the people of the north-east and for Scotland.

15:11

Sarah Boyack (Edinburgh Central) (Lab): Labour welcomes the proposed legislation on climate change, flooding and the marine environment that will focus on protecting our environment for the long-term benefit of our economy and our people. Labour would also have introduced bills on those matters. The key issue for Labour will be whether the SNP Government gets the principles and the details right. Our support will therefore be conditional. We look forward to the committee debates.

I agree with colleagues that we need to reflect on what is not in the programme. A promise to consult on crofting legislation has been made and I noticed Alasdair Allan's nervousness about that. I caution ministers not to get carried away by their own enthusiasm; rather, they should consult crofters before they produce a draft bill. Highland Labour MSPs consulted crofters over the summer and ministers must now listen and act on their concerns.

It is not only the legislation that will be crucial. How the Government acts and leads will determine whether we meet the ambitious target that the SNP has set on climate change or whether there will simply be a lot of hot air. Our criticism has been constructive. We have said that the SNP has made bold promises but has failed to make progress in key areas. It has failed to make progress on renewables in every public building, starting with our schools. It has made a timid and slow response to lifting the burden of red tape

from householders who are keen to do their bit and benefit from micropower. Respondents to the Scottish Government's consultation slated the proposals. The Government has also failed to make progress on its own electricity contract. It is not only dumping the commitment in the previous three Labour-Lib Dem contracts to secure 100 per cent of the electricity in question from renewables, but it is not even saying what the lowest threshold is to power companies that are competing for the contract. That is a big step back for renewables.

The SNP is still not delivering policies even to begin to meet its ambitious target of 3 per cent year-on-year reductions in carbon emissions, and it has taken transport decisions that are sending us in the wrong direction. That the First Minister did not even mention sustainable transport in his statement was striking. Furthermore, he has given no answer today to the 20,000 people who have made submissions to the Scottish Government's climate change consultation calling for stronger action to be taken in the bill on targets, aviation and on greenhouse gases other than carbon dioxide.

Patrick Harvie: Will the member take an intervention?

Sarah Boyack: No, thank you. I have just started.

The climate change challenge is not to talk boldly about it, but to prepare for it and do everything that we can now to prevent the catastrophic changes that scientists have been warning us about for years through the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. We need joined-up action and partnership in the chamber and outside it. It is important that the SNP resists the temptation to play constitutional games with the marine bill in particular. We need partnership working with the UK Government and a joined-up approach to our environmental obligations. A good precedent has been set with the climate change bill, but that must be followed through in the handling of the marine bill. None of our marine stakeholders, fishing and environmental organisations and business communities want to be pawns in the SNP's game of constitutional chess.

On flooding, Labour was critical of the SNP's funding arrangements. We hope that the SNP will listen to the Rural Affairs and Environment Committee's sensible suggestions on that. Unprecedented flooding hit our road and rail infrastructure this summer. It simply is not good enough for the Scottish Government to tell us again that local authorities are adequately funded through the concordat. For starters, railways are not even run by the local authorities. People across the length and breadth of Scotland have seen journeys disrupted and areas flooded that

are not on the list of vulnerable areas. We do not need an admonition from the Minister for Environment that everything is fine, when it patently is not.

I said that we would be constructive, and we welcome the First Minister's agreement that we need to work together across the chamber on climate change. This week, for the first time, the north pole has become an island. We have had years of warnings about it, and now it is in its death spiral. There is graphic evidence of the change in our marine environment. That change might be less dramatic in Scotland, but it is there nonetheless. The challenge is how we make the radical and fast changes that are needed.

Marine biologists have reported changes in our seas and we know from our fishing communities that the changes are happening. Farmers and gardeners can see the seasonal changes, and scientists report changes in biodiversity, with some species already under pressure. We need action now. The SNP needs to move beyond monitoring our carbon outputs to making major reductions in them. It is a paradigm shift and we must urgently get rid of the attitude that it is business as usual. Our economy is already under pressure and the challenge is to make the changes by reducing carbon output. As many colleagues have said, families are already feeling the pressure of rising energy prices. Gas and electricity prices are up by 30 per cent. The First Minister was long on blame for the UK Government, but painfully short on what he will do. When I started work on my member's bill on energy efficiency and microgeneration, the one statistic in my mind was that a 5 per cent increase in domestic fuel prices led to 30,000 families being dragged into fuel poverty. However, a 5 per cent increase now drags 40,000 families into fuel poverty.

When I met the cabinet secretary last year, he said he would oppose my bill but look favourably on some of its proposals. A year on, a bill has been drafted, but we have not yet had the raft of measures to give every householder and small businessperson the financial support to tackle energy efficiency issues or to put microgeneration technologies on their roofs or in their houses. We need action now. Energy use is the biggest source of CO₂ emissions in our existing building stock and we cannot keep just talking about it—we must do something about it. The Scottish Parliament and Government have the competence to act on the issue, but there is no commitment to deliver the changes in the climate change bill. I would like to see movement. There is cross-party support and support across a wealth of organisations on the environment, fuel poverty and the renewables industry. Let us see strong and bold action now; otherwise we have no prospect of reaching the challenging target that we have all signed up to of

a reduction of 80 per cent in carbon emissions by 2050. We need progress now.

15:18

Angela Constance (Livingston) (SNP): It is a privilege to be in the position of welcoming the SNP's legislative programme, which will continue to move Scotland forward. We have heard a few times in the debate that the Scottish economy is robust, but not immune from global pressures. Every man and woman in the street continues to feel the pinch with, as we have heard, soaring energy prices and the scandal of 500,000 Scots being in fuel poverty. That is particularly scandalous in an energy-rich country like Scotland. The cost of living is up, with the retail prices index at 5 per cent. The cost of living is, of course, even greater for the over-65s. The price of petrol has increased, which results in the cost of everything increasing.

Despite not having full economic powers and facing the frustration of having one hand tied behind its back and being able only to campaign for a fuel duty regulator as opposed to implementing one, the Scottish Government has succeeded in putting money back into the pockets of hard-pressed Scots. The council tax has already been frozen and we have heard today our political commitment to the abolition of such a regressive and hated property tax—although the will of Parliament will determine whether we achieve our aspiration of introducing a local income tax. Prescription charges are also going. Of particular delight to me and my Livingston constituents is the fact that car parking charges at St John's hospital will go at hogmanay—a happy hogmanay that will be.

The resilience of the Scottish economy is exemplified by growth that continues to match or surpass that of the UK, as it has done over the past three quarters. Our population is increasing—Fergus Ewing and I have made our own small contributions to that, as have Richard Lochhead and Shirley-Anne Somerville, and Karen Gillon will make her contribution in the months to come. Our population is at its highest level in 25 years. Retail sales are up and house prices in Scotland continue to edge up—notwithstanding today's reports that house prices in Edinburgh have fallen quite dramatically.

I want to focus on the Government's much-welcomed proposals to advance the affordable housing agenda, but I prefix my comments with a personal view. While recognising the value of the house-building industry to the Scottish economy—not least because it provides employment—I have never been convinced that rising house prices are a good thing per se. In my constituency, soaring house prices have had a disproportionate effect on

first-time buyers. Median incomes in Livingston constituency are between £17,000 and £18,000 a year; average house prices are about £160,000 in Scotland and a little bit higher than that in West Lothian. In Edinburgh, average house prices are around the £200,000 mark. People might well make a hefty profit on their house sale, but that will only be diminished when they need to pay more to buy their new house. It concerns me greatly that young families are mortgaged to the hilt. We have gone from one extreme to the other, from a situation in which people were offered 100 per cent-plus mortgages to one in which first-time buyers now struggle to get a mortgage at all.

In my view, it is the job of Government to support first-time buyers and those who struggle to pay their mortgages in these economically challenging times, but it is not the job of Government inadvertently to bolster house prices. With that in mind, I believe that the measures introduced by the Scottish Government strike the right balance, in particular in their support for first-time buyers. The investment of £250 million in low-cost initiatives for first-time buyers is very welcome indeed, as is the £25 million for home owners who struggle to pay their mortgages. Of course we have a responsibility to prevent reposessions, given the impact that those would have on our already difficult problem with homelessness.

Affordable housing is very much at the heart of the Government's agenda. I believe strongly that abolishing the right to buy was a bold and decisive move that has kick-started a new generation of social housing. I welcome the fact that, for the first time in decades, new council houses will be built in West Lothian. Of course, much remains to be done. Some 200,000 people are on council house waiting lists across Scotland—11,000 in West Lothian alone—so there is a lot of work to be done.

I endorse the Government's legislative programme. It is very much about lifting the hearts and minds and aspirations of Scottish families and communities. Together, we will certainly take forward Scotland as a nation.

15:24

Lewis Macdonald (Aberdeen Central) (Lab): If ministers in Scotland's devolved Government are indeed to make a serious contribution to achieving sustainable economic growth, they will need to focus on those sectors that can help to grow the economy and on those measures that are within their power to deliver under the devolution settlement.

Energy and tourism are recognised as key potential growth areas for the wider economy. References to both sectors were made in this

morning's programme for Government, but we heard surprisingly little about detailed commitments to action on the part of SNP ministers.

Alex Salmond talked of using the opportunity of the homecoming 2009 celebrations to deliver the maximum benefit for tourism nationwide. That seemed to be hopeful. The many enterprising and innovative people from the tourism sector who will gather at the royal yacht Britannia this evening to mark the achievements of the finalists in this year's Scottish Thistle awards would be keen to know how ministers intend to deliver on that pledge. So would those members on the Parliament's Economy, Energy and Tourism Committee who heard evidence from VisitScotland and others about the pretty modest funding that has been provided to homecoming 2009 so far. Unfortunately the programme for Government document does not tell us how ministers intend to respond to those issues, or to the committee's recommendations that they consider other funding options. Instead, the only action that it records is a change in the project's organisational arrangement that was already in place before the committee's inquiry. There is no indication of how ministers intend to use the opportunity to maximise its benefit, and no sign of whether they will provide additional support to ensure that all the quality events that are seeking support as part of the year of homecoming 2009 will actually happen. An opportunity has also been missed to widen the scope of homecoming 2009, as Jack McConnell recently suggested, by drawing on Scotland's growing links with ever more countries around the world. There will, of course, be an opportunity for members to consider all those points more fully when the committee's report is debated later this month. In the meantime, it would be useful to know from the cabinet secretary whether there will be substance behind the words that were used this morning.

There are other things that ministers might usefully do to maximise Scotland's tourism potential but which are, again, sadly missing from the programme. On air route development, for example, there is no sign of any action to put in place a new scheme to support direct routes to follow up on the success of the previous Scottish Government's route development fund. Jim Mather told the Economy, Energy and Tourism Committee that ministers are "actively pursuing" ideas for working with airlines to develop joint marketing campaigns in support of new direct routes. That is good, but it is a pity that nothing in the programme for Government explains how it is being done and how, if at all, ministers will actively support the development of new direct routes.

There is no word either of action to restore direct ferry links with continental Europe. Again, the SNP

has presided over a reduction in visitor access to Scotland whereas that was increased by ministers in previous Administrations.

Of course action in all those areas does not necessarily require legislation, but it does require political will. On sea routes, ministers have again said that they recognise the importance of direct routes for tourism and the wider economy, but restoring those links does not appear to merit prioritisation in today's programme for the year ahead.

The programme for Government has a little bit more to say about the energy sector. It recognises Scotland's renewable energy potential. We believe that the success of that sector will be vitally important to our future economic fortunes and to achieving our targets for reducing emissions and climate change.

However, critical issues are again simply not addressed. The biggest single contributor to Scotland's short-term renewable energy potential is onshore wind, but that is the one renewables sector that can take least comfort from the SNP's record in Government. Since taking office 16 months ago, Mr Salmond's Government has rejected four of the 10 applications for new or extended wind power developments under the Electricity Act 1989, representing almost 900MW of rejected applications against just over 1,100MW in approved applications. That is a rejection rate of almost 45 per cent.

I was glad to see this week's report from the forum for renewable energy development in Scotland on the potential of small run-of-river hydroelectric schemes. The forum's work on identifying the potential of new technologies during the past five years is very welcome. However, even the most optimistic assessment suggests that it would take hundreds of new run-of-river hydro schemes to offset the rejected wind power potential of the Lewis wind farm proposal alone. The test of Government is not just whether ministers are willing to endorse new technologies verbally, but whether they are prepared to support already-proven technologies. By that test, the SNP has yet to show willingness to take the tough decisions that are sometimes required to deliver cleaner energy.

If the potential of tourism and energy to contribute to Scotland's sustainable economic growth is to be realised, ministers need to go beyond today's warm words, to listen to those who have a stake in those sectors and to take action to deliver progress across the board.

15:30

Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green): So it is a new parliamentary year. Some of the faces around

the chamber are in new jobs and 15 new bills are coming our way. However, some things are just the same as they were last year. The Government continues to strike a confident tone, but it is still a minority Government. It still needs to negotiate, co-operate and work with others if it wants to propose a programme. The Greens have been constructive but not uncritical in the past year and I am sure that that tone will continue.

One theme of today's debate has been hard economic times. Prices are rising and people are being hit in their pocket and their purse by the cost of living—the cost of food, energy and so on. It is recognised that that is due largely to the global economic pressures under which we all live. However, the First Minister introduced a paradox when he mentioned high and growing levels of life satisfaction—of happiness—in Scotland. Does that mean that no connection exists between the economy and wellbeing? Of course not. However, I argue that the connection is more complex than any Government has recognised.

