

MEETING OF THE PARLIAMENT

Thursday 15 January 2009

Session 3

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Scottish Parliament

Thursday 15 January 2009

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

Health Boards (Membership and Elections) (Scotland) Bill: Stage 1

The Presiding Officer (Alex Fergusson): Good morning. The first item of business is a debate on motion S3M-3162, in the name of Nicola Sturgeon, on the Health Boards (Membership and Elections) (Scotland) Bill. I remind members that the Presiding Officers will no longer give a warning when a member has one minute remaining to speak. However, we have a little flexibility this morning to allow members to take interventions. We will monitor the situation as the debate goes on.

09:15

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Health and Wellbeing (Nicola Sturgeon): I am pleased to open the debate on the general principles of the Health Boards (Membership and Elections) (Scotland) Bill. Before I get into the substance of my speech, I offer my thanks to the many organisations and individuals who took the time to participate in our consultation. I also offer my thanks to Christine Grahame and the Health and Sport Committee, as well as to colleagues on the Finance Committee and the Subordinate Legislation Committee, for their robust scrutiny of our proposals. I have been encouraged by the support for the principles of the bill from the many individuals to whom I have spoken the length and breadth of the country, the many patient representative groups that responded to the consultation, and organisations such as Unite and Unison, which are two of Scotland's biggest trade unions.

At the outset, it is important to set the bill firmly in context. Members will recall that "Better Health, Better Care: Action Plan" set out our vision of a mutual national health service in which ownership and decision making are shared with the public and the staff who work in the service. The bill, together with our proposals to strengthen existing public engagement processes, our plans for a participation standard and ownership report, and our intention to introduce a new patients' rights bill, is designed to bring to life the concept of mutuality.

Many people in all parts of Scotland believe—rightly, I think—that there is a real democratic

deficit in the operation of our health boards. Too often, the public feel shut out of the big decisions that health boards take daily and which account for significant sums of public money. Sometimes, that exclusion from the decision-making process leads to deep-seated alienation from the decisions that are reached. There can surely be no better illustration of that than the decisions, which the present Government later overturned, to close the accident and emergency units in Ayr and Monklands hospitals.

The bill's clear objective, therefore, is to allow the public voice to be heard and listened to at the heart of the decision-making process. That is how it should be: whether in cities with their challenges of health inequalities, or in rural areas that face the challenges of remoteness and rurality, people have strong views and, more important, they have real-life experience of what works and does not work. Therefore, people should be involved in consideration of developments in their areas and in the decisions about how resources are spent to best meet those challenges.

Of course, as I and others have said on many occasions, people being directly elected to health boards will not take away the need for difficult decisions, but I believe strongly that having elected members on health boards will enhance and improve the quality of decision making in the NHS. In my view—a view that, if anything, has been strengthened in the past few months—when people are involved in decision making, and when they understand and become persuaded of the reasons for change, they are far more likely to be drivers of change than they are to be barriers to it. Problems arise when people feel excluded from the process and are denied a say in decisions.

The Government is committed to democratisation of our NHS boards. We believe that democracy is a good thing and that opening up NHS boards to the public through elections will deliver better decision making and, ultimately, even better services than those we already enjoy.

However, I realise that many people, inside and outside Parliament, remain unconvinced. As well as powerful positive contributions from bodies such as Unison and Voluntary Health Scotland, the Health and Sport Committee heard a range of concerns from organisations such as the British Medical Association. Those organisations' voices are respected and their views should be listened to. Many of the concerns that have been voiced about direct elections have been addressed in the bill. For example, some people are concerned that the flip-side of local democracy could be a postcode lottery of provision. It is precisely to allay that concern that the bill proposes no change whatever to ministerial powers of direction or to

the clear line of accountability that exists from NHS boards, through me, to Parliament.

Malcolm Chisholm (Edinburgh North and Leith) (Lab): Although I accept the need for accountability to the health minister, is not there something inconsistent about having directly elected members who can be dismissed by that minister? I make that point despite my support for the general principles of the bill.

Nicola Sturgeon: The health minister's power to dismiss members of health boards already exists. As Malcolm Chisholm will be aware, I have been unable to uncover any example of that power being used. The chances of its being used in the future will remain very remote.

Malcolm Chisholm is correct that, with directly elected members, any health minister seeking to use the power would have to have the strongest possible reasons for dismissal because the decision would be subject to the closest scrutiny. However, it is right to retain the status quo because all members of health boards should be treated in the same way in that regard.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): The Subordinate Legislation Committee's concern was about the conflict whereby ministers will have the power to dismiss a person who had been democratically elected to a board.

Nicola Sturgeon: I may be wrong, but I predict that amendments will be lodged on the issue at stages 2 and 3, so I am sure that we will have more discussion. I have made clear my views in the Health and Sport Committee and this morning. Ultimately, however, the decision is for Parliament.

As I said, many of the concerns about direct elections are addressed in the bill, but some of the concerns are speculative. That does not necessarily mean that they are wrong: it simply means that questions such as whether people will want to stand or whether single-issue candidates will dominate can be answered only through experience.

Jim Tolson (Dunfermline West) (LD): Will the cabinet secretary give way?

Nicola Sturgeon: I want to make progress. I will take an intervention later, if I have time.

That is why we have responded to the significant number of people who said that we should pilot elections before deciding whether to introduce them throughout Scotland. That is the right approach. It is also right that Parliament, and not just the Government of the day, will decide whether to roll out the proposals throughout Scotland, and that it should do so only after a full and independent evaluation of the pilots. The bill as it stands will put Parliament in the driving seat,

but in response to the Health and Sport Committee's stage 1 report, I have agreed certain changes that will further strengthen Parliament's hand. Earlier this week, I wrote to that committee and to Opposition spokespersons confirming that I will seek to amend the bill's long title at stage 2 to make it clear that the bill is concerned primarily with pilots. I also confirmed that I will introduce an amendment to make the decision on roll-out subject to the super-affirmative procedure.

I will outline the proposed approach to the pilots. My view is that we should pilot the elections in two health board areas that are representative of Scotland's population and geographical diversity. We must also test the pilots over a reasonable period. The bill provides for an evaluation of the impact of elections to be placed before Parliament not more than five years after the pilots commence. The bill proposes that a majority of a board's members must consist of directly elected members and locally elected councillors. As an aside, it is worth noting that, for the first time ever, the bill will give statutory underpinning to local authority membership of boards. That is important, because the role of local authority members is vital to ensure seamless delivery of health and care services throughout an area. Our move to recognise in statute the important role of local authority members reinforces our commitment to building a strong partnership between the NHS and Scottish local authorities.