More wealth for those who already have wealth does not increase happiness—that was the story of the latter half of the 20th century—just as higher GDP for an economy is not a measure of progress or wellbeing for the population, yet the Government's purpose remains to increase growth and to fix single-mindedly on that one measure of economic progress. Given that and the growing acceptance that the global pressures under which I mentioned we live are not short term—they are not going away and are likely to worsen as the decades and the century roll on—we should reassess the fundamental purpose of Government.

In the past year, the SNP has brought clarity and focus to what it believes is the purpose of Government. It has brought greater clarity and sharper focus than its predecessors, but it has the same purpose—economic growth—which is the problem. The SNP calls it sustainable economic growth, but we hit up against the same basic problem: everlasting economic growth on a planet of finite resources cannot happen. That is the definition of unsustainability. Of course, that which is unsustainable will not be sustained.

How would making the purpose of Government sustainability rather than growth at any cost translate into a Government programme that was announced at the beginning of a parliamentary year? On energy prices, we would certainly do what Sarah Boyack argues for and remove the barriers—the inhibition and bureaucracy—that prevent people from adopting microgeneration and energy efficiency measures. We would go further and make huge public investment, which could turn high prices into an advantage for householders—into an income source rather than

a bill at the end of the month. We are constrained in regulating the energy market in some areas of power, but we could at least do what some of the best local authorities down south are doing. However, we are not even doing that. I urge the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Sustainable Growth to consider what some of my colleagues in councils such as Kirklees Council are doing.

On the budget, the First Minister highlighted transport investments. However, with a sustainable vision, instead of spending billions on road building and more than £4 billion on constructing one of the most expensive bridges in human history right next to where we already have a bridge, we would consider public transport, and not just infrastructure, but services and fares. Every morning, I take an overcrowded and uncomfortable bus service into town, which passes the route of the M74, where the Government is pursuing the same unsustainable road-building policy as its predecessors.

The First Minister was keen to suggest that council tax and local income tax are the only two options, but that is not the case. We need to look for a solution that offers social, environmental and economic benefits, in addition to greater fairness. Replacing an unfair tax with an unworkable tax will cause more misery than we can know.

Jeremy Purvis made some important points on small businesses, in relation to not only the immediate economic pressures but the longer-term issues of climate change and peak oil. The Green party would promote an enterprise policy that supports and focuses on small and local businesses. We need to transform our economy so that business is more sustainable. Localisation should be a key imperative of that.

I could not finish without saying something substantial on the climate change bill. As Robin Harper said, it is a welcome bill. It is coming later than we had hoped—perhaps in his closing speech the cabinet secretary will tell us about the timing. For example, by the time that Governments from around the world meet at Poznań for the next intergovernmental conference, will the Scottish Government be able to say that it has introduced its bill or will we have longer to wait? If indications are to be believed, the bill will be weaker than we had hoped. Because the SNP does not have a majority, I do not always give it a verbal kicking for changing policies and dropping manifesto pledges. It does not have the authority to implement all of its manifesto pledges and needs to work with others to form a majority. However, annual targets were SNP policy, Green party policy and Liberal policy. Further, every voice from the Labour Party that has spoken on the issue so far has called for annual targets. If that is the case, there is a majority and there is no excuse for changing the

policy. There is no get-out on that; there should be no get-out on aviation either.

John Scott (Ayr) (Con): Will the member take an intervention?

Patrick Harvie: I am afraid that I do not have time.

As Robin Harper argued this morning, a climate change plan with a get-out for aviation is like a diet plan with a get-out for pies. It is simply not credible. Crucially, how are we going to reach the target? As well as the bill, there must be a clear programme of action that convinces us that the targets will be reached. Targets on their own are necessary but they are not sufficient.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Trish Godman): Before I call Margo MacDonald, it is only fair to point out that certain members at the end of the debate will not get 6 minutes. Those members are Johann Lamont, Alex Neil, John Park, Roseanna Cunningham and Paul Martin. I am sorry about that, but if members take even 20 seconds over for their speech, and three of them do so, we lose a minute.

15:37

Margo MacDonald (Lothians) (Ind): This morning, the First Minister said that we need a reflationary programme. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development confirms that the UK economy is in recession, so it might seem strange—perhaps even frivolous—that I should urge the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Sustainable Growth to honour the promise made by the First Minister about the provision of facilities to ensure that the young, upcoming cyclists who are being coached in Edinburgh realise their potential in time to compete in the Glasgow Commonwealth games and the 2020 Olympics.

It takes eight years to produce a world-class cyclist. Currently, there are 50 riders aged between seven and 16 in training, of whom three are already British champions. If Chris Hoy and Alan Edgar are to be joined on the podium in Glasgow, the facilities must be in place as soon as possible. That means that a new velodrome must be started ASAP. The City of Edinburgh Council is investigating the cost of a covered velodrome, and I believe that its officials think that about £3 million might produce a satisfactory feeder facility to complement the new facility being built in Glasgow. Experienced cyclists and coaches have told me that the figure could be nearer £4 million. However, the space in the centre of the track would be completely suitable for judo and gymnastics—I have checked—both of which sports are looking for suitable venues for their elite competitors and community participants alike. For

a modest outlay, the Government could make good its intentions to support and help to develop Scottish sport and produce a fitter Scotland.

My reason for associating the Government with the required spend on facilities such as those that I have briefly outlined is the inference I drew from the First Minister's remarks after Chris Hoy's triumph. The First Minister obviously understood that the standard of facility required to make Scotland a centre of excellence for cycling is much higher than the replacement local practice track originally envisaged by the City of Edinburgh Council. The costs I refer to would provide a Scottish national facility. They represent very good value for money, but it is money that is not now available to Edinburgh because of the economic downturn, which has resulted in a drastic downward revision of the projected income from the sale of part of the Meadowbank site.

While discussing how the City of Edinburgh Council would juggle its resources to maximise the possibilities afforded by modern, standardised cycling facilities, I discovered that there may be a suitable piece of land available in the Leith docks to provide a world-class white-water course for canoeing, kayaking and rafting. The site would also provide a centre for community use and outdoor education for schools. If the new velodrome and an artificial white-water facility were located side by side, economies of scale would be possible in shared facilities. The resulting centre of coaching expertise could prove very attractive to coaches and competitors alike. Without such a centre, people will continue to work and train outside Scotland.

At present, even though we lack facilities of international standard, cycling, water sports and judo are three sports in which Scotland can realistically claim to be right at the top of the world class. Or, to be more accurate, they are three sports in which Scotland can claim to produce world-class athletes who have to leave Scotland to access the best coaching and facilities. Everyone now knows that our cyclists live and train in Manchester.

Make no mistake: in the world of top-class sport, there are centres of excellence for all sports. The Jamaican sprinters, so much admired by our own dear Minister for Communities and Sport, are produced from an excellent system of competitive school sport, and follow the same path as Liz McColgan did in living and being coached to world-beating standard in the American college system.

Some top athletes will probably always seek outside Scotland for the top coaches in their sport. However, we currently have dozens of water sports athletes who could well beat a path to the white-water facility that is being built in Cardiff

docks, even though the regeneration of Leith docks is on-going and Scottish canoeists have identified suitable locations and have supplied me with a basic outline proposal that is based on the Cardiff facility and costed at £5 million.

I hope that the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Sustainable Growth will agree to consider the imaginative idea of investing in a conjoined sports centre. As we speak, Forth Ports is being supplied with the relevant information, as is the City of Edinburgh Council. The Government must be involved. Such a facility would be not only for elite athletes; it would be suitable for every standard of participant and could greatly enhance the provision of facilities for the type of outdoor education advocated by Elizabeth Smith. I commend the idea to the cabinet secretary as the sort of investment that is entirely compatible with his Government's objectives and is entirely suitable as a proactive method of breaking out of the current depressive economic mood.

It is always a good idea to aim high when the economy is going through a low-performance phase. Until sovereign economic powers are available to the cabinet secretary, he cannot do everything that might be done to buttress the Scottish economy against the effects of global economic difficulties. However, for a very modest outlay, he could provide a sports facility that would enhance our national fitness, health, sporting prowess and ability to host top-flight international competition.

The cabinet secretary and the First Minister have implied in all their comments on the economy that we should not lose confidence in Scotland's ability to weather the storm. Investment in a world-class sports centre, such as the one that I have suggested, would help us not to lose confidence.

15:43

Joe FitzPatrick (Dundee West) (SNP): I start by touching on a couple of areas on which I think and hope there will be a fair degree of cross-party co-operation. As Rob Gibson said earlier, the proposed marine bill and climate change bill will place this Parliament at the fore, leading the way around the globe. This is an appropriate point at which to acknowledge the commitment of the members of other parties who have driven that agenda forward. Robin Harper and Sarah Boyack have been pushing it since the Scottish Parliament was reconvened by Winnie Ewing in 1999. However, if we are to ensure that the bills are passed as swiftly as possible—which they must be—it will be crucial that this Parliament works with the Government and the third sector towards our common goal of a greener Scotland.

Another bill will produce robust debate during its passage through Parliament: the council tax abolition bill will take forward one of the flagship policies of the SNP—a policy supported right across the country, in stark contrast to Labour's hated council tax. The SNP policy, as well as being fundamentally fairer, will reduce the local tax burden across Scotland, reduce the total tax take, and provide the biggest tax cut in a generation.

George Foulkes (Lothians) (Lab): How can it be fairer if students, student nurses and members of the armed forces pay more while people who live in mansions, such as Brian Souter and Tom Farmer, pay less? Why is that fairer?

Joe FitzPatrick: It is fairer because Mr Souter and Mr Farmer will pay more than they pay under the current system; it is fairer because Mr Foulkes will pay more than he pays under the current system; and it is fairer because the tax system will be based on people's ability to pay.

The abolition of the council tax will remove entirely from local taxation the most vulnerable members of society, breaking the crippling chains of the council tax. I am not suggesting for a minute that anyone likes to pay tax—nobody likes to pay tax. We would all like to be tax-free and have the best services in the world. However, by basing the tax take on income, we can, at least, ensure that we have a fair system that does not disproportionately tax those who are on low and fixed incomes. The end of the council tax will see all those who are on low incomes automatically paying less, with the majority of pensioners being exempt. There will be no complicated forms that many pensioners are not prepared or not able to fill in. Under the current council tax benefit system, up to 40 per cent of eligible pensioners do not receive any help towards their bills. That is a lot of very vulnerable people.

I will give a real-life example to highlight the point, although it involves someone whom I have not identified personally. I refer to the pensioner who was identified by Iain Gray this morning. Mr Gray said—I paraphrase, as I have not seen the *Official Report*—that a pensioner with an income of £8,000 would be brought into the local tax system by the introduction of a local income tax. Iain Gray was wrong on two points. He was wrong to suggest that a single pensioner on a meagre income of £8,000 does not pay council tax—they do. I am not sure where Mr Gray's pensioner lives, but if they live in a band D house in my constituency they will be liable to pay council tax. Even if they have no savings and apply for council tax benefit, that benefit will not cover their council tax liabilities. Additionally, we know that about 40 per cent of entitled pensioners do not claim that benefit. In fact, for pensioners to be paying up to 30 per cent of their income in council tax is not

unusual, while Scotland's most wealthy citizens pay a fraction of that. The SNP's proposal for a fair system that is based on the ability to pay will end that inequality.

Mr Gray was also wrong to suggest that his pensioner would be liable for local income tax. The UK Treasury, to whom Mr Gray was a special adviser, has set the personal allowance for single people between the ages of 65 and 75 at £9,030 for this financial year. So, any pensioner with an income of less than £9,030—which, I am pleased to confirm, includes someone with an income of £8,000—would pay no income tax, whether local or national. Furthermore, if the pensioner in question is over 75, their personal allowance is even higher.

Mr Gray's comments are typical of Labour members, who are happy to scaremonger without checking their facts and who offer no solutions. With the announcement that the Government's second legislative programme will include a bill to abolish the council tax, Labour's day of reckoning on local taxation has arrived. It is no longer good enough for them to criticise the proposals that are put forward by others—at least the Conservatives have some proposals—without coming up with proposals of their own. The people of Scotland have a right to examine such proposals in detail.

I understand that Labour members are in difficulty at the moment—they are rudderless without a leader and have no idea which direction they will take on any policy initiative. However, they had eight years in government, throughout which time they promised to tackle the inequalities of the council tax. That was one of many broken promises by Labour in government. The people of Scotland have a right to know where Labour members stand on the £400 million that Gordon Brown and Alistair Darling want to keep from Scotland if we abolish the council tax. Will they stand up for Scotland with the SNP, or will they capitulate as they did on care charges?

This has been a good debate. I have enjoyed it, although we have not agreed on everything. There is much in the legislative programme that will bring the Parliament together in the interests of the nation as a whole, and I hope that the bills around which there are fundamental disagreements will serve to generate increased interest in the Parliament.

15:49

John Scott (Ayr) (Con): I declare an interest as a farmer and food producer.

This has been another difficult year for Scottish farmers, with the on-going and dramatic decline in sheep farming and, to a lesser extent, cattle

farming in our hill and upland areas being the biggest concern.

The scale of the problem was documented during the summer in the Scottish Agricultural College's report, "Farming's Retreat from the Hills", which confirmed and quantified the anecdotal evidence that we have been hearing for some time. Sheep and cattle are leaving our hills and upland areas in droves. I thank all the members who have signed my motion S3M-2437, which concerns the SAC report and which I hope will be debated during members' business in the near future.

This week, hard on the heels of the SAC report, the National Farmers Union Scotland issued its "Manifesto for the Hills", leaving us in no doubt of its views on the scale of the problem that we face.

Today, I would like to hear more from the Government about what specific measures it will take to address the situation and, in particular, what its response is to the specific proposals of the NFUS.