On the method of election, we propose the single transferable vote. In discussion with electoral administrators, we have agreed that we should use the same STV system that is used in local government elections. For the pilots, we propose an all-postal ballot, which is in line with the approach for national park board elections. We also propose to extend the voting franchise to include 16 and 17-year-olds. That is the right thing to do, because we want direct elections to health boards to include as many users of the NHS as possible. The measure is an important way in which to introduce young people to the democratic process as they reach adulthood, because it concerns a public service of which they will already have considerable experience.

A key focus of the discussions that have taken place on the bill—especially in the Finance Committee, which is not surprising—has been the costs of holding pilot elections. We have estimated those costs at £2.86 million. The figure is based on the costs of holding an all-postal ballot covering two health board areas that represent about 20 per cent of Scotland's population. It would not be fair to expect health boards to bear the burden of those costs, so I have given a commitment that they will be met from central resources and not from health board budgets.

Before I draw my remarks to a close, I want to deal with the suggestion that was made during the consultation and in committee evidence-taking sessions that the democratic deficit in the NHS that I have described this morning could be dealt with through approaches other than direct elections. For example, some people have suggested that we should simply strengthen existing methods of engagement. I agree that we should do that; the consultation made clear that elected health boards would be only one part of the process.

I am committed to improving public engagement and involvement with health boards. All boards encourage community and public involvement, and will continue to do so. They also have a statutory duty to show year on year how they are improving their engagement with the public. We continue to strengthen the links between communities and the NHS through further work with bodies such as community health partnerships. I have already spoken about initiatives such as the development of a participation standard. Although all that is important, none of it is a substitute for direct elections to health boards. If we are truly to enhance public engagement and involvement, such measures and initiatives should go hand in hand with direct elections.

Others, including the Health and Sport Committee, suggested that we pilot alternative approaches to enhancing public involvement, and that we do so in parallel with the direct elections pilots. I agree that that would be a useful exercise. In advance of stage 3, I will introduce plans to conduct other forms of pilot, which will take place concurrently with the direct elections pilot in board areas that are not included in that pilot. That will allow Parliament to assess the impact of direct elections not just on their own merits, but against other potential methods of increasing public engagement and involvement. We should not lose sight of the fact that all the methods that we are discussing are simply means to an end, which is better public engagement and involvement.

I have made commitments both to the committee in writing and to Opposition spokespersons on the place of Parliament in the decision about roll-out of elections and on alternative pilots. Given those commitments, which I have repeated in Parliament today, some members may regard Ross Finnie's amendment as superfluous. However, that is not a reason not to support it; I advise Parliament that SNP members will support the amendment at decision time this evening.

In conclusion, I have been encouraged by the level of interest in, and engagement with, our proposals across the country. What is proposed

will undoubtedly result in a real change in the make-up of our health boards—a real shift in the balance of power. It will ensure locally mandated representation on health boards, while retaining the strengths of those who currently sit around the table on boards. Direct elections will represent a significant step towards ensuring that the public voice is heard and, more important, that it is listened to at the heart of NHS decision making.

I move,

That the Parliament agrees to the general principles of the Health Boards (Membership and Elections) (Scotland) Bill.

09:29

Ross Finnie (West of Scotland) (LD): I have difficulty recalling an occasion in the nearly 10 years that I have spent in Parliament, on which dealing with the principles of a bill, as set out in that bill, has been more difficult. At first blush, it is clear from the long title that—as the cabinet secretary cogently put it—the bill is about ensuring that direct elections are part and parcel of our system, and about the method by which such elections will take place. Curiously, however, when we reach sections 4 and 5 of the bill, we find that there is conditionality; perfectly reasonably, the bill specifies that Parliament will have powers. Do not get me wrong—I do not object to that. The cabinet secretary has very properly provided for Parliament to consider the matter before it decides whether to proceed. However, today we are being asked to vote on the general principles of the bill, so we need to ask ourselves what we are doing or pre-empting.

I appreciate that the rules of Parliament make it clear that in a stage 1 debate one should not seek to qualify the general principles of a bill. I have lodged my amendment, on which I spent a considerable amount of time—I am grateful to the chamber desk for assisting me with its drafting—simply to note and to make clear on the public record that we are not pre-empting the parliamentary decision for which the bill provides. No one is arguing that we should; nevertheless, the Liberal Democrats think that it is important for the amendment to be part of the resolution that Parliament approves.

In addition to being the Liberal Democrat spokesperson on health, I have the benefit of being a member of the Health and Sport Committee. I make my remarks as a Liberal Democrat spokesperson—I have no doubt that Christine Grahame will address in detail the issues that were raised with the committee. However, with the benefit of hindsight, I have come to the conclusion that the bill may not have started at entirely the right place. As the cabinet secretary indicated, there is considerable disquiet about the

way in which health boards are discharging their functions, although that is not spread evenly across health boards or across Scotland. There is a view that boards are not responsive and that board members are not clear about what they should do to engage with the public.

The evidence that was given to the Health and Sport Committee indicated that there is great disparity in how boards function—I am bound to say that I gained the impression that the corporate governance of our health boards is very vague. As each health board witness came before us, we did not get the impression that executive directors are clear about their functions or that non-executive directors, led by the chair, are clear about theirs. Even at this late stage, I am concerned, with the best will in the world, that bolting on a new system of non-executive directors will not necessarily work when we have given little attention to examining how the actual board structure does and does not function. I am not, however, suggesting that we hold a three-year inquiry into how health boards operate.

Nicola Sturgeon: No.

Ross Finnie: Not even I would suggest that. However, if we are properly to evaluate the pilots' achievements, it would be helpful for us to have greater clarity about how boards discharge their functions and about the roles that executive and non-executive directors see themselves playing. The evidence that the committee took on that was very unclear.

The cabinet secretary posits that boards got it wrong on Monklands and Ayr. I do not necessarily agree, but if they did, how did that happen? How did allegedly sane and rational people who had been selected for office and who knew and understood their functions apparently so misrepresent the public whom they were supposed to represent? Even board members who are not directly elected have functions to discharge, but how they should do so is unclear.

I turn to the other provisions of the bill. I am grateful to the cabinet secretary for her public statements this morning and for the letters that she has written to the convener and members of the Health and Sport Committee and to the Subordinate Legislation Committee. There are two critical matters, apart from those that are addressed in my amendment. As the cabinet secretary said, it is now in her mind to amend the bill's long title. Members will understand that that adds to my difficulties this morning because, given that the long title is in general terms the basis upon which one defines the principles of a bill, as soon as the cabinet secretary lodges that amendment she will by definition to some extent have changed the principles of the bill. She will not

have changed the whole principle of the bill, but she will have qualified its principles.