Members will recall that, prior to the summer, the Scottish Conservatives secured a parliamentary debate on the important issue of food security. I welcome the First Minister's acknowledgment that food pricing is now right at the top of the political agenda. With food prices continuing to climb at an alarming rate, I am pleased to announce that the Scottish Conservatives' food security task force, which was launched at the time of our debate in June, will be publishing its report imminently, following its summer consultation.

I welcome the Government's intention to conduct a review of land use, which the Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs and the Environment announced last week. That is an important step, as there is a desperate need to ensure that the multiple pressures on our land—food, renewable energy, biofuel production, forestry, housing, flood management and so on—are properly planned and managed. The bluetongue vaccination programme must also be rolled out this autumn. The recent scare in the south of England has again focused minds on that ever-present danger. Achieving a high uptake of the vaccination programme this autumn will be vital.

I was less impressed with the confirmation during the summer that the Government's manifesto pledge on funding a new entrants scheme has been watered down, and that the application process for the flagship rural development programme has, thus far, been so poorly handled.

The farming industry was also upset with the terms of the cabinet secretary's aid package for the pig industry, which, at first glance, appeared

welcome—indeed, I welcomed it—but which, on further inspection, proved to be misleading and far less generous than it seemed.

On the legislative programme that was announced today, the wet summer that we have had has reminded us again of the need for us to be better prepared for the dangers of flooding. I look forward to seeing the details of the Government's flood risk management bill, which, frankly, cannot come soon enough. The adequate funding of that piece of legislation will be crucial to its success. The flooding in Ayrshire and Fife affected many families and home owners who will quite literally still be counting the cost of the damage that was caused. Our sympathies are with those families who are still restoring their homes.

Similarly, we welcome the Government's plans for a Scottish climate change bill. Although the 2050 target is good, it is to be regretted that the First Minister failed to mention annual targets for emission reductions. Would that not make more sense, as Sarah Boyack and Patrick Harvie said? For Patrick Harvie's information, I point out that that has been Conservative policy for some considerable time.

In addition, we look forward to seeing the content of the forthcoming marine bill. Although there is no doubt that that legislation is to be welcomed, I hope that the Government will not allow its obsession with extending its reach to the 200-mile nautical limit to distract it from the issues that are really important, namely marine spatial planning and biodiversity.

On fishing, the quota plans that were announced before the summer generated mixed feelings, to put it mildly. Although I whole-heartedly endorse the call for more national and local control of fisheries management, I question whether the Government's policy has been developed in the interests of our fishing communities as opposed to the interests of creating further tensions with Westminster.

From an Ayrshire perspective, and as a member of the Rural Affairs and Environment Committee, I welcome the announcement of a rural schools bill, which will introduce a presumption against closure. Rural schools are the heart of our rural communities, and their continuation is vital. From an Ayrshire perspective, again, the need to maximise the tourism benefit from the homecoming year of 2009 cannot be overstated. Ayrshire, the birthplace of Burns and the riviera of Scotland, is always ready and willing to play its part in welcoming tourists.

Rural Scotland continues to face massive pressures, including those from high fuel prices. Those pressures affect tourism and all rural dwellers; they are leading to low returns for

farmers; and they continue to present challenges to commercial and recreational fishermen.

We in the Scottish Conservatives will continue to do all that we can to represent the best interests of our rural and maritime communities, and we will work constructively with the Government over the coming year to develop policies to address issues on which there is common ground.

We will also do our utmost to hold ministers to account, ensuring that sensible pledges that were made by the SNP in its manifesto last year are fulfilled.

15:55

Alison McInnes (North East Scotland) (LD): I wish to use my time to talk about the proposed climate change bill. We must work together in Parliament to ensure that the bill is fit for purpose. This morning, the First Minister made only one commitment relating to the bill, in reaffirming his target of reducing emissions by 80 per cent by 2050. The recent consultation drew a remarkable 21,000 responses from all around the world. I have heard it said before that Scotland's impact is small and insignificant in this global matter, but surely that level of international response demonstrates that people are waiting to see what we do and are urging us to grasp the opportunity to make a profound difference. I hope that we do not let them down.

While acknowledging the moral imperative to act on the issue, we should also recognise the economic opportunities for Scotland in moving to a low-carbon economy. A strong bill that has the backing of the whole Parliament will give business the certainty that it needs for it to invest in order to put us at the forefront of a new low-carbon global economy. The virtue of annual targets and steady progressive policies is that they give advance warning to the market of the scale of the task and provide a spur to specific innovation.

I want the Government to ensure that the eventual legislation includes these key issues: maintaining the 80 per cent emissions reduction target; insisting on annual targets; measuring the whole basket of greenhouse gases; and providing strong incentives and sanctions for public bodies to ensure that all the measures work. All emissions must be accounted for in the targets that are set out in the climate change bill. The exclusion of international aviation and shipping emissions from those targets would mean that a significant and growing percentage of emissions were going uncounted. The bill must also ensure that the Government of the day is held to account through scrutiny of forward plans as well as through proper reporting back.

There has been a range of comments about budgeting periods, but there is one clear message from scientists: we need emissions reductions of at least 3 per cent per year to keep on target. Without annual targets, there will inevitably be a drift, and the longer we leave it, the more punitive will be the measures that will have to be imposed. Friends of the Earth recently said:

"There are two ways society can get a grip on CO₂ emissions. The best approach is to make a steady, achievable cut every year. The alternative is to wait until we have no choice but to do something, and then make drastic cuts—which may turn out to be too little, too late. It's like choosing a gentle path down the cliff or going over the void."

The SNP has argued that it is not practical to have annual targets, and it cites the lag of 20 months before greenhouse gas inventories are available, but is the real reason why the Government has backtracked on annual targets not more prosaic? Annual targets will be uncomfortable for the Government—they would be for any Government—which will from the outset be held to account here in Parliament. Grand gestures about an 80 per cent emissions reduction by 2050 need to be underpinned by real action.

I believe that it is possible to speed up the data collection process. Currently, provisional estimates are available after only three months. If it is to be taken seriously, the Government must commission research now to identify and remove the barriers to shorter reporting times for the various inventories. Giving evidence to Westminster's Select Committee on Environment, Food and Rural Affairs last year, Dr Alice Bows from the Tyndall Centre for Climate Change Research explained:

"I would say that the likelihood is that if you wanted to make that quicker, I am sure that that would be possible because we have not actually been doing it for that long ... If people were more used to collecting emissions data on a monthly basis and submitting them more rapidly, then you could speed up that process."

Support should be given for more research into the sociological aspects of climate change. So far, technology has received far more research attention than have socioeconomic, cultural and political factors, and energy supply far more than energy demand.

I recently attended the Macaulay Institute's open day and was interested to hear from a social scientist about a new project that is examining behavioural change in relation to climate change. It is increasingly clear that, although technological innovation can reduce the energy requirement for specific activities and make low-carbon energy sources economically and environmentally viable, the impact on reducing carbon-intensive energy use will, critically, depend on broad public and political commitment to such a reduction.

Otherwise, increases in energy efficiency could simply raise demand for energy-intensive products and services.

Much of what needs to be done to tackle climate change does not need legislation, so I am disappointed that valuable time has been squandered over the past year. Opportunities have been missed, particularly in relation to renewable energy and energy efficiency. Achim Steiner, the United Nations under-secretary-general and the executive director of the UN Environment Programme, has said:

"Energy efficiency, along with cleaner and renewable forms of energy generation, is one of the pillars upon which a de-carbonized world will stand or fall. The savings that can be made right now are potentially huge and the costs to implement them relatively low if sufficient numbers of governments, industries, businesses and consumers act".

The potential for de-carbonising modern economies is huge. Energy efficiency measures can be taken and wind, solar and hydro power are carbon-free energy alternatives that are available today, but there is a lack of clarity about the Government's overall direction on renewables, which must be addressed. After 15 months in power, why does the Government have no energy strategy? Will the Government introduce policies immediately to tackle energy efficiency issues in the existing housing stock in a sustained way? When will there be a new biomass support scheme?

The Government has announced 15 bills today. I have no doubt that the one that could make the greatest difference is the proposed climate change bill. The response to the consultation on the proposed bill gives the Government a clear mandate to be bold. It identifies that, although everyone in Scotland must play their part in tackling climate change, we need leadership, direction, clarity and certainty on the way forward.

The First Minister said this morning that the legislative programme on climate change and the environment will propel his Government into a new leadership role, but that that is a role in which he will be comfortable. I do not particularly care whether Mr Salmond is comfortable but, on the climate change issues, I would like him to be bold and to show leadership.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We move to five-minute speeches. I call Johann Lamont.

16:01

Johann Lamont (Glasgow Pollok) (Lab): If I move away from my planned new chilled approach to speeches in the chamber, I shall blame you entirely, Presiding Officer, for cutting my time from six minutes to five.

I will comment on the Government's programme from the perspective of my party's commitment to our central purpose when we were in power, which was economic growth and social justice. We regard the two as being absolutely inseparable but, during the summer, the First Minister confirmed his view that it is possible to separate economic policy from its social consequences—that we can somehow separate pit closures from the devastation in mining communities. The great fear is that because the Government's overarching commitment is to only one priority—sustainable economic growth—it may abdicate its responsibility on social justice or naively presume that social good will inevitably emerge from economic activity, when we know that that cannot be the case.

I am concerned that there appears to be no reference to tackling gender, race or disability inequality and no mention of community regeneration and the deep-rooted inequalities in some communities. We all know that no advance in equality ever happened by accident, and that it is absolutely critical to scrutinise spend with proper understanding and to use evidence about whom it benefits.

I seek reassurance that the SNP will learn the lessons of its first year in power and equality proof its budget and reflect on its decision to accept single outcome agreements without any evidence of equality impact assessments. I recently met representatives of the Equality and Human Rights Commission to discuss that very issue. They were obviously concerned, but they told me that the explanation is that the timetable is too tight to expect local authorities to fulfil that responsibility. That seems to be a perverse argument, given that the Government established the timetable. I am gravely concerned that the single outcome agreements, which will determine so much in addressing inequality, will not undergo that impact assessment.

The proposed abolition of council tax makes my case. It is evident that an equality impact assessment of the proposal would confirm that it would not affect the most disadvantaged people because they do not pay council tax, and that those people would suffer disproportionately as a result of the cuts in services that would necessarily follow as a consequence of the largest tax cut, which was so proudly vaunted earlier.

Bill Wilson (West of Scotland) (SNP): Will the member give way?

Johann Lamont: Let me finish this point.

SNP members can argue for council tax abolition if they wish, but it is unacceptable to assert that it would address inequality, when it would not.

Bill Wilson: I find it remarkable that Johann Lamont seems to be saying that people on low incomes who may be in poverty do not pay council tax.

Johann Lamont: If the member had listened carefully, he would know that I said that “the most disadvantaged people” do not pay council tax. It is claimed that abolition of the council tax would meet the needs of the most disadvantaged people. SNP members can support abolition if they will, but they should not use the poor to defend the policy.

There are serious issues in housing for whoever is in power. I was determined not to be provoked by the response of the Scottish Government to the announcements by the UK Government. I was depressed, however, by the line that was taken, which was, “They have copied us.” Even if that were true, which it is not, it is hardly an adequate response to the serious issues that we all face. The £100 million that has been committed by the Government has been welcomed. I welcomed it because I asked the Government to release it, but all through the summer it refused to do so, then it did so through pressure. There are hard questions around that £100 million. The housing minister confirmed that £40 million of it has not yet been agreed. The Government has to understand the consequences of the anxiety that that creates. I do not have time to go into all the housing issues, but I urge the Government to listen—if not to me, then to the housing sector, which says that the Government’s core approach is damaging. If the Government has the stature to reverse its decision in “Firm Foundations: The Future of Housing in Scotland”, it will have our support.

I return in my last minute to social justice. The minister might wish to reflect on the article in *Third Force News* that highlights the anxieties of the voluntary sector about what is happening to the fairer Scotland fund, which has, of course, been cut. The sector says that it is being squeezed out of the social inclusion process. We all know how important that process is to housing in particular. I urge the Scottish Government not just to assert its commitment to equality and social justice, but to show its seriousness, if not in response to me then to the serious people in the sector. Its budget decisions and programme for government should show that, unlike the First Minister, it understands the absolute centrality of economic and social factors in determining Government action.

16:06

Alex Neil (Central Scotland) (SNP): The Government has announced one of the most substantive legislative programmes that Scotland has had in the past 30 years. I welcome in particular the proposed abolition of the council tax

and the additional support for learning bill, which will rectify many of the significant deficiencies in the current legislation.

As the First Minister rightly said, our number 1 priority has to be the economy—that is where I agree with Johann Lamont. Although I would not copy her on anything else, I agree that economic growth and social justice, which go hand in hand, are our number 1 priorities, as has been spelled out by the First Minister and the Government day in, day out in the past year.

During the past year, the official inflation figure has more than doubled and the real level of inflation for pensioners has been nearer 10 per cent than 5 per cent. Those increases are a cause for immediate worry. So too are the increases in fuel prices—22 per cent for petrol and 38 per cent for diesel. Energy prices are already up by 38 per cent and are rising further, and weekly grocery bills have gone up by 23 per cent in the past year. We have heard from Gordon Brown over the past 10 years that he did not want boom and bust. What we have had is Brown and bust—the UK economy is nearly bust now.

The economic situation that we face has demonstrated two things in Scotland. First are the importance and benefits of having a Scottish Government that will make maximum imaginative use of our limited powers to influence the Scottish economy. Secondly, it has shown up that until this Parliament has sovereign powers over economic policy we will never realise the full potential of the Scottish economy or the Scottish people.