Nicola Sturgeon: I know that Ross Finnie knows this, but he should acknowledge that although I will lodge an amendment it will be up to Parliament to decide whether it passes it.

Ross Finnie: I am aware of that, but I am also aware of the persuasive qualities of the cabinet secretary when she lodges amendments. I perhaps overestimated the effect of that, but I certainly had it in mind when I made that statement with some confidence.

The second important issue, which was a key recommendation in paragraph 123 of the committee's report, is what we now rather inelegantly call the super-affirmative procedure. I am not sure that anyone who is of a legal persuasion will be terribly taken with that term, but it is nonetheless important because it means that if we come to the pilot stages—no matter what they are and no matter their form and shape—not only will the affirmative procedure be used, but no decision will be taken by Parliament without all the evidence being produced and published and without its being scrutinised by Parliament before the decision is taken.

The Liberal Democrat construct of introducing a reasoned amendment to point out that what is in the bill itself contains a degree of conditionality, and the two important undertakings that the cabinet secretary has given in her letters mean that she can be assured of our support. I am not entirely sure that that will give the Government a majority on the bill, but it will be terribly close when we come to the vote.

It is important that we now give thought to how we will test the various propositions and address the concerns of those who genuinely wonder, irrespective of the current state of the board structures, how to get a decent electoral system in place and how it will work. Although I and the Liberal Democrats are keen to extend the franchise to 16-year-olds, we know from the evidence to the committee that a number of disturbing issues that were raised have to be addressed if that is to be carried out properly. It is clear that there are issues relating to voter identification and the need to produce, in the lead-up to the process, information on how to maintain an electoral roll that does not interfere with the privacy of minors but which at the same time allows them to be scrutinised and examined in exactly the same way and on the same basis as any other elector. I hope that there will be wider discussion on what the alternatives might be and on the other propositions that the cabinet secretary has said she is prepared to bring forward as part and parcel of the process.

I and the Liberal Democrats share with the cabinet secretary the view that the objective must be to have health boards that operate efficiently and which appear definitively and definitely to understand their function and that, in so far as they are the keepers of the public purse at a lower level than Cabinet level, they also understand the importance of the input of the public. It was a little disappointing that, although during the committee's evidence sessions a number of the health boards spoke a lot about how there could be wider engagement with the public, they always seemed to talk about it being below board level. I am not against that, as such engagement plays an important part in improving public engagement, but, given that the fundamental thrust of the criticism from parliamentarians across parties related to how the boards function, it was a little disappointing that so many of the chairs spent so much time saying, "If we deal with engagement below board level, that will be okay." I say very gently to those chairs, "No, it won't." I would be happier if, as a fundamental starting point for the exercise, I knew why some of the corporate governance appears on the face of it to be more dysfunctional in some boards than in others. That is a crucial point.

As I say, I am happy if we have elections to health boards, but given that Parliament is much exercised by trying to improve the quality of care in our communities, and that we are trying to get rid of the existing barriers between local government and health boards, I remain to be convinced that creating directly elected health boards with a separate mandate from those who are elected to local government to represent the wider population as a whole, and having those two separate bodies will contribute to greater co-operation and collaboration in our health and care partnerships. That is a matter on which I and the Liberal Democrats have still to be persuaded, but we now have the possibility to move to stages 2 and 3, when such matters can be further examined.

I move amendment S3M-3162.1, to insert at end:

"but, in so doing, noting the terms of the Health and Sport Committee's Stage 1 report, calls on the Scottish Government to bring forward, ahead of Stage 3, firm proposals for the piloting of a variety of alternative schemes to improve public participation and shares the committee's view that such agreement to the general principles should not be taken to pre-empt any decision that the Parliament may later be asked to take on the rolling out of direct elections to health boards nationwide."

The Presiding Officer: I ask Christine Grahame to speak on behalf of the Health and Sport Committee. You have around seven minutes.

09:40

Christine Grahame (South of Scotland) (SNP): That constrains me—not a position in which I usually find myself, Presiding Officer.

I thank Ross Finnie for his thoughtful speech and for his amendment, which has meant that my speaking time has been cut by four minutes. I do not find that an unhappy position to be in because I think that we will be in groundhog day to some extent during the debate.

Ross Finnie: It was not deliberate.

Christine Grahame: I am delighted, in any case.

I also thank, on behalf of the committee, all the witnesses who gave written evidence. Everyone knows that volume 2 of the report itemises and lists a substantial cross-section of the submissions. I thank those who were called and came to the committee to supplement their written evidence with oral evidence. Although I suspect that there is still a great deal of work for the committee to do at stage 2, I thank members for delivering a unanimous report—it is always commendable when committees achieve that—following thorough debate, which was mixed with the usual humour for which we are known. We are, indeed, a venerable and humorous committee.

I also acknowledge Bill Butler, who is in the chamber and who did so much with his member's bill to progress the matter. The member's bill process is the way in which many issues come before Parliament, so I hope that more members' bills get a breath of fresh air in Parliament and that we move on to pass them as legislation.

The committee recognises that we cannot stay where we are. As Ross Finnie and others have said, in relation to the closure of accident and emergency departments and the closure of community hospitals in areas that I represent, such as Jedburgh and Coldstream, it took people aback when anonymous figures—the public had no idea who they were—appeared at public meetings after alleged consultation, which is another issue, and told the meetings that various services were to close. It was obvious that we had hit on a democratic deficit. Perhaps a function of Parliament over the nine years of its existence has been to ensure not only that we are open to scrutiny but that when it comes to local authorities, housing associations and health boards people are much more engaged and more aware of their rights. That is as it should be.

We all know that not every local community will get what it wants, even if we have directly elected health boards, but we want them to feel that they have had a fair crack of the whip and, as Ross

Finnie said, are engaged at all levels: not only at lower levels but at health board level.

I now move on to some of the key issues that the committee raised—I had better talk more slowly. There have been responses on many of the issues. I am grateful to the cabinet secretary for responding with such alacrity in her letter of 12 January to the committee, but one or two issues still remain open. We will poke at those at stage 2 and I remind the committee that, if we wish, we can call witnesses back at that stage to discuss amendments.

Paragraphs 22, 33 and 34 are key ones in the report. The recommendations in those paragraphs are about improving public consultation by health boards. We do not believe that public participation in, and the accountability of, many health boards has been adequate, although we know that the situation has improved. Evidence also suggests that efforts to promote diversity in health boards are failing. That point relates to evidence that we received about disabled people. There is also concern that if we have direct elections people who live in remote areas will have difficulty putting themselves forward for election—I am looking at Jamie Stone in respect of that point. If pilots go ahead, a rigorous evaluation of their impact on the diversity of health boards and on the equalities impacts of their policies should be made. The cabinet secretary has agreed to that recommendation.

The committee was not convinced that elections are necessarily the most effective way of achieving better engagement and accountability, although it agreed that they have the potential to do so. It did not see elections as necessarily excluding other initiatives such as public participation forums. The cabinet secretary agreed to that in her letter.

The bill will not change health boards' accountability to ministers; the committee considered that to be the correct approach. However, Malcolm Chisholm raised the concern that the public might not appreciate the subtle difference between elected members' local accountability on delivery and ministers' national accountability on policy, which could lead to disillusionment. We suggested that, if the elections proceed, there should be a public information campaign so that people understand that the board is accountable to the cabinet secretary for policy delivery but that accountability for practical delivery on the ground would rest with health boards. It is a neat distinction, but there are going to be some difficulties if expectations are not always met, particularly if several single-issue members are elected to health boards; there could be tensions there.

In paragraphs 97 and 98 of our report, the committee supports the ideas of parallel pilots alongside those that are set out in the bill, and of comparing health board elections with other initiatives to improve public engagement. I have put a tick next to that point as well—the cabinet secretary has agreed to it.

The committee drew attention to uncertainty about the total costs of nationwide direct elections. The committee endorsed the Finance Committee's call for a reassessment of roll-out costs in the light of a proper assessment of the pilot costs. Those recommendations are in paragraphs 109 and 111 of our report—there is a tick next to them because the cabinet secretary has also addressed that point.

The committee called for tighter parliamentary scrutiny of any decision to roll out health board elections or to abandon the pilots than is provided for in the bill. That involves a decision of principle. There is also a tick next to those paragraphs, and we are now going for the grand design and new plan with the super-affirmative procedure. We are all going to read the book on that—I hope that someone has produced one.

Overall, the committee did not believe that there was an overwhelming case for health board elections, but there was broad support for piloting the proposal. The committee therefore supports the introduction of pilots but stresses that that should not be taken as a decision to support health board elections per se. Notwithstanding some issues around amending the long title, the cabinet secretary has addressed that, so I have ticked it.

However, some of our recommendations do not have ticks. We said that personal identifiers should be required for all postal ballots and health board elections. The cabinet secretary is not planning to do that.

In addition, the committee did not consider the proposal for a private young person's register to be a recognised part of the democratic process. I know that I said I would not talk for my full time, but I will read out what the committee report said.

"The experience of the Scottish general elections in May 2007 shows that the robustness of any new elections introduced in Scotland will rightly come under serious scrutiny. Whilst the Committee recognises that there would be significant cost and logistical implications, the Committee recommend that the Scottish Government reconsider using personal identifiers for postal votes in health board elections. If the cost and logistical implications are too great to be overcome, the Scottish Government may also have to reconsider holding an all-postal ballot."

That is a serious issue in the light of the public's recent experience, and the minister might hit a bit of a brick wall with that one.

09:48

Cathy Jamieson (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (Lab): I apologise to members in the chamber, but I make them and the Presiding Officer aware that I need to leave the chamber to attend another engagement. I do not mean any discourtesy, and I hope to be back to hear the closing speeches.

I welcome the debate as an opportunity to contribute to discussions on participation in our health services and their accountability. Like the cabinet secretary and the convener of the Health and Sport Committee, I thank those who contributed to the consultation. I also thank the committee for its helpful report and the cabinet secretary for the letter that was circulated earlier this week.

As we said in our manifesto for the 2007 Scottish Parliament elections, Labour Party policy is to support pilots for direct elections, so today we will support the general principles of the bill. It is worth putting on the record that Labour has a strong record in government of increasing the accountability of health boards to their communities. Ross Finnie raised a number of interesting issues around that.

We fully support community engagement with the NHS. Allowing the public's voice to be heard, listened to and taken seriously must be at the heart of health boards' decision-making processes. It is vital that we ensure that local communities are well served.

Labour implemented significant measures in the National Health Service Reform (Scotland) Act 2004. That legislation was designed to improve accountability and public involvement, and it made considerable progress towards that goal. The introduction of a single management tier through the abolition of the trust system simplified avenues of accountability, and community health partnerships were a step in the right direction for public involvement by providing parents, carers and the public with an opportunity to participate more fully in health boards' decision-making processes.

Unison Scotland has highlighted the point that there is widespread support among patients groups for the bill's principles. I am well aware of the strength of feeling in local communities about what they see as their local services.

However, public engagement must not just be about the major and often controversial issues involving hospitals. Such engagement must become the norm for the whole range of health services, and it must reach beyond the affluent and the articulate to include those who need support and advocacy to get their views heard. I

am sure that we will return to those issues during discussions on the proposed patients' rights bill.

Although I said that we will support the bill's principles, we have serious concerns about the way in which the bill has been drafted. We recognise that the cabinet secretary has accepted that there are a number of areas in which amendments need to be made at stage 2. We will look at what more needs to be done. We must explore the concerns that have been raised and make constructive suggestions about the further work that could be done to ensure that the proposed pilot schemes are a valuable endeavour.

A number of criticisms have been made, including by the British Medical Association, that there is no evidence to show that directly elected health boards are effective and that the bill might be overpromising on public engagement. Unison has pointed out that directly elected health boards are not simply a substitute for other forms of public engagement.

It is also important that the cabinet secretary fully considers the concerns highlighted by the Health and Sport Committee. I emphasise one point that the committee raised: the pilots must be robust and fully assessed, and alternatives must be examined before roll-out is considered. We have already seen some important movement on that. The pilots must also be properly funded, and front-line patient care must be protected.

We should try to assess different models before any decision is taken on implementing a specific model. In her letter of 12 January, the cabinet secretary offered an undertaking

"to bring forward details of non statutory pilot schemes that will run concurrently with elections".

She has committed to doing that before stage 3; I welcome that commitment and look forward to examining those details in due course.

The financial memorandum assumes that two identical pilots will be run in different areas, at a cost of £2.86 million. However, concern has been raised that that figure does not include the cost of the remuneration of elected members, the cost of the evaluation study, the cost associated with extending the franchise, and the cost of public awareness materials. I hope that the cabinet secretary will commit to looking at those areas.