We could debate forever how we got here. Every country is facing an element of global influence as a result of the international credit crunch. However, a large part of the problem in Britain is the making of Brown. The chickens are coming home to roost in terms of the real results of having him as Chancellor of the Exchequer for 10 years and Prime Minister for one. We saw yesterday the limits of his Government’s ambitions, when it announced a programme of activity that comes nowhere near matching the scale of the challenge that faces the UK economy. Indeed, some of the measures that were announced yesterday will not be implemented until April 2009, while we face a situation in which families require immediate substantive action on the right scale to deal with the problems that they face. That is why we have called, rightly, for a reflationary policy to expand the UK economy by £30 billion a year, about £3 billion of which would come into Scotland to deal with the economic situation in which we find ourselves. Part of that programme should be giving Scotland our fair share of our oil money to invest in social housing, infrastructure, new jobs and new industry.

The other thing we need—I hope that we will get it—is immediate help for pensioners and people on low and fixed incomes to deal with their fuel bills. We need action on two levels: first, to deal with the energy companies and the excessive prices that they are now charging, not to mention the cowboy activities that were exposed by *The Sunday Times* last Sunday; and secondly, a substantial increase in the winter fuel allowance to ensure that our pensioners can see through this winter without—literally, in some cases—freezing to death.

That is what we would be doing if we had the power to do it. The great tragedy is that the current situation demonstrates the link between the constitution, the economy and social justice. If we had the constitutional powers to do it, we could grow the Scottish economy and deliver real social justice for our people.

16:12

John Park (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): We are pressed for time, so I will concentrate on skills and their all-too-brief mention in section 5 of the Government document.

No one would disagree that, as Alex Neil just said, the economic conditions that we face in Scotland are among the most challenging for many years. Equipping Scots with the tools to meet the challenge head-on should be a key priority for any Scottish Government. If we are going to compete globally, we need high-quality skills to be maintained and further developed.

I spent the summer recess meeting constituents across Mid Scotland and Fife, private sector companies and UK-wide organisations, who are all deeply concerned about the lack of sufficient funding for, in particular, adult apprenticeships in the vast majority of sectors. I met training providers who are concerned about the cut in funding for adult apprenticeships and who fear that the term “skills utilisation”, which is frequently used by the Government and is indeed mentioned in today’s document, is really about dismantling the apprenticeship system as we know it.

I met the sector skills council, Creative and Cultural Skills, which is making huge strides at UK level in developing opportunities for school leavers entering apprenticeships and for adult apprenticeships. However, no similar support is available in Scotland, which means that creative industries in areas such as Edinburgh, Fife, Aberdeen and Glasgow will lag behind those in the rest of the UK. It is not about the levers that we have; it is about what we do with them.

On a personal note, I met a constituent—Jacqueline Winski—who had a very personal story to tell about how gaining new skills had changed

her life and provided her with an opportunity to play a key role in a successful family jewellery business. She is devastated that no money is available to help to support her small business to train and develop staff because adult apprenticeship funding has been cut for all sectors other than engineering and construction. She is devastated because she knows from personal experience the difference that upskilling makes not only to her small business but to the lives of the people who undertake the training, by making them more employable for the future.

For the record, let me say that I have no problem with the Government increasing funding for adult apprenticeships in engineering and construction, but it should not be done at the expense of other areas such as information technology, tourism and management. Those are key areas of our economy—a diverse economy that is essential to Scotland’s international standing.

The removal of funding for training our next generation of managers is especially worrying because management skills especially need to be developed on the job—at the coal face. Anyone who knows anything about improving productivity will say that we need a highly skilled population of managers and leaders. People who know the industry but also have the skills to manage effectively will ensure that Scotland can face up to the stiff global competition for work that we face now and in the future. The fact that the Government has chosen not to prioritise skills in its document makes me extremely disappointed and worried.

I had intended to mention vocational training and the OECD report, but unfortunately I do not have enough time. Instead, I will concentrate on the debate that we had on the skills strategy on 22 May this year. “Moving Scotland Forward” highlights the skills strategy as the platform for making progress on skills in Scotland. On 22 May, Parliament gave a clear instruction to the Government to produce a revamped skills strategy. The motion that was passed that day called on the Scottish Government to ensure that the revamped strategy contained detailed information on the 50,000 training places that it promised to provide between 2007 and 2011, and outlined how access would be

“provided to high quality vocational education for all school pupils aged 14 or above.”—[*Official Report*, 22 May 2008; c 8990.]

The motion also said that the revamped strategy should set targets for the expansion of apprenticeships and, most importantly, should contain the performance indicators that would be used to measure the strategy’s success. Such indicators were missing from the original strategy.

Today we have heard little on skills from the Government or, unfortunately, from other parties in the Parliament, and there is no indication that the promised revamped strategy will appear any time soon. I assure all my parliamentary colleagues that there was no overtly political reason for asking the Government to produce a revised strategy. When the original strategy was rejected last September, it was a logical conclusion that the Government would have to reassure Parliament that it would reconsider it. Opposition parties are genuinely concerned that one of the main economic levers that the Scottish Parliament has at its disposal is not being used to its full potential.

Margaret Curran mentioned a new politics. Colleagues tell me that the Parliament has become increasingly partisan over the past 16 months. As someone who was elected only last May, I cannot say that with any confidence, but I can say that although I understand—but do not agree with—the SNP Government's desire to do things differently from the UK Government at every turn, it is vital that the Parliament and Alex Salmond's Government put this country's interests first at all times.

In the debate on 22 May, the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning said:

"We need Scottish solutions for a Scottish skills system."—[*Official Report*, 22 May 2008; c 8867.]

From what I have seen in front of me today, it is not just on skills but on the economy and jobs that we need that.

16:17

Roseanna Cunningham (Perth) (SNP): We have listened to many speeches about the glass being half full. In that regard, I note John Park's failure to tell us what his constituent thought about the small business bonus scheme. There is no doubt that she welcomed it and is using it to further her business.

John Park rose—

Roseanna Cunningham: How different Scotland looks, both to itself and to the wider world, in year 2 of our Administration. There is increased confidence, increased optimism and an increased sense of direction. I understand that not everyone buys into that sense of direction, but at least there is now a clear road map for Scotland. That situation compares starkly with the first eight years of devolution. To paraphrase Yeats, "All is changed, changed utterly"—although this time for the better.

Given my position as convener of the Rural Affairs and Environment Committee, it would be remiss of me not to mention the three bills that will directly affect that committee's work. We are

promised a flood risk management bill and a marine bill, both of which will receive initial consideration by my committee. There is also the climate change bill, in which we will have a significant interest, even if we will not be the lead committee for stage 1 consideration.

The committee has already done significant work in the area of flood risk management. Although the Government has not immediately adopted all our recommendations, I have no doubt that we will have lively and wholly constructive engagement with it on the legislative way forward. The marine bill will make great changes and take huge strides forward for Scotland's marine environment, and I look forward to its introduction.

Of course, my interests are not confined to those of my committee. I am absolutely delighted that the Government is pressing ahead with plans to abolish the unfair council tax and to introduce a fairer local income tax that is based on the ability to pay. The challenge to Labour is about fairness. The challenge to the Liberal Democrats is for them to engage constructively with the Government on the issue. I say to my former sparring partner Mike Rumbles that "consensus" does not mean everyone simply agreeing with what he wants—although that is how he usually interprets it.

Earlier in the debate, Murdo Fraser expressed his party's opposition to a local income tax, saying that organisation after organisation was lining up to attack it. Strangely, he made no mention of the hundreds and thousands of ordinary people who are lining up to support it—at the last count, it was 88 per cent of the population. Are their views to be set aside so easily? If that is the Tory way, it is little wonder that the Tories are sitting where they are in the opinion polls in Scotland. As they say in the north of England, the Tories should think on. That said, at least the Tories said where the money would come from for their alternative measures—through an attack on Scottish Water, which I fear would be done with an eye on breaking it up and flogging it off to the highest bidder. Plus ça change.

I woke on Sunday morning to the strains of "Darling is a Charlie, a Charlie, a Charlie" emanating from the radio: either I was dreaming it or Radio Scotland was having a bit of a laugh. Either way, it is incredibly sad that the UK chancellor has become such a laughing stock. Many MSPs may not be aware that he also gave an interview to the *Stornoway Gazette* in which he said that his most important priority that day was to unblock a drain. Fair is fair, he was on his holidays, but if I were him I would be careful about using the word "drain" in any context, given that the words "down the" and "circling" come forcibly to mind. There is no magic touch at the moment at number 11 Downing Street.

Meanwhile, it is clear that Opposition members in the Scottish Parliament expect miracles from the SNP Government. According to the Opposition, a failure to implement our entire manifesto in year one is a manifest failure. Evidently, they had even higher expectations of Alex Salmond than we had, and that is saying something. We need only look at the turnaround in Scotland since Alex started waving his magic wand. However, what did we hear from Iain Gray? We heard talk of his “nagging doubts”. I have a hint for Iain: when you spend 13 minutes and 14 seconds nagging, you should not be surprised when your audience switches off. Here is the truth that Iain and his colleagues hate to hear—

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Alasdair Morgan): Members should address other members by their full name.

Roseanna Cunningham: Scotland switched on last May: it switched on to the SNP, the SNP Government and a bright future for Scotland.

I started with a quote and I will end with one. In an SNP Scotland:

“All Shall Be Well; And All Shall Be Well; And All Manner of Things Shall Be Well.”

16:22

Paul Martin (Glasgow Springburn) (Lab): Let there be no more excuses from this Government. *[Interruption.]* The point is a fair one. Never before has a Government said so little when talking of passing legislation.

The previous Executive passed 51 bills, yet to date this Government has proposed only 21 bills, and we are not even sure how far many of them will go. For a Government that has so much to say about what it would do if it had the legislative powers that are reserved to Westminster, it is a pity that it makes so little use of the powers that the Scottish Parliament has at present.

I listened with interest to the First Minister boasting about record numbers of police officers, given that the increase is fewer than 100 officers since the SNP Government took office. I will provide the chamber with the facts: in the 10 years of Labour in Scotland from 1997 to 2007, the average increase in the number of police officers was 125 a year and yet, over one and a half years, this Government has managed less than half of that.

Labour will not allow this Government to continue its attempts to condition the Parliament and the people of Scotland into believing that it will deliver its pledge of 1,000 more police officers. I am happy to take an intervention from any member on the Government benches if they feel that I have misrepresented the facts.

I have some advice for Annabel Goldie: do not sit on a hot stove while waiting for the number of officers to reach the figure of 14,236. She needs a reality check. Given current trends, the SNP Government will not deliver on that pledge.

The First Minister reminded Labour members that our manifesto contained no commitment on delivering additional police officers. I say to him that our respect for the electorate is such that we did not want to make an empty promise to deliver 1,000 additional officers. What the First Minister said represents the kind of cheap politics that we saw in the 2007 election campaign.

In January, in line with a number of other health boards throughout Scotland, NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde entered into car park charging arrangements. Subsequent to that, I raised the possibility of introducing a member's bill to scrap hospital car parking charges throughout Scotland. I welcome the cabinet secretary's commitment to scrapping car parking charges at hospitals at the end of the year—yes, constructive points are made in this chamber. *[Interruption.]* I would welcome constructive responses to constructive points. However, let us get to the nub of the matter: will the cabinet secretary provide all the additional funding—not transitional funding—that will be required for health boards to exit their current car parking arrangements? Does she accept that it is grossly unfair that three hospital sites will not have free car parking?

Nicola Sturgeon: Can Paul Martin tell us why it did not cross his mind once that it was unfair for people to be tied into car parking charges at PFI hospitals when the Administration of which he was part was signing PFI contracts for those very hospitals?

Paul Martin: I remind the minister that she signed the documentation that allowed car parking charges to be introduced at Stobhill hospital, Glasgow royal infirmary and the Southern general hospital. It is not good enough for her to provide only the information that suits her in the chamber. If she wants to have a real debate on hospital car parking charges, she should advise us what the termination costs would be for the three private hospital sites in Scotland.

From the Government's justice agenda, it is clear that it prefers spending time making excuses for the perpetrators of crime to defending those who are the victims of crime. I call on the Government to ensure that the antisocial behaviour legislation that the Parliament passed is not diluted by Kenny MacAskill and Fergus Ewing. We will oppose with vigour any attempts by the Government to dilute that legislation, which was welcomed by every community in Scotland and gives our communities protection from the tiny minority who cause havoc through crime.

16:27

Ross Finnie (West of Scotland) (LD): For those of us who have been chosen by our respective parties to wind up today, it is difficult to believe that today's proceedings commenced only seven hours ago. Father Kevin Dow reminded us of St Gregory. Sadly, this debate has not always reached the high standards that are required of a Gregorian chant.

John Swinney: Not yet.

Ross Finnie: I am grateful to John Swinney for the confidence that he expresses—even from a sedentary position—in my remarks.

Tavish Scott and Jeremy Purvis made clear that there is an immediate requirement for us to tackle the consequences of the current economic downturn. The Government must flesh out much of what it has said in general terms. Liberal Democrats share with the Government the belief that we always need to give a sense of hope and confidence in what the nation can do. In doing so, we want to make clear that, although individuals in Scotland can realise their potential and Scots can strut the world stage, they do not need to be part of an independent state. Chris Hoy, our triple gold medallist, is an outstanding example of the position in which Liberal Democrats would like Scotland and Scots to be. I was disappointed that in a successful summer the First Minister managed to play only a “reasonably starring role”. Given his penchant for hyperbole, that probably means that he had no starring role at all.