The cabinet secretary has said that she will make clear proposals on the timetable for the additional public participation pilots. Now that that commitment has been given, the full costs associated with those proposals and the costs of the two original pilots need to be brought together clearly and concisely.

In its report, the committee says that it

“does not believe that there is sufficient certainty about the total costs of health board elections were they to be rolled out nationwide”.

I am concerned by the growth in the estimates for a national roll-out of health board elections; we must continue to look at that area, which is of serious concern. When the bill was introduced, the Government gave an initial figure of £13 million, but that had risen to more than £16 million by October last year. Just this week, it seems that the estimated costs have now risen to more than £20 million. On the Government's uncertainty, I echo the view of the Health and Sport Committee and the Finance Committee that the evaluation of the pilots must include a full assessment of all costs.

I am aware that I do not have a great deal of time left, but I wish to put on record serious concerns about the proposal to extend the franchise for the elections to 16 and 17-year-olds. Before someone digs out a previous quotation from me on this subject, I should say that it is fairly well known that, within the ranks of the Labour Party, I am one of those who are more sympathetic than others to the notion of 16 and 17-year-olds having the franchise. However, I do not believe that this bill provides us with the right mechanism to test that idea, given the concerns that have been rightly raised by the committee about the private nature of the register. I do not want the issue of the extension of the franchise to get in the way of our ability to consider properly the other issues around public engagement. I therefore ask the cabinet secretary to think again about the issue and perhaps to engage in further discussions before pushing forward with the proposal.

There is no doubt that there are serious issues that must be addressed around the implementation of the pilots. I draw the chamber's attention to the salient point that was made by Malcolm Chisholm, and restate the fact that there are grave concerns about bringing in a piece of legislation that would give ministers the power to remove someone who had been directly elected by the public. We need to think hard and seriously before passing a bill that has that power at its core.

Improving public engagement and involvement in the NHS remains a cornerstone of Labour's health policy. We will continue to scrutinise the proposals closely as the bill proceeds, and we welcome Ross Finnie's amendment. As the cabinet secretary said—and as Ross Finnie perhaps recognises—the amendment is not strictly necessary, but we believe that it sends a strong signal, which is why we will support it.

09:57

Mary Scanlon (Highlands and Islands) (Con):

When I first approached the bill, I thought that its progress through the Health and Sport Committee and the chamber would be straightforward and that it would simply be passed with a few tweaks and amendments. However, the fact is that the bill has not exactly been wholly welcomed or endorsed by those who responded to the call for evidence. I can also confirm that, although I have been active in the political world in the Highlands and Islands for some time, I have never been asked to try to bring about health board elections. Further, when I asked my Labour and Liberal colleagues whether anyone in the Highlands had asked them to deliver health board elections, they said that that no one had.

Ross Finnie made a good point about the governance of health boards: we should not assume that all health boards are bad at consulting. Although I have my differences with Highland NHS Board, I can confirm that it consults on various issues. Thousands of people participated in the consultations on maternity services in Caithness and the proposed reduction in services at the Belford hospital in Fort William—indeed, one health board official returned to Inverness saying that he was traumatised by his experiences in Caithness. There was engagement and the health board listened to the public, which resulted in the retention of the services that we fought for.

Although we will support the bill at stage 1 today, that should not be taken as a guarantee of our support at stage 3. Of the 54 responses to the Health and Sport Committee, 15, or 27 per cent, were in favour of health board elections, and 19 were against. If we take out the 20 responses that expressed no preference, that still means that only 44 per cent were in favour while 56 per cent were against. Further, of the 19 responses that were against the proposal, only five were from NHS bodies, so we should not assume that it is only the NHS that is against elections to health boards—civic Scotland does not support the bill either. In any democratic system, that lack of support cannot be ignored.

There was more favourable support for the pilots, however, with 19 responses in favour and two against. On that basis, we will support the Liberal Democrats' amendment. I am not entirely convinced that it is necessary, but I feel that putting a greater focus on the pilots and having something about them in writing would be helpful.

The Scottish Conservatives welcome the commitment of the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Wellbeing to reconsider the issue of restricted NHS posts, to make use of the super-affirmative

procedure, which none of us seemed to have heard of until now—

Jamie Stone: Not so.

Mary Scanlon: Those on the Subordinate Legislation Committee are, of course, familiar with it.

We also welcome the cabinet secretary's commitment to ensure that thorough and independent evaluations of the pilots are conducted, to change the long title of the bill to reflect the emphasis on pilots, and

"to bring forward details of non statutory pilot schemes that will run concurrently with elections in advance of stage 3."

Like Cathy Jamieson, we are concerned that the cost of the full roll-out of the elections has risen from £13 million to £16 million—and we are still only at stage 1 of the bill. With the use of personal identifiers, we are looking at a cost of £20 million. Our main concern is that those funds will come from front-line NHS services.

I ask that more attention be paid to the issue of the NHS Highland electoral ward, which would cover more than 40 per cent of Scotland's landmass and would include 30 islands. Its population centre is Inverness, which makes it likely that candidates will come from Inverness and the surrounding area. Although the salary will be the same for each member, members from further afield will have to pay considerable travel costs. More important, some of them will have to make a much greater time commitment than others. I give, as an example, the situation that an elected member from Tiree would find themselves in. The ferry takes three hours and 40 minutes to get to Oban from Tiree, and there would be a further three-hour journey by car, or a whole day's journey by public transport, to get to Inverness. The shortest time that it would take a member from Tiree to get to Inverness and back would be six hours and 40 minutes each way, which means that they would need to allow for a day's travel on either side of a meeting, with possibly two overnight stays. Anyone with a full-time or part-time job would find it impossible to make that commitment. A further problem is the issue of leafleting the NHS Highland area. How could a candidate afford to pay for the distribution of a leaflet across that huge area? All of that means that only those who are both time and money rich will stand.

I appreciate that not all meetings will be in Inverness, but, as it is the main population centre, it is likely that most of them will be.

Ian McKee (Lothians) (SNP): Is the member therefore not in favour of people who live in Tiree being appointed as non-executive members? They have to pay the same expenses and face the

same travel time as would someone from Tiree who was elected to the board.

Mary Scanlon: We are not discussing that issue. Anyway, there is no doubt that, before an appointment is made, there is a discussion about whether the person is able to commit the time that is required. The point remains that NHS Highland has the largest health board area in Scotland.

I know that, in the Health and Sport Committee, Dr McKee has raised concerns about the potential politicisation of health boards, which is something that we do not want. However, it is likely that political parties will put forward candidates for the elections, given that they have the necessary organisation and experience.

Jamie Stone: Does the member agree that the fact that the weight of the population in the Highlands and Islands is around Inverness will skew the result and alter candidates' chances?

Mary Scanlon: That is a possibility, and people in Caithness have been concerned for years about the fact that they do not have a representative on NHS Highland.

Although election expenses are to be determined by regulation, I presume that that will involve the maximum spend rather than assistance with election addresses and so on. I would like that to be clarified.

We are concerned that independent scrutiny panels, public partnership forums, health councils and other fairly new initiatives have not been given sufficient time to bed in prior to the introduction of the bill. We also remain concerned about ministers' power to remove elected members from health boards.

However, my main point of concern involves the Government's capacity to overturn health boards' decisions. Its reversal of the plan to remove accident and emergency services from Ayr and Monklands hospitals was welcomed by many across Scotland. However, how difficult would it be for the Government to overturn a decision of an elected health board, following the intervention of an independent scrutiny panel? Would a minister take the advice of the directly elected health board or that of the independent scrutiny panel? I look forward to that issue being clarified later today.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Alasdair Morgan): We now move to the open debate. We have some time in hand, so members may speak for up to seven and a half minutes if they so wish.

10:05

Michael Matheson (Falkirk West) (SNP): Presiding Officer, you were given notice of my delay in being present at the start of the debate.

Unfortunately, I missed the cabinet secretary's opening speech due to Network Rail arranging a signal failure that affected my train journey this morning. As a regular train user, you will no doubt appreciate that difficulty.

Naturally, we are very proud of our national health service, which holds a unique place in the minds of people throughout Scotland. The NHS is a public service that people strongly believe belongs to them rather than to a particular Government at any given time. People believe that the service exists for the collective benefit of everyone in our society. I am always reassured by the public's considerable depth of good will towards the staff who work in our NHS—which does not always apply to those who work in other public services—although that good will towards NHS staff often stops at the door of the health board.

In dealing with NHS issues, I am always aware of the fact that people have a level of emotional attachment to the NHS, particularly the local elements of the service. That emotional attachment often becomes extremely evident when health boards consider closing or reconfiguring local health services, as happened in the Forth Valley NHS Board area—which covers my constituency—and the Lanarkshire NHS Board area. Despite the public meetings and other events that took place, there was a genuine public perception that, before proposals even went out to consultation, the health boards had already decided how they would reconfigure services, which services would be closed and which hospitals would no longer provide particular services.

To some extent, people have become so cynical that they often feel that the consultation process is nothing more than a window-dressing exercise. We could get into a debate about whether that is true, but I believe that people have a genuine grievance. The issue is well illustrated by the thousands who turned out for the public consultation events that were organised by Lanarkshire NHS Board. Despite overwhelming opposition within that community to the proposals to close or reconfigure services, the board ignored the outcome of the consultation and tried to drive ahead with the proposed changes. In my view, such experiences undermine the public's confidence that health boards listen to the communities that—I emphasise this point—they exist to serve.

I believe that having a directly elected element on our health boards provides the potential to create a level of openness and transparency in how our NHS operates that is missing. It is also worth reflecting on the fact that our NHS boards are responsible for spending some £8 billion-worth

of taxpayers' money every year. In my view, such a large budget justifies greater democratisation in how it is used.

Like other committee members, and other members who are present today, I felt that it came as no surprise that every health board that made a submission in response to the committee's call for evidence on the bill opposed the idea of having any element of directly elected representation on health boards. Unison summed up the matter well:

"Opposition to the Bill in the main comes from the health establishment that believes health is too complex for mere mortals to comprehend. This reflects the 'we know best' top down health management culture that needs to be changed."

One health board—Lothian NHS Board—that gave oral evidence to the committee went so far as to suggest that it had actually consulted patient groups and other interested parties before submitting its views to the committee. However, when we asked for evidence of that, it became clear that that was not the case whatsoever.

If there is one lesson that comes from our evidence-taking sessions, it is that some health boards—I think, sadly, the majority—seem to have forgotten that they exist to serve the public interest rather than their own interests. I believe that one result of having a directly elected element on our health boards is that it would help to refocus minds on that.

An extremely important point is that, once the pilots are up and running, health boards must not interpret the inclusion of an elected element as in some way removing the need to continue to engage with and consult the communities that they exist to serve. Like Cathy Jamieson, I agree that having directly elected health board members should complement on-going engagement with the communities that health boards exist to serve.

I turn to a couple of issues that were raised by the committee in its stage 1 report. The cabinet secretary's response that she will provide details of other types of pilots before stage 3 consideration of the bill is extremely useful. I think that it would be worth running other types of pilots to see what value can be gained from them.

Another issue concerns restricted posts within the health service, the holders of which might not be entitled to stand for election to the health board. As currently drafted, new schedule 1A, which the bill would insert into the National Health Service (Scotland) Act 1978, could lead to a lack of consistency in how boards designate certain post holders as not being entitled to stand in a health board election. I believe that the amendments that the cabinet secretary plans to lodge at stage 2 will help to address that. It is extremely important that, if we are to have a

register of restricted posts—as is the case in local authorities—we have consistency in the way in which that is applied by health boards across the country.

Finally, like others, I am prepared to support the amendment to the motion, although I suspect that it may have been overtaken by events, given the cabinet secretary's response. I hope that other members will be minded to support the general principles of the bill later today.

10:13

Bill Butler (Glasgow Anniesland) (Lab): I congratulate the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Wellbeing on introducing the bill. As Ms Sturgeon and others will be aware, Labour now has a policy of supporting pilots in which 50 per cent plus one—a simple majority—of health boards are directly elected. I am glad to say that I played some part in persuading my party of the efficacy of such a policy position. Although not a betting man, I would venture that the Government's bill will gain support at stage 1, where previous efforts have—inexplicably—failed. That is good news.

I welcome the Health and Sport Committee's stage 1 report and the diligence of all its members, including its excellent convener, Christine Grahame, who made a detailed interrogation of the bill at stage 1. I said that I would refer to Christine Grahame in that fashion.

I have believed for some time that there is strong support across Scottish society for the introduction of direct public elections to Scotland's NHS boards. I also believe that there is a compelling case for greater democracy, accountability and transparency in the decision-making process for local health services. I continue to believe that the best way to achieve greater accountability and transparency is through the introduction of direct public elections.