I move on to a more important issue. I welcome the First Minister's move in the direction of the well-respected Liberal economist John Maynard Keynes, but he must do a little more study before I welcome that conversion fully. It is interesting to note that Keynes deplored the great amount of waste in a world full of wants. That is why Liberal Democrats support sustainable growth. Patrick Harvie was right to point out that sustainable growth does not mean growth simply continuing at the same level each year; it is actually growth that is determined by using our resources in a sustainable way. It is not clear from the Government's current policies that that is its interpretation of the term.

There is a second issue to which I would like the Government to give more thought. Several members, including Alex Neil, briefly talked about sovereign powers and the unfettered way in which the Government could manage the economy if Scotland was independent. They also told us that the Government would be tied to the pound. Indeed, Kenny Gibson reminded us that it would also be tied to the euro. Members must be more honest and admit that that would mean that the Government would also be bound by the monetary

strategy that goes with those currencies. It is erroneous to give the impression that there would be unfettered control over the economy, because that is simply not true.

The Liberal Democrats are prepared to support many aspects of the legislative programme and other parts of the Government's programme. We are keen on the abolition of the council tax. Liberal Democrats have supported progressive taxation for many years. I was disappointed that the member who opened for Labour, Iain Gray, cited a range of people most of whom can be relied on day in, day out to condemn any form of personal tax—indeed, any form of taxation—and then cited advisers who spend their whole professional lives advising people on how to avoid taxes.

George Foulkes: My understanding of the Liberal Democrats' policy is that they are in favour of a local income tax and local authorities retaining powers. Is that not entirely different from what the nats are proposing, which is a national nat tax, a Salmond tax, a tartan tax—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I think that we get the point.

Ross Finnie: I think that I got the point. I am grateful that Lord Foulkes has so intelligently understood Liberal Democrat policy, and I welcome his point, which is a point that I want to make. I support progressive taxation, but I make it clear that we do not want a national tax.

Alison McInnes made clear our support for the climate change bill and annual targets.

I disagree with the Conservative party's point on the marine bill. It seems to the Liberal Democrats that unless jurisdiction is extended to 200 miles, there will be a great guddle rather than a simplification of our marine legislation. We could end up with fishing in a larger area and conservation being confined. Rob Gibson alluded to the fact that marine spatial planning is the solution for resolving conflicts, and the Liberal Democrats are certainly keen on that.

We are delighted that the Government will continue to bear down on tobacco and we welcome the fact that a cultural change on alcohol has been proposed. However, we will not achieve a cultural change by simply stigmatising people between the ages of 18 and 21. Young people must be made part of the solution rather than part of the problem, otherwise we will fail in trying to reach our objectives.

16:33

Derek Brownlee (South of Scotland) (Con): It says quite a lot about the low expectations from which the Government has been able to benefit that it can get away with displaying the word

“Competence” on the first page of its glossy document on its new approach to government as if competence were something that should not simply be expected of every Government as of right. The degree to which the Government is able to benefit from the low expectations that have been engendered by its predecessor is astonishing.

As other members have said, there are some things in the Scottish Government’s programme that we will support, some things that we will oppose and some things that we will take a view on only after further scrutiny. We welcome the confirmation that the business rate cuts will be implemented in full in April next year, the bill to safeguard rural schools and the bill to decouple Holyrood elections and local elections. That we should do so is no surprise, of course, as we have campaigned on those issues for years. They are sound Conservative policies from the Scottish Government, and long may such policies continue. We also welcome the reaffirmation that sustainable economic growth is the Government’s top priority. As other members have said, the economy will, perhaps more than any other issue, dominate the political landscape in the year ahead.

Scotland is not immune to the downturn. The consequences of the economic slowdown or recession and of higher prices will be faced not just by Scotland’s families but by the Government. The First Minister talked of the need to reflate the economy. If the Scottish economy could grow as far and as fast as the First Minister’s ego, we would have nothing to fear. However, there is a debate to be had about whether the Scottish Government can do anything meaningful to affect the economic situation in the short term, other than at the margins. There is an equally valid point, which I think Ross Finnie touched on, about the ability of the UK Government or any Government to counterbalance some of the factors in the world economy at present. Although the boost from reduced business rates is welcome, it is unlikely to offset the full consequences of the downturn for many businesses. I was glad to see that the Council of Economic Advisers is examining the potential for further business rate cuts in order to stimulate the economy.

The Scottish Government’s economic policy levers tend to be effective in the longer term. For example, its impact on infrastructure and education clearly has a longer-term implication for the economic growth that can be achieved. However, whatever view we take—whether we think that the Scottish Government can and should intervene and can achieve a lot, or whether we believe that its role and remit is more limited—we can surely agree that, as a minimum, the

Government should seek to do no harm. Measures that will harm the economy should be ditched. We should aim to reduce burdens on employers and offer what support we can to businesses and families within the constraints of a devolved budget. In many ways, the right decision for the economy in the short term is to take the right decisions for the long term, because making Scotland a stronger and more attractive place in which to do business will do more to insulate us from future downturns than doing anything else, and will encourage faster economic growth sooner.

I look forward with some interest to the public services reform bill, but the highlight of the session will undoubtedly be the Government finally introducing its discredited local income tax bill. It will not be a highlight for the Scottish Government, but it will be a highlight nonetheless, because there will finally be no hiding place when the detail of all the plans is set out for all to see. Given what we have heard on the economy from a range of speakers across the parties in this debate, does anyone really now believe that Scottish income tax receipts will grow by 5 per cent year on year as the Scottish Government assumes? We simply do not know.

We have heard varying things from the Liberal Democrats, and we do not know whether the Government will stitch them up with vague assurances on local variability to get their votes in the chamber or whether they will stick with their commitment to oppose a tax that is not locally set. I sincerely hope that they stick to their principles, but we will wait and see. Perhaps the new arbitration bill will help the SNP and the Liberal Democrats to come to an accommodation. It is not just scrutiny in Parliament that the discredited local income tax will need to withstand. In only 27 days, the Government will have to release the consultation responses on the new tax, with organisation after organisation being critical. There will need to be some grand Government announcement to bury the bad news.

In his comments about the example that I think Iain Gray used earlier, Joe FitzPatrick seemed to confirm that the higher rate personal allowance for pensioners will be available under the local income tax. I think that Iain Gray’s example came from Citizens Advice Scotland, and of course the reason that it assumed that there would be no higher rate personal allowance was that the consultation paper was not clear on that. My heart leapt when Alex Neil called for immediate help for pensioners. I thought that he was about to restate his long-held support for a pensioner discount for council tax, but he went off in a different direction.

The First Minister boasted earlier of a large tax cut for low and middle-income households.

However, that could, of course, be delivered through a cut in council tax. More important, it could be delivered sooner in that way. The First Minister talked of Scotland judging harshly any MSP who voted to keep the council tax. However, would Scotland not judge harshly MSPs who voted to impose a tax on people who are on the minimum wage who currently pay no council tax or on low-paid workers, and to cut taxes for people who have substantial dividend income? Citizens Advice Scotland also raised in its submission the example of families with disabled children.

It is the discredited local income tax that Scotland will judge harshly. The sooner it is killed off, the sooner we can get on with reforming and reducing the council tax.

16:39

Andy Kerr (East Kilbride) (Lab): It could be said superficially that the legislative programme could bring consensus across the chamber—we will wait and see—which would not be surprising from our perspective, given that many Labour issues and policies are contained in the programme. As ever with this Government, however, the detail requires closer examination as it is not always as good as it might have looked on its first outing in the chamber. We will therefore pursue matters as the Parliament goes on and as we review the policies.

I worry about the short-term nature of many of the policies that have been introduced today. The programme for government is more about scoring fast political points than about laying down long-term strategic opportunities for Scotland. That is particularly the case on economic and social justice, which seems to be lacking entirely from the Government's document. As ever, there is a lot of facade and front in the document, but many of the policies are ill thought through. I cite the alcohol policy as one such example.

It is noticeable that, for our much-loved First Minister, all that is good in Scotland is due to Mr Salmond and his party but, when the going gets tough, it is always somebody else's fault. Ironically, when Malcolm Chisholm raised an issue about culture, Mr Salmond immediately thought that the question was about his own performance at the Edinburgh festival fringe as opposed to his lack of attendance at many of the events. The First Minister also took credit for the cervical cancer vaccination programme, but the announcement that Scotland would be the first nation in the world to undertake such a programme was made by a Labour health minister—in fact, by this Labour health minister. If the First Minister wants to work on a cross-party basis, as he so often claims, why does he not reveal some of the facts behind those policies?

The First Minister's statement was followed by Nicola Sturgeon's speech, the first few minutes of which were a love-in. She was dewy-eyed—the violins were playing in the background—as she talked about how great the First Minister was. She and her colleagues will have their day of reckoning in due course for many of the policy failures that are clear for us all to see. The national conversation is not a success just because Ms Sturgeon says that it is. The only people who are engaged in that conversation are her own supporters.

We heard much from the First Minister about Keynesian economics, but he has one of the most right-wing economic strategies of any recent Scottish Government. On the issue of creeping privatisation, has the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Wellbeing ruled out NHS boards using the private sector to bring down waiting times? She makes no answer to the question, so it appears that use of the private sector in the health service has not been ruled out. Again, the facade or fallacy that is presented by the Government is that it talks left but acts right. Given that the cabinet secretary has refused to clarify the point, I assume that, although she says that the private sector is not involved in the health service, she has not stopped health boards using the private sector to reduce waiting times.

Iain Gray mentioned issues on which there is some consensus across the chamber, such as the climate change bill, the marine bill and the flooding bill. However, as many members have pointed out, we need not just legislation to support a national flood prevention strategy but the resources behind the strategy to make it a reality. That has been lost in the local government settlement. As the Rural Affairs and Environment Committee and other commentators in this Parliament and beyond have identified, further resources are required to make the strategy real but those have not been made available by the Government.

I share the views of Murdo Fraser, Margo MacDonald and others on the policy on alcohol. I do not think that it is right to increase the age limit, but I believe that we require stronger enforcement. We need to ensure that those who sell alcohol to young people are hit in their pocket. If we took away their right to sell alcohol by removing their licence from them, that would be far more effective than the quite tawdry approach whereby 18 to 21-year-olds would be prohibited from buying alcohol across the off-licence counter.

As Margaret Curran, Johann Lamont and others pointed out, £500 million has been taken out of the Scottish budget to subsidise two tax cuts. The Government has no vision on apprenticeships, as John Park pointed out. There has also been talk of the need for business confidence, but what could

greater undermine that confidence than the SNP's proposals for a local income tax? Many members mentioned that issue during the debate.

We heard a lot about Keynesian economics in relation to housing. However, the £100 million that has been announced by the Government is not new money. It is simply accelerating a slice of future capital spending by bringing it forward, so that money is only being rescheduled. It was said that the money would be spent this year and next, so the money will not be spent this year. The Government's great Keynesian economics do not add up, because the amount of additional money being spent is—believe it or not—just £20 million. Given that, according to the finance profile that the previous Government left the current Administration, spending on housing was due to rise to £584 million but will now amount to only £513 million, some £81 million is actually being cut from that budget. Those are the facts about what the Government inherited and they reveal the fallacies of the Government's economic strategy, particularly in relation to housing.

Many members raised the issue of class sizes. On 5 September 2007, Hugh Henry said

"The First Minister promised in his manifesto that he would reduce to 18 class sizes for primaries 1 to 3. I know teachers and others who voted for him on the basis of that promise. Can he confirm that his promise will be delivered in the lifetime of this parliamentary session?"—[*Official Report*, 5 September 2007; c 1378.]

The First Minister's response was yes. We have heard from David McLetchie and others on the point. There is not a hope that that pledge will be met and, indeed, ministers are backtracking from it. Where is the SNP on one of its key manifesto pledges, which appealed to parents and teachers throughout Scotland? It has no intention of delivering on that target, which is a betrayal of the faith of the Scottish electorate.

On the subject of education, along with the fudge of class sizes in the single outcome agreements, we have a lack of leadership and finance to support the SNP's objective; David McLetchie used West Lothian Council as an example of failure; only a quarter of teaching probationers are in work, leaving three quarters not in work; the number of composite classes is growing; class sizes are increasing; and kids are studying in classrooms that have neither been refurbished nor renewed because of the SNP's inability to approach the subject of matching Labour's brick-for-brick programme. The SNP is letting Scotland down, not acting in the Scottish interest; indeed, it is doing the opposite.

We heard about the council tax freeze and 71p per week for Scottish people. However, in Aberdeen, Edinburgh and other parts of Scotland where council services are being cut back, no one

is welcoming the council tax freeze. Home care charges are rising in Fife, class sizes are rising, and school support budgets are being reduced; that is the true reckoning of the council tax freeze in Scotland. One old age pensioner wrote to me recently to ask what benefit she got from Labour and what she is getting from the SNP. She gets a £14 reduction per annum in her council tax, and she will get across the Forth and Tay bridges toll free. From Labour she got free bus travel, fuel allowance, free television licence, free passport, free prescriptions, income tax free, free central heating, and free travel. All of those were supported and delivered by Labour.

We have not heard much today about the Scottish futures trust, which is a big omission. There has been no mention of matching Labour's brick-for-brick plan, and no mention of the key financial strategy, other than local income tax, and how it will be delivered. Why was the Scottish futures trust not mentioned? Unison says that it is PFI lite; Allyson Pollock says that

"A new name can't save a poor policy"

and we all know that the futures trust is PPP in disguise. The initiative has been rebadged and called something different. A bit of honesty about the SNP's alternative to PPP would be welcomed by the people of Scotland.

Jeremy Purvis raised some relevant issues about Scottish Enterprise, the lack of training, research and university funding, the fact that the arc of prosperity is now going a bit rusty, and how the bureaucracy surrounding the single outcome agreements will grow day by day. Those points are relevant to the debate and the minister should respond to them when he speaks.

Margaret Curran pointed out the reality of NHS budgets. There have been £42 million in cuts in NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde.

Christine Grahame asked how Gordon Brown dared to invite Margaret Thatcher to 10 Downing Street. He invited her in for a cup of tea; he did not sign up to her economic policies as Alex Salmond has done. That is the true disgrace of Alex Salmond and his leadership. [*Interruption.*] Aye, they do not like it, do they?

Bill Aitken raised the point that Kenny MacAskill is emptying prisons and putting our communities in great danger.

I return to today's key issue—local income tax. Why did the minister bother with a consultation when, although it told him that no one in Scotland wants a local income tax, he is going to go on with it? Is the tax legally incompetent? Yes, said CIPFA and the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives. Is it a local tax? No, said the Law Society of Scotland, the SCDI, the STUC, Unison,

the chambers of commerce and others. Does it remove fiscal autonomy from local government? Yes, said CIPFA. Will it lead to a funding shortfall? Yes, said the CBI, SOLACE and the STUC. Will it be 3p in the pound? No, said CIPFA, SOLACE, the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors, the CBI, the FSB and many other organisations. Will it be a disincentive to work in Scotland? Yes, said the CBI and Unison. The policy has been condemned. The SNP must consider the impact that it will have on the Scottish people and economy, and it must not bring that policy to the chamber.

16:49

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Sustainable Growth (John Swinney): As Ross Finnie said, this has been a fascinating way to spend a Wednesday. I have enjoyed every minute of it and I look forward to addressing the points that members have made. My only regret is that there was some stigmatising of age groups during the debate. That was undertaken by somebody who I would not have thought would do it. Margaret Smith, who is well known for her crusading work on equalities issues, accused me of being middle aged. That was most inappropriate and I await the apology.

On the subject of apologies, perhaps Malcolm Chisholm might want to make one or to correct Andy Kerr's inaccuracy, because Malcolm Chisholm did attack the First Minister for the number of times that he attended festival shows. However, I will not be churlish; I will address Malcolm Chisholm's points of substance about creative Scotland. He asked whether the public services reform bill will be amendable in relation to creative Scotland. Of course it will be, because it is primary legislation. I would have thought that Malcolm Chisholm would know that.

Malcolm Chisholm asked whether the Government has received a report that says that transition costs will be £7 million. I do not believe that the report that we received says that; I believe that it covers a variety of questions on the establishment and operation of creative Scotland, which ministers are considering. If he wonders why the enactment of provisions from the Creative Scotland Bill is delayed, perhaps he should think about how he pressed his button to vote down the bill back in June.

Malcolm Chisholm: John Swinney knows full well that another bill could be introduced and passed before April. How can the body be set up when its remit is to be determined retrospectively? That makes no sense. Even more fundamentally, why are the Parliament's financial concerns about creative Scotland being totally ignored?

John Swinney: The issues will be the subject of the public services reform bill, which Parliament will have the opportunity to scrutinise in the usual fashion with the Finance Committee.

I will correct something that Iain Gray said. He made great play of the home care charges in Fife Council, but he omitted to say that 10 councils in Scotland with Labour involvement at their core already charge for those social care services, sometimes at a higher rate than Fife Council proposes to charge.

Those are my points of rebuttal. I will now concentrate on consensus. I make it clear that the Government is enthusiastic about finding consensus throughout the Parliament on the climate change bill. We have undertaken an enormous consultation exercise on the bill, which attracted 21,000 responses—that is second only to the consultation on the Smoking, Health and Social Care (Scotland) Bill. The Government will reflect carefully on that consultation and will return to Parliament with proposals.

Many questions have been asked about the pace of renewables activity under the Government. Between 2003 and 2007, the previous Government authorised 17 renewables projects. Since May 2007, the Administration has authorised 13 renewables projects, including what will be the largest wind farm in Europe. For heaven's sake—give the Government credit when we deliver the goods on our commitment to renewables.

The second issue that I will tackle in the spirit of consensus is criminal justice and licensing activity, which will be the subject of a Government bill. Bill Aitken made a thoughtful speech, on which I intervened, about the challenges in the criminal justice agenda. I detected from what he said enthusiasm for more effective community disposal as an alternative to imprisoning people when we all know that imprisonment is not the effective disposal in many circumstances. I hope—I appeal genuinely to Mr Aitken—that he will contribute to the debate publicly and in the Parliament in that fashion, to try to secure consensus, because whichever part of the chamber we are in, we all know that prison is failing many people whom community sentences would more effectively deal with and tackle. I hope that Mr Aitken will take that issue forward.

Pauline McNeill expressed concern about antisocial behaviour. It would have been more helpful to hear from the Labour Party what measures it would be prepared to support to tackle the problems of alcohol abuse, which are deep set in our society. Christine Grahame made an excellent and thoughtful speech. She gave a different view from that which Government front benchers argued in the consultation process, but

her opinion is legitimate and strong and the Government will reflect on it. I encourage Parliament to focus on those challenges, because the country must address them.

In the spirit of consensus, I turn to the debate on the Scottish futures trust. There was a marked contrast between the contribution of Ken Macintosh, the MSP for Eastwood, and the one I heard from the leader of East Renfrewshire Council when I met him last week to discuss the school building programme in East Renfrewshire and to hear about the enthusiastic energy of the council to be a participant in the development of the Scottish futures trust. The leader of East Renfrewshire Council is a Labour leader, and he demonstrated a maturity that is evident in Labour local authority leadership but not on the Labour benches in the Parliament. I will be delighted to come to Parliament next week, subject to the consent of the Parliamentary Bureau, to update Parliament on the significant progress that we are making on the Scottish futures trust and to set out further details on the Government's proposals.

The issue of the council tax and the local income tax has been a fundamental part of today's debate. Des McNulty made a characteristically illogical argument that council tax benefit was not part of the local government settlement and was in fact the property of the pensioners to whom it was paid. Council tax benefit is not paid to pensioners. It is not paid to people on low incomes. It is paid to local authorities in respect of the financial circumstances of people in their communities. It is an integral part of the local government settlement and it will be an obscenity if the United Kingdom Government does not allow the Scottish Government to retain those resources to support local taxation in Scotland, which is our entitlement. The Labour Party is the supposed party of social justice and it would be a strange position for it to adopt if it were to turn its back on lifting 85,000 people out of poverty by the introduction of the local income tax.

The debate has focused very much on our current circumstances. One of the issues on which I want to close relates to the economy. Ross Finnie commented on the significance of the financial situation that we face. It is because of that situation that the Government has, in the past few weeks, set out measures to accelerate our affordable housing investment programme to ensure that we introduce European structural fund support and give greater help to first-time buyers to get a foot on the property ladder. Those are all constructive measures to try to support the development of the housing sector, and the Government takes them forward responsibly to improve the economic conditions. That is a great deal more than can be said for Alistair Darling's

destructive contribution to the debate on the economy last week.

Johann Lamont: The housing minister said that the issue of the £40 million is still being discussed with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities. That is an important point. Will Mr Swinney confirm that that discussion is on-going, and will he provide detail of how the £100 million can be accessed by individual local authorities to ensure that it is fairly distributed throughout Scotland to meet housing need?

John Swinney: We will be delighted to set out information on exactly how that will be taken forward. The discussions with local authorities on all questions, including this one, have been constructive and effective.

We have had today what can only be described as hustings on the Labour benches. It has been a display of talent to find out who is best suited. I remain a floating voter in the contest. Had I been fortunate enough to have a vote, I would still be unsure about which way to cast it. I remind the Labour Party of one or two realities about its position in Scotland. The party went into the most recent election telling us that no public service—other than education—would get above-inflation increases in funding. That was the Labour manifesto position. In the course of the past few weeks, Margaret Curran—who made a distinguished contribution today—has demanded that we give more money to health boards, despite the fact that only 12 months ago, Labour was castigating me for efficiency savings of 3 per cent, which it said was not a sufficiently ambitious target. Des McNulty wants more money for buses. Pauline McNeill wants more money for police pensions. Malcolm Chisholm wants more money for creative Scotland. Andy Kerr wants more money for local government salaries. Lewis Macdonald wants more money for the homecoming, and John Park wants more money for apprenticeships. Until they can get their sums to add up, they should not attempt to get anywhere near government again.

Parliamentary Bureau Motions

17:00

The Presiding Officer (Alex Fergusson): The next item of business is consideration of two Parliamentary Bureau motions. I ask Bruce Crawford to move motion S3M-2477, on committee membership, and motion S3M-2478, on substitution on committees.

Motions moved,

That the Parliament agrees that—

Nicol Stephen be appointed to replace Jim Hume as a member of the Audit Committee;

Iain Smith be appointed to replace Tavish Scott as a member of the Economy, Energy and Tourism Committee;

Margaret Smith be appointed to replace Jeremy Purvis as a member of the Education, Lifelong Learning and Culture Committee;

Jim Hume be appointed to replace Iain Smith as a member of the European and External Relations Committee;

Jeremy Purvis be appointed to replace Liam McArthur as a member of the Finance Committee;

Robert Brown be appointed to replace Margaret Smith as a member of the Justice Committee;

Liam McArthur be appointed to replace Mike Rumbles as a member of the Rural Affairs and Environment Committee;

Robert Brown be appointed to replace Hugh O'Donnell as a member of the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee.

That the Parliament agrees that—

John Farquhar Munro be appointed to replace Iain Smith as the Scottish Liberal Democrats substitute on the Audit Committee;

Jeremy Purvis be appointed to replace Liam McArthur as the Scottish Liberal Democrats substitute on the Economy, Energy and Tourism Committee;

Margaret Smith be appointed to replace Jim Tolson as the Scottish Liberal Democrats substitute on the Equal Opportunities Committee;

Iain Smith be appointed to replace Jeremy Purvis as the Scottish Liberal Democrats substitute on the European and External Relations Committee;

Liam McArthur be appointed to replace Ross Finnie as the Scottish Liberal Democrats substitute on the Finance Committee;

Alison McInnes be appointed to replace Robert Brown as the Scottish Liberal Democrats substitute on the Local Government and Communities Committee;

Nicol Stephen be appointed to replace Jim Hume as the Scottish Liberal Democrats substitute on the Public Petitions Committee;

Jim Hume be appointed to replace John Farquhar Munro as the Scottish Liberal Democrats substitute on the Rural Affairs and Environment Committee;

Mike Rumbles be appointed to replace Alison McInnes as the Scottish Liberal Democrats substitute on the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee;

Ross Finnie be appointed to replace Margaret Smith as the Scottish Liberal Democrats substitute on the Subordinate Legislation Committee;

Jim Tolson be appointed to replace Tavish Scott as the Scottish Liberal Democrats substitute on the Transport, Infrastructure and Climate Change Committee.—[Bruce Crawford.]

The Presiding Officer: The questions on the motions will be put at decision time.

Decision Time

17:00

The Presiding Officer (Alex Fergusson): The first question is, that motion S3M-2477, in the name of Bruce Crawford, on committee membership, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to.

That the Parliament agrees that—

Nicol Stephen be appointed to replace Jim Hume as a member of the Audit Committee;

Iain Smith be appointed to replace Tavish Scott as a member of the Economy, Energy and Tourism Committee;

Margaret Smith be appointed to replace Jeremy Purvis as a member of the Education, Lifelong Learning and Culture Committee;

Jim Hume be appointed to replace Iain Smith as a member of the European and External Relations Committee;

Jeremy Purvis be appointed to replace Liam McArthur as a member of the Finance Committee;

Robert Brown be appointed to replace Margaret Smith as a member of the Justice Committee;

Liam McArthur be appointed to replace Mike Rumbles as a member of the Rural Affairs and Environment Committee;

Robert Brown be appointed to replace Hugh O'Donnell as a member of the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee.

The Presiding Officer: The second question is, that motion S3M-2478, in the name of Bruce Crawford, on substitution on committees, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to.

That the Parliament agrees that—

John Farquhar Munro be appointed to replace Iain Smith as the Scottish Liberal Democrats substitute on the Audit Committee;

Jeremy Purvis be appointed to replace Liam McArthur as the Scottish Liberal Democrats substitute on the Economy, Energy and Tourism Committee;

Margaret Smith be appointed to replace Jim Tolson as the Scottish Liberal Democrats substitute on the Equal Opportunities Committee;

Iain Smith be appointed to replace Jeremy Purvis as the Scottish Liberal Democrats substitute on the European and External Relations Committee;

Liam McArthur be appointed to replace Ross Finnie as the Scottish Liberal Democrats substitute on the Finance Committee;

Alison McInnes be appointed to replace Robert Brown as the Scottish Liberal Democrats substitute on the Local Government and Communities Committee;

Nicol Stephen be appointed to replace Jim Hume as the Scottish Liberal Democrats substitute on the Public Petitions Committee;

Jim Hume be appointed to replace John Farquhar Munro as the Scottish Liberal Democrats substitute on the Rural Affairs and Environment Committee;

Mike Rumbles be appointed to replace Alison McInnes as the Scottish Liberal Democrats substitute on the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee;

Ross Finnie be appointed to replace Margaret Smith as the Scottish Liberal Democrats substitute on the Subordinate Legislation Committee;

Jim Tolson be appointed to replace Tavish Scott as the Scottish Liberal Democrats substitute on the Transport, Infrastructure and Climate Change Committee.

A92 (Upgrading)

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Trish Godman): The final item of business is a members' business debate on motion S3M-2148, in the name of Ted Brocklebank, on the upgrading of the A92. The debate will be concluded without any question being put.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament supports the campaign to dual the A92 from Glenrothes to the Melville Lodge roundabout in north east Fife and as a priority to upgrade the Parbroath junction, which is the only major intersection between Kirkcaldy and Dundee without a roundabout; commends the efforts of local people campaigning to upgrade the section between Preston roundabout and Balfarg junction, and notes that in terms of accidents the A92 is one of the most dangerous roads in Scotland with over 600 accidents in the last five years.