The bill will significantly increase public involvement in local NHS services by involving people in the planning and delivery of health care services in their communities. Its main aim of introducing more democracy into the operation of health boards does not mean—and I emphasise this point—that I believe that all health board decisions are necessarily wrong and detrimental to local health services. Such a view would be absurd. However, the undeniable problem with the way in which health boards currently operate and reach decisions lies as much in public perception as in the nature of those decisions. To an extent, the anger that some people feel about certain decisions is generated by the manner in which those decisions are seen to be made. They are made in secret, with little or no explanation offered; they are often predetermined; and they

often ignore the views of the community and the responses that have been made to the board's consultation process. Many people believe that health board consultations are fake, and that is not a happy situation.

Of course, there is no perfect method for consulting the public on major local health issues, so I do not believe that direct public elections would lead to everyone being happy with every decision that an NHS board makes. However, I contend that decisions made by health boards that have a large element of democratically elected members will have much more credibility than decisions made under the current system.

When reading the evidence given to the Health and Sport Committee, I did not see a convincing explanation of why the make-up of regional NHS boards should not contain a strong element of direct democratic accountability. Introducing greater democracy would mean more than just structural change: introducing electoral accountability would involve patients and communities and would provide an opportunity for public debate and greater access to information. The bill would lead to a sea change—as Unison contended—in the culture of NHS boards. That would be a very good thing.

Having said all that, problems with certain aspects of the bill will have to be rectified at either stage 2 or stage 3. If I have a major disappointment, it is that the Government has included in the bill a provision that

“councillor members and elected members of a Board must”

form a majority of the board. Let me say right away that I have nothing against councillors being appointed to boards. Indeed, their appointment was a welcome innovation of the previous Labour-led Executive. Councillors make a valuable contribution. However, I remain firmly of the view that they should not count as directly elected members of the health board. They are not directly elected to a health board; they are appointed by ministers. At stage 2, I intend to lodge an amendment that will state clearly that the directly elected element of the board should be a simple majority directly elected by communities at health board elections. To do what the Government suggests would be to dilute the principle of democratic accountability. It would be a step too far.

The bill is also deficient in that it permits the cabinet secretary to remove elected board members from office. That should not happen, even in exceptional circumstances. I therefore sincerely hope that the Government will think again. It is entirely unacceptable that anyone—no matter how exalted—be allowed, even in theory, to

overturn the decision of the electorate. Only the electorate can overturn such a decision—at the next electoral diet.

I stress that I support the idea of 16 and 17-year-olds being able to vote in health board elections—and I support such an extension in other types of election as well. That is a personal opinion; my political party has not yet come to a view on the issue. However, as far as the bill is concerned, I am apprehensive about the practicability of having a special young persons register, containing the details of 15-year-olds, that would not be made public. I do not know how that could possibly work. I share the committee's concern about that, and I look forward to the Scottish Government presenting specific proposals to meet those genuine concerns.

An argument often used by conservative opponents of the bill—conservative with a small “c”—concerns the politicisation of health boards. I share that fear. As suggested by Local Health Concern, there should be a prohibition on party political slates—a point mentioned in paragraph 47 of the Health and Sport Committee's report on the bill. Again, I will consider lodging a stage 2 amendment that I think will deal with concerns about the party politicisation of health boards.

Of course there is politicisation of health boards, and of course health boards indulge in politics. That is just the way of things.

Despite the reservations that I have expressed, I genuinely feel that the general principles of the bill are a welcome first step towards the positive extension of democracy and democratic accountability in our NHS. On that basis, Labour will support the bill at stage 1. I welcome the Government's endeavours in this matter.

10:21

Ian McKee (Lothians) (SNP): First, I congratulate Bill Butler on all his work in this field over the years and on his wise contribution today, which I am sure that members on all sides of the chamber will take seriously.

Like most people in the chamber, I am a passionate supporter of a health service that is free at the point of need and paid for out of general taxation. However, I will tackle the question of public representation in a slightly different way from other speakers.

Ideal in theory the NHS may be, but it has one serious flaw. The people of this country were told for years that they had a first-rate health service that was the envy of the world and that it could exist, and be developed to an almost unlimited extent, without the pain of higher taxation. Normally, when we make a purchasing decision,

we balance desire against cost and make a judgment accordingly. Is having four extra programmes on a dishwasher worth an extra £100? Perhaps not. But by divorcing the cost of health care from its quality or comprehensiveness, we have removed that vital link. We need to reconnect our function as taxpayers—as owners of the service—with our natural desire to ensure that it is of the highest quality, almost at any cost. We must enable the public to take part in difficult decision making, and the bill before us is one small step in that direction.

Territorial health boards are responsible for spending about £8 billion a year, which is almost as much as the amount spent by local authorities. Yet, although local authorities are subject to stringent local accountability, health boards have no such discipline. My local health board here in Lothian can be taken as an example. I know that the board is composed of dedicated, public-spirited individuals with the best interests of Lothian at heart. However, if we consider who the chairman and the non-executive members are, we would not be surprised to meet them all at the same Morningside drinks party. They are business consultants, accountants and academics to a woman or man. They have been appointed to represent the public interest, but how representative are they? Who knows their names, how can they be approached, and what do they know about the health needs of deprived areas or ethnic minorities, for example? That is why I favour direct elections to health boards.

It is perhaps not surprising that many of the protests about direct elections have come from those with vested interests in maintaining the status quo—from the “health is too complicated for ordinary people to understand” brigade. Well, I beg to differ. It is only when we have members of health boards who have submitted to the electoral process that we will begin to give local people real confidence in the way that their health service is run. If they subsequently lose that confidence, there is a remedy at the next election.

At this point, I emphasise the importance of arranging suitable training for newly elected members of health boards. At the moment, most non-executive members of a health board seem to receive their training from the executive members of that board. As a result, a master-pupil relationship develops right at the beginning, and that militates against good decision making later on.

Those who oppose the bill raise objections that require consideration. Direct elections have been tried in New Zealand and Canada, the objectors say, and have been unsuccessful. Well, although such elections may not have produced the instant transformation of health services promised by the

most fervent advocates, the evidence is that they can deliver beneficial results. In the most recent elections in New Zealand in 2007, 43 per cent of the population voted in district health board elections, as compared with 41 per cent in city council elections. That does not seem to indicate that people feel such elections to be useless. In Saskatchewan, I am glad to say that researchers found little evidence of politicisation of the electoral process, or of elected members considering themselves to be hostage to majority opinion on every issue.

Mary Scanlon: Does the member acknowledge that the turnout in New Zealand has fallen from 50 to 43 per cent and that the number of candidates has halved since the elections were first introduced?

Ian McKee: I appreciate that. The number of people who voted in ordinary elections in New Zealand fell, too. That was part of the general democratic process. I believe that the number of people putting themselves forward for election to the Scottish Parliament has more than halved since 1999. It is a characteristic of democracy throughout the world. I do not think that the 43 per cent turnout in New Zealand was indicative of a lack of confidence in the procedure.