17:02

Ted Brocklebank (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): The motion before us tonight should concern all Fifers, and I would like to preface my remarks with a genuine tribute to the late John MacDougall. Although I did not know John personally, those whose judgment I respect, in the kingdom and beyond, talk of a doughty son of Fife who served his constituency well.

At the end of May, Tricia Marwick, Claire Baker and I took part in an open meeting in Glenrothes, at the invitation of the local area futures group, to discuss the state of the A92. We were left in no doubt about the strength of feeling that this road has been treated as the Cinderella among Scottish trunk roads for far too long. Shortly after, the futures group presented a petition of 3,000 signatures to the Parliament's Public Petitions Committee, recommending that the road be upgraded to complete the dual carriageway around Glenrothes.

For those like me whose recognition of Scottish roads by initials and numbers is not the best, I say that the A92 is the road that branches off the M90 motorway at Dunfermline when you are travelling north and then runs all the way through central Fife to the Tay road bridge. Again for the benefit of those not familiar with the road, I explain that it is dualled up to the Preston roundabout at Glenrothes and that there is then a stretch of approximately 3 miles of two-lane road passing the gates of the busy Tullis Russell paper mill to the Balfarg junction. After that, there is again a short section of dual carriageway to the New Inn toll, where to all intents and purposes the A92 becomes a rural two-lane road meandering through north-east Fife until another short dualled section immediately before the Tay bridge.

Although no one suggests that the A92 is as dangerous as the A9, what is clear from Scottish road transport statistics over the past five years is that, in terms of numbers of accidents, the A92 runs the Highland road fairly close, with a total of some 600 accidents, 23 of which were fatal. That represents a catalogue of broken families and human misery that is no longer sustainable.

Fife safety camera partnership has regularly expressed concern that warnings about speeding on the A92 are falling on deaf ears, with drivers at times exceeding 100mph on the 60mph stretches.

As far back as July 1996, when he was a minister of state at the Scottish Office, my distinguished colleague Lord James Douglas-Hamilton announced that the Conservative Government planned to upgrade the A92 around Glenrothes. However, in giving the scheme the green light, Lord James added a key proviso: he stressed that a dual carriageway between the Preston roundabout and the Balfarg junction was just a part of the proposed upgrading to the trunk route through Fife to the Tay bridge. In other words, the dualling of the Glenrothes section, important as it was, should be seen as part of a more ambitious transport project that the Conservative Government of the day had in prospect.

Of course, less than a year later, the Conservatives were replaced by Labour at Westminster and it is a matter of record that the A92 upgrading was put on hold. When it came before the new Scottish Parliament of 1999, the scheme was quietly shelved by the Minister for Transport, Sarah Boyack. Throughout all that time, Labour ran Fife Council and the Central Fife MSP was the Minister for Enterprise and Lifelong Learning, who was about to become First Minister in the Scottish Executive. Although members' business debates are consensual affairs, I wonder whether the Labour Party will show as little interest in the A92's future over the next few weeks as it has over the past few years.

The Scottish Conservatives have been consistent in their view that the dual carriageway around Glenrothes should be completed. However, we believe that, as part of Lord James's greater vision, in the short term, dualling should continue beyond Glenrothes to the Melville Lodges roundabout where the A92 crosses the A91. That section of the road is only an additional 5 miles beyond New Inn toll, bypassing the villages of Freuchie and Ladybank, but accident statistics suggest that it is one of the most dangerous stretches of the whole A92.

Additionally, we believe that, as a matter of urgency, the Parbroath junction where the A92 crosses the A913 between Cupar and Newburgh should also be upgraded. That is the only major

intersection between Kirkcaldy and Dundee without a roundabout and it is a well-known local black spot for accidents. In recognition of the current economic realities, we are limiting the scope of Lord James's original aspirations for the A92 to the improvements that I have outlined, at least in the short term. Those proposed upgrades are consistent with Conservative manifesto commitments to improve the infrastructure that was neglected by the previous Lib-Lab pact and to specific black-spot funding that is targeted at dangerous junctions and bends.

Understandably, in the light of the forthcoming Glenrothes by-election, there will now be other voices clamouring for the upgrading of the section of the A92 that bypasses Glenrothes. At the meeting to which I referred, back in May, Tricia Marwick made it clear that, as far as her party was concerned, the campaign for upgrading had to be relaunched. She said that it had been pushed back in the queue by other priorities. I believe that she said that the reopening of the Levenmouth to Thornton rail link was a higher priority for her party than the upgrading of the A92. However, although we support the rail link project, we recognise that the lack of a Levenmouth rail link is not costing lives.

I appeal to the other parties not simply to play to the voters of Glenrothes in considering the upgrading of this dangerous road. By all means, let us commit to dualling the 3 miles between Preston and Balfarg, but let us not forget that other elections are already on the horizon. Voters in North East Fife will doubtless take their own view if parties are prepared to commit only to the Glenrothes section, to coincide with the by-election.

I look forward to hearing what the minister has to say, especially as we have not yet had a chance to see the Government's strategic roads review, which was promised this summer. I appeal to him to consider any prospective dualling of the A92 not simply in a Glenrothes context. I am sure that, as a good son of Cupar, he remembers the long years when Fife Council's spending was controlled by a raft of Labour councillors from the west and central parts of the kingdom. When motorists driving northwards on the A92 asked how they would know when they reached North East Fife, the answer was invariably, "That'll be where the dual carriageway runs out." I hope that the chamber's support tonight for my motion will put an end to that kind of thinking and that kind of politics.

17:09

Tricia Marwick (Central Fife) (SNP): I am grateful to Ted Brocklebank for securing the debate and I welcome the members of the

Glenrothes area futures group who are in the public gallery. It was a great pity that, yesterday, because of a mix-up in Claire Baker's office, she did not turn up to a meeting with the minister that she had asked for. That is a shame, as it was a most productive meeting.

Claire Baker (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): I would like to put on record the fact that there was a misunderstanding between our offices. We did not receive e-mail confirmation from the minister's office, and I had child care commitments last night. The meeting has now been rearranged, and I am grateful to the minister for that.

Tricia Marwick: I think that it is quite clear that Claire Baker was not at the meeting yesterday. I recorded the fact that it was a great pity that there was such a mix-up.

I have always supported the dualling of the road from Preston roundabout to Balfarg. I have lived in Glenrothes since 1975 and am well aware of all the campaigns that have taken place.

I say to Ted Brocklebank—[*Interruption.*]

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Would you like me to call the next speaker and let you continue your speech when you have stopped coughing?

Tricia Marwick: I would be extremely grateful.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Claire Baker.

17:10

Claire Baker (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): I share the sadness expressed by Ted Brocklebank regarding the untimely loss of John MacDougall. Speaking personally, I can say that he and his office were a great help to me in my first year in Parliament. His contribution to Fife will be missed and not forgotten.

I am not as long in the tooth as other parliamentarians who take an interest in the A92 and, accordingly, cannot reflect on decades of activism on this issue. However, I have been a frequent traveller on the road over the years and know well the frustration that arises from getting stuck behind a tractor and the anxiety that can be caused by some other drivers' foolish overtaking.

However, it has been the efforts of the Glenrothes area futures group that has focused the attention of all of us on the case for further improvements to the road. I have been happy to work with the group to support its efforts to raise the profile of the road, the state of which the group's members believe is affecting the quality of life of their communities.

Increasingly, the A92 is a road that needs attention. The circumstances around the road are

different from what they were 10 or even five years ago. For a start, 25 per cent more traffic uses the road than was the case 10 years ago. Increasingly, it is recognised that connectivity between Fife and Dundee, in terms of road and rail networks, is in need of improvement. Dundee is a growing city, with key industries that Fife should be further engaged with. Fife's focus is frequently on Edinburgh, but we have another major economic centre on our doorstep, and it is important that we are able to take full advantage of it.

More immediately, Tullis Russell is proposing a new biomass energy system, which will bring around 200 lorries a day to this section of the A92. Two new retail developments are also being brought forward in Glenrothes, and Amazon has recently located to Glenrothes on the A92. All those developments will cause increased traffic on the road.

The safety record of the road has been referred to already and, as Ted Brocklebank said, accidents and injuries are increasing. There is also anecdotal evidence that drivers are choosing to avoid the road, especially in rush hour, due to safety concerns, even though it is often the most direct option. People deciding to take longer, less direct routes is not good for the Fife economy.

Ted Brocklebank is right to appeal for improvements to be made outside the Glenrothes boundary. If the issue is about improving the economic growth of Fife, particularly central and east Fife, and making it a more attractive place for businesses to locate themselves, improving the A92—along with securing a new Forth crossing—is vital to ensuring that Fife remains open for business.

The forthcoming by-election has already been referred to. By-elections often generate more heat than light, but the Glenrothes area futures group has been working hard to create a cross-party consensus on the matter. I hope that that is reflected in the support that the group receives when it comes before the Public Petitions Committee shortly. The campaign was going on for some time before the election and will continue after the election. I will be happy to work with the group on this issue for some time to come.

It is a bit disingenuous for Ted Brocklebank to suggest that the Conservative Government had any intention of delivering the dualling of the A92. It is well known that the Conservatives' package of transport projects was an election sweetener that was undeliverable, so it is a bit rich for Ted Brocklebank to accuse other parties of electioneering on the issue.

Of course, with regard to past decisions, the Scottish National Party is blameless on this issue,

as it has only recently been in a position in which it is able to make decisions. However, it is worth noting that, so far, those decisions have not included a commitment to upgrading the A92. Although Tricia Marwick expresses her support for the campaign, that support is not shared by the SNP-led Fife Council, and we wait to see whether it is shared by the SNP Government.

I appreciate that the minister will announce his strategic transport projects review soon, which will make the Government's priorities much clearer. When he does so, I hope that he has something positive to say to the A92 campaigners.

17:14

Tricia Marwick: Many thanks, Presiding Officer—I am now able to resume. I, too, pay tribute to John MacDougall, whom I knew for a very long time. He was a good man, who is missed by a great many people in the Glenrothes constituency.

I would respond to Ted Brocklebank by saying that the Leven to Thornton rail link has of course been one of my highest priorities for a long time. I point out to both Claire Baker and Ted Brocklebank that the Leven to Thornton link, which is the number 1 transport priority of Fife Council, has the support of all the other parties that are represented on the council: the Liberal Democrats, the Conservatives and the Labour Party. Fife Council's number 1 transport priority is not the A92, the Preston roundabout or the Redhouse roundabout; it is indeed the Leven to Thornton railway line. That is the decision of the council.

When I came to Glenrothes in 1975, it was clear that we needed the section of the A92 there to be dualled. As Ted Brocklebank has pointed out, the Conservative Government promised in 1995 that the A92 would be dualled from the Preston roundabout to Balfarg. Claire Baker is also right: it was clear from the press coverage at the time that, although the Conservative party was promising the dualling of the road, the minister of state, Lord James Douglas-Hamilton, was making it clear that there was no money available at the time and that the dualling would not take place until such time as it became available.

To jump forward a couple of years, Henry McLeish was elected in 1997 and became the Scottish roads minister. He was promising action at the notorious A92 junction in April 1998. In 1999, Sarah Boyack, under the strategic roads review, dumped the project completely, and mine was the only voice in opposition to Ms Boyack. I said in the chamber at the time:

"The minister has ditched the long-promised improvements to the Preston roundabout in Glenrothes on the A92 to Balfarg. She claims that there are more

appropriate alternative measures. Has she spoken to Tullis Russell and Company Ltd, the town's largest employer, whose factory gates open out on to the A92? Has she spoken to ... Henry McLeish, or to anyone in Glenrothes? Will she outline the appropriate alternatives and the time scale for their implementation?"—[*Official Report*, 4 November 1999; Vol 3, c 364.]

When it was under Labour Party control—interestingly, Christine May was the administration's leader at the time—Fife Council refused to back me in my call for dualling that stretch of road, insisting that minor improvements would suffice. I am indeed grateful to my dear friend Michael Woods, who was the councillor for Pitteuchar from 1992 to 2007, for his commitment to keeping the scheme alive when the Labour Party in Glenrothes did not want to know.

Over the past year, a campaign for dualling was started again by the Glenrothes area futures group. I have been happy to give it my support. I have made it clear to the group, however, that I believe that a lot of work and campaigning needs to be done to get the project back up the agenda. New approaches, appraisals and costings are needed. In 1995, the cost was £21 million, but it will have risen since then.

As Ted Brocklebank mentioned, a great deal of feeling was expressed at a public meeting that dualling was the preferred option and should go ahead. Other voices said that improvements could be made to the Balfarg junction in the meantime. Anybody using the A92 at the Balfarg junction knows that it is one of the most unsafe parts of the road. People take their lives in their hands every time they use it.

I urge the minister to reconsider the case for dualling the A92, and to consider reviewing the Balfarg junction and the stretch of the A92 as it enters Glenrothes at the Cadham junction. Despite the improvements that have been made over the years, exiting from those junctions does not fill anyone with confidence. I wonder whether the minister, in reconsidering those issues, could report back to the members who are most interested in them—and of course to the Glenrothes area futures group—about what he plans to do for the A92 in the immediate and longer term.

17:19

Gavin Brown (Lothians) (Con): I congratulate Ted Brocklebank on securing this important debate. The Conservatives have had a solid track record on the issue for well over a decade and Ted Brocklebank has shown his commitment to it by introducing a members' business debate.

It is fair to say that the A92 has waited its turn. Back in 1996, the green light was given to what was then a £21 million scheme. After the

Conservatives lost power in 1997, the scheme was put on hold until the Scottish Parliament was formed, but in 1999 it was scrapped by the transport minister at that time, with the claim that it would be put into the pot along with all the other roads projects.

Claire Baker described the Conservatives as disingenuous, but I point out most gently to her that a more accurate definition of disingenuous would be scrapping a project, doing absolutely nothing about it for eight years and then suddenly deciding that it is a priority. I hope that we hear warm words and promises of action from the minister. We certainly look forward to seeing what is in the strategic roads review, but perhaps the minister can provide a sweetener, or at least an inkling of what will be in that review.

Why is the A92 upgrade important? There are several reasons, but the overriding one is that the road is dangerous and busy. There are numerous reports about speeds and there are anecdotal reports of people driving at more than 100mph when the speed limit is 60mph. As Ted Brocklebank said, there have been 23 fatalities in five years and more than 600 accidents in a five-year period. There were not 23 fatalities in one year and zero in other years; there were fatalities in them all—five in 2003, seven in 2004, seven in 2005 and four in 2006. We do not want to have a similar debate in the next session of Parliament with similar or worse figures to look back on.

Ted Brocklebank set out clearly the specific measures for which the Scottish Conservatives are asking: a dual carriageway around Glenrothes on the 3 miles between the Preston roundabout and the Balfarg junction, with the added idea that the dualling should continue until Melville Lodges. Priority should be given to upgrading the Parbroath junction, which is a particularly dangerous part of the road where accidents occurred at regular intervals in the past five years and, no doubt, for a long period before that.

As I said, the Conservative party has a good track record on the issue. In 1996 we had plans for upgrades and dualling. At the most recent election, we had clear and strong manifesto commitments on transport. The transport budget would have had an extra £30 million per annum and, on top of that, we would have set aside an extra £15 million per annum for black-spot funding. A combination of those two funds would have been applied to the A92, which would have helped to make the road far safer. It is time for action, so I hope that we get action from the minister.

17:23

Iain Smith (North East Fife) (LD): I, too, congratulate Ted Brocklebank on securing the

debate and pay tribute to John MacDougall, whose untimely passing saddened me greatly as I had known him for a number of years, since I first joined Fife Regional Council in 1982. He was leader of the administration of Fife Regional Council and convener of Fife Council while I was leader of the opposition.

A significant stretch of the A92—the bit that runs from New Inn to the Tay road bridge—runs through the heart of my constituency. I welcome the opportunity to highlight some of the road safety concerns on which I have been campaigning for many years. Ted Brocklebank is right to highlight the significant accident record on the route. On the part of the A92 that runs through North East Fife, there have in the past five years been four fatal accidents, 27 serious ones and 71 that resulted in slight injury. I am pleased that, in 2007, the number of accidents reduced to 14 and there were no fatalities, but 14 accidents is 14 too many.

The Liberal Democrat transport ministers in the previous Government—Nicol Stephen and Tavish Scott—were responsible for developing and promoting a route accident reduction plan for the A92. Some of the plan—most notably the extension of the 40mph speed limit at Freuchie, which has been the site of several accidents over the years—has been implemented. I hope that that, improved signage, improved street lighting and vehicle-activated warning signs at Freuchie and other accident blackspots such as the Parbroath and Wormit junctions, contributed to the reduction in the number of accidents last year.

Significant schemes have yet to be progressed. They will require significant funding commitments from the Scottish ministers. I should perhaps declare an interest as a resident of Ladybank, but the most significant schemes relate to the junctions at Ladybank. There have been numerous accidents involving vehicles turning into or out of Ladybank at the southerly Monkstown junction and the northerly Cairnfield junction, as well as slightly further down the road at the junction with the B937 at Eden Bridge, where a sharp corner separates the two long straights from Ladybank and Freuchie.

The proposed roundabout at Monkstown would not only greatly enhance road safety for people who turn on and off the trunk road, but force all vehicles on the trunk road to slow down on a long, fast stretch of road.

The proposal at Cairnfield is to realign the junction and construct a staggered ghost island. I am sure that that sounds very exciting for staggered ghosts, but I hope that the lighting of the junction or, at the very least, the lighting of the traffic bollards, will also be considered. The poor visibility of the junction contributes to many of the accidents, particularly on dark and stormy—or

foggy—nights. I have been battling since I was first elected as a councillor for the Ladybank area in 1982 to get the bollards lit, but I have consistently been told that it cannot be done because there is not a convenient power supply. Perhaps through modern technology and microgeneration we can find a way of lighting the bollards without plugging them into the mains and we can finally put the matter to bed.

I do not expect the minister to be able this evening to give a firm commitment to fund those vital road safety improvements, but I hope that he can give an assurance that he will ensure that Transport Scotland progresses them with some degree of urgency.

I also draw the minister's attention to Transport Scotland's proposal to stop up the gaps in the dual carriageway at Inverdovat and Station Brae at Newport-on-Tay, on the approach road to the Tay road bridge. I am sure that he is aware that there is substantial local opposition to the proposed closure and that it is probable that the traffic order will be subject to a local inquiry. The community has proposed an alternative: the introduction of a 50mph speed limit on the short stretch of dual carriageway, which would match that on the bridge. So far, Transport Scotland has been unwilling to investigate that option. I ask the minister to ask Transport Scotland to consider it fully.

A number of projects in Fife require investment from the Scottish Government. The Redhouse roundabout on the A92 has been mentioned. It is seen as the number 1 priority, in respect of roads, to deal with congestion, to unlock the development potential of the neighbouring land and to improve access to Levenmouth.

Dualling of the A92 between Preston and Balfarg has long been desired and it is time that a full appraisal was carried out of that missing link in Fife's road network. In that respect, I have no problem in backing the calls that have been made today by Ted Brocklebank and others, but I am less convinced that there is a case for dualling the A92 from New Inn to Melville Lodges, as is proposed in the motion. I am sure that the residents of Freuchie and Ladybank whose homes would probably have to be demolished to allow for such dualling would also be against it. The priority for the A92 in North East Fife is not more dual carriageway but completing the road safety improvements to which I referred. I will be interested in the minister's response to those points.

17:28

John Park (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): I was pleased to add my name to the motion to give

Mr Brocklebank the opportunity to raise these matters in the Parliament, because I have been impressed with some of the members' business debates that we have had on Fife issues. I will come on to that shortly, but first let me say that I would be very careful about insinuating that my contribution is something to do with a by-election in Glenrothes. If Ted Brocklebank checks, he will see that I added my name to his motion in June, and I did so because I believe in supporting community action groups throughout Mid Scotland and Fife that have done the amount of work that has been done on upgrading the A92. I am always happy to help to give people a voice, for example through members' business debates.

Those of us who represent Mid Scotland and Fife have discussed many of the kingdom's transport priorities in the 16 months that I have been in Parliament. Most recently, we discussed the Rosyth to Zeebrugge ferry. We have also discussed the Leven to Thornton rail line and issues related to the Kincardine bridge and the upper Forth crossing. We have delayed the minister quite a lot over the past few months. Now, his knowledge of transport issues in Fife is probably better than most.

Fife is a key area in Scotland in respect of developing transport priorities. Having travelled the A92 many times, I have no doubt that it is a priority. I travel on it even more now on constituency business, and I know from first-hand experience that the conditions that individuals regularly face are dangerous and worrying.

I remember the significant improvements to and the extension of the A92 between Dunfermline, Kirkcaldy and Glenrothes in the late 1980s and early 1990s. I had had to travel the back roads on those routes, and I saw the difference that the completion and dualling of that connection made by easing travel across Fife. It certainly helped with road safety, too.

I mentioned the many debates that we have had on transport in Fife and, as Tricia Marwick, Claire Baker and Ted Brocklebank mentioned, it is clear that we need to work across traditional party lines, because the priorities are different. We need to ensure that projects are prioritised properly in the interests of those who live in Fife and neighbouring regions. We also need to manage the expectations of the campaign groups to ensure that they understand what can be achieved both in the Parliament and through links between Fife Council and the Parliament and Government.

As well as there being support for the projects that I mentioned earlier, there is wide support throughout Fife for a Rosyth bypass and a passenger rail link between Alloa, Dunfermline and Edinburgh. Although we have not debated those issues in members' business debates,

groups have been campaigning on them and lobbying members. It is not just a question of the priorities that we have spoken about in Parliament; we need to consider carefully several other issues in Mid Scotland and Fife.

I wanted to contribute to the debate in a positive tone, and I have tried my best to do that, because I believe that through cross-party consensus and support we will meet the transport priorities of the people of Fife. I look forward to working with my colleagues across the Parliament on that.

17:31

The Minister for Transport, Infrastructure and Climate Change (Stewart Stevenson): I thank Ted Brocklebank for lodging the motion and giving members the opportunity to debate the A92.

Although I had no personal contact with John MacDougall, I join others in respecting the contribution that he made to political life in a different tradition from my own. I have heard from others that, as an individual and as a campaigner for the people whom he represented, he was a doughty man. Mesothelioma—the terrible disease that John suffered from—has been an issue close to my heart and one on which I have contributed in previous sessions.

There are always difficulties when we talk about numbers, and we have heard several different figures this evening. I most closely recognised the numbers that Iain Smith used, which came from the Scottish Parliament information centre briefing. We heard a reference to 600 accidents on the A92; I should stress that that reference covers the road all the way to Stonehaven, including the part of the road that is not a trunk road, north of the bridge.

The figures that I have suggest that, from New Inn to the south end of the Tay bridge, four people have been killed and 27 have been seriously injured in the past five years. None of the arguments that we might have about figures is intended to relieve us of the obligation to consider the important issue of safety on the A92, but we need to ensure that the numbers are in perspective.

I know that Ted Brocklebank has been engaged in the issue before. In 2006, he raised the issues of road signs and street lighting at Parbroath. Since the work that he promoted has been done, there has been a single accident with a slight injury in 18 months. If I may link that to some of Iain Smith's comments, that illustrates that we can, with relatively simple and quick interventions, make some significant improvements.

Ted Brocklebank: I do not want to cavil too much over exact figures, but from checking with

Fife Constabulary this afternoon my understanding is that there have been significant accidents—although no fatalities—at the Parbroath junction in each of the past five years.

Stewart Stevenson: We could have a debate about that, but I do not want to fall out with members on the subject of numbers. The accident record, both serious and fatal, appears to be declining. If there are different numbers, I will be happy to engage on them with members after the debate.

Rather than get unduly hung up on that issue, let us turn to the substance of the matter. I have met Tricia Marwick and I hope to meet Claire Baker shortly—I understand that we have been able to rearrange that meeting fairly quickly. The first priority of our approach to road transport is to maintain and operate safely our strategic networks. Our second priority is to make use of existing capacity and our third is to proceed with targeted new infrastructure developments. Giving safety considerations primacy when we make our investment decisions represents a sensible and prudent approach to the allocation of scarce resources.

Across the piece, the road might be safe or it might be dangerous but, as with many roads, there are localised areas where safety is an issue and where the architecture or the design of the road contributes to the problems that lead to accidents. Two thirds of accidents are caused primarily by drivers, but that is a result of their interacting with the architecture of our roads.

We know that many organisations are involved in improving road safety. Our strategic road safety plan sets out how the Scottish Government works with the police, local authorities and organisations such as Road Safety Scotland further to improve safety on Scotland's roads. I pay tribute to all their efforts.

The statistics that were published last month revealed that 282 people were killed on Scotland's roads last year—that is the lowest figure since recording started, and it compares with a figure of 308 for the previous year, but it is still too high. For the relatives, friends and families of the victim, every such death is a 100 per cent tragedy, and neither for me nor, I believe, for anyone who is present this evening is it simply a statistic.

A number of changes have been made in the Glenrothes area. The geometry of the Balfarg junction has been improved, as have facilities for pedestrians, and anti-skid surfacing has been put in place. The A92 route action management plan reported in 2004, and centre hatching, red surfacing, bollards and improved signs have been put in place along the whole length of the route. Resurfacing and central island hardening are

planned at the Redhouse roundabout during this financial year. Such measures, along with a range of smaller-scale improvements, play an important role in improving road safety without detracting from longer-term aspirations to deliver more significant interventions.

We believe that strategic transport links are critical to the achievement of the Government's central purpose. We fully recognise the kingdom of Fife's contribution to the economy of Scotland and the need for the people who live there to have every opportunity to gain from the improvement efforts that are made there.

The strategic transport projects review, which is about not just roads but all means of surface transport, will be concluded shortly, so I have no rabbits to pull out of the hat tonight. We have engaged in the drafting of the summary report and an announcement will be made in the not-too-distant future. Lord James Douglas-Hamilton was involved in the process; indeed, I think that all former ministers have had something to say on the matter. The accident count appears to be coming down.

Tricia Marwick asked whether I would consider reviewing the Balfarg and Cadham junctions. I am certainly prepared to have Transport Scotland assess whether some quick improvements could be made at those points. In a measured speech, Iain Smith highlighted the speed limit in Freuchie, where I acknowledge that there are difficult junctions, and mentioned the possibility of additional roundabouts. We will take all that on board.

Fife makes a significant contribution to the country's economy. That will be reflected in the opening later this year of the upper Forth crossing and it is reflected, too, in our commitment to provide a Forth replacement crossing, without which Fife would undoubtedly suffer severe economic impact. I have listened carefully to what has been said in the debate and will take away a great deal of it as food for thought. We will continue to make the upgrades that we are able to make as quickly as we can. The strategic transport projects review covers the ten years from 2012 to 2022, but there are some measures that we can take in the meantime.

Meeting closed at 17:39.

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