There is the criticism that elected members of boards tend to come mainly from the same narrow backgrounds as appointees, although I believe that that will change in time. No matter. At least they will have been chosen by the public to represent them and will be available in surgeries and meetings to be consulted on the issues of the day, which will be a great improvement.

We are urged by the amendment, which the Government has accepted, to consider other methods of public involvement, but what are they? It is true that there are effective patient organisations, but we are debating the role of the public as owners of the health service, not just its immediate users. There is talk of extending the role of public partnership fora, but how do people get on to those bodies? By appointment. In any case, they relate only to community health partnerships, not to health boards that are also responsible for hospital services. In addition, such fora can be as easily dissolved as formed. Independent scrutiny bodies are suggested, but whereas those are useful tools for the consideration of specific issues, they are unsuited for guiding the general direction of services in a large area, and the Scottish health council is just another appointed body. I agree with the cabinet secretary that all such activities should continue alongside direct elections, but I do not see how they are alternatives to direct elections.

In conclusion—and at the risk of giving undue succour to my Conservative colleagues—I quote Winston Churchill, who said that

“democracy is the worst form of Government except all those other forms that have been tried from time to time.”

We have tried those other forms and they do not work. Let us now have the courage to embrace democracy.

10:27

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): This morning, rather like Dr McKee’s dishwasher, I have more than one programme—I have two. That is because I have two roles to play in the debate. First, I am the convener of the Subordinate Legislation Committee, which has been referred to by other members. Secondly, I am my party’s public health spokesman.

This is my big day. It is not often that the convener of the Subordinate Legislation Committee has the opportunity to talk at length about something, and I will take that opportunity with both hands. It is right and proper to put on record my and the committee’s thanks to a number of people who helped us in our scrutiny of the bill at stage 1. We thank the clerks and the Scottish Parliament’s legal team, and I thank the members of the committee. One of the most disconcerting things about being the convener of the Subordinate Legislation Committee was discovering that Dr Ian McKee and Jackson Carlaw read all their committee papers, so the opportunities for convener flannel are kept to zero. In praising Dr McKee, I may inadvertently have ruined his career within his party—but we will come to that later. The involvement of the cabinet secretary has been mentioned and I, too, thank her and her officials.

The committee conducted a robust examination of the bill. The letter from the cabinet secretary, dated 12 January, which has been referred to, answered some of our questions and those of the Health and Sport Committee and the Finance Committee. The Subordinate Legislation Committee is the Parliament’s watchdog; its job is to ensure that the powers that are introduced in bills, which might be conferred on ministers, are reasonable and that, at all times, the proper role of Parliament is safeguarded. It is right for me, as the convener of the committee, to recognise the fact that, in the cabinet secretary’s letter, there was a significant give on a number of fronts. I am sure that my fellow committee members from all parties agree with that. That is good for the Scottish Parliament, because it demonstrates that we are doing what we should be doing as a committee of the Parliament. It is also good for the Scottish

Government, as it means that better legislation will be made.

I must be careful, as must all members of the Subordinate Legislation Committee, to ensure that there is a clear dividing line—like that between my two programmes—between what the committee does, which is about the legalities of a bill, the powers that may or may not be conferred on ministers and the role of Parliament, and the subject matter of the bill, which we must keep off because it properly falls within the remit of the subject committee. Therefore, the issue of the cost of the pilot schemes—whether it is one figure or another and whether it has gone above £20 million—was emphatically not for the Subordinate Legislation Committee. That was a matter for the subject committee and it has accordingly been raised in the debate already.

Speaking in my other role, as my party's public health spokesman, I note that the power that ministers will have to dismiss elected health board members appears somewhat scary. As I said in my intervention on the cabinet secretary, that would involve a minister cutting across the powers of a directly elected health board member. The cabinet secretary has given an undertaking to revisit the issue at a later stage in the bill process, and I am sure that we all await that with interest.

The issue of the identification of 16 and 17-year-old voters is also crucial. I accept Bill Butler's point that the jury is out on that one and that the devil will be in the detail.

My colleague Ross Finnie has rightly expressed the Liberal Democrats' continuing concern that the direct election of health board members could, in a bad week, set local authorities against health boards. That would be unfortunate, especially in times of limited resources when we must work together.

The issue that Mary Scanlon raised about what I might call the geographical deficit is obviously close to my heart. Members will know that I have repeatedly raised the issue to which Mary Scanlon alluded, concerning maternity services in the far north. Indeed, the very last parliamentary question that the late Donald Dewar answered was a supplementary question from me about maternity services in Caithness. That shows how far back the issue goes. It is arguable that we would never have arrived at the situation that was arrived at had the then health board had better representation on a geographic front. In my intervention on Mary Scanlon, I made the point that favouring a candidate from an area where the weight of the population lives over a candidate from an outlying area could disadvantage the outlying area. That would be in addition to the difficulties faced by people who have to travel, which Dr McKee talked about. That is a valid point

for a later debate, and I make a plea that the issue of geographic representation be considered as the bill progresses.

Michael Matheson talked about the attitude, which we have all come across, that health is too important to be left to ordinary mortals, which seems to turn the debate on its head. Provided that there was geographic coverage, directly elected members could have made all the difference and could have headed off the situation that we faced in the far north long before I got to my feet and questioned Donald Dewar. That is a fair point, which it behoves us all to keep in mind.

The Liberal Democrats are extremely pleased that our amendment is being accepted by members throughout the chamber. As Cathy Jamieson said, it sends a strong signal about where we are coming from and that we must ensure that things can work before we go any further. The debate is being conducted very much in the same spirit as the interaction between the Subordinate Legislation Committee and the cabinet secretary and her team. In other words, we are all working together constructively to make better legislation. The Liberal Democrats wait with great interest to see the bill again at stages 2 and 3.

10:34

Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab): I am instinctively in favour of anything that will improve health boards' accountability to the cabinet secretary, this chamber or the public—or indeed to all three. Inevitably, we are shaped by our experiences: I, for example, witnessed at close quarters the operation of NHS Argyll and Clyde and members will not be surprised to learn that I did not find it a particularly edifying sight. My particular interest, of course, is the Vale of Leven hospital.

What I witnessed in that health board was its dismissive treatment of the community's views, its arrogant approach and its strong belief that it knew best. To top it all, there was a payroll vote at board meetings. Perhaps I should explain that a little bit more: when the chief executive of NHS Argyll and Clyde raised his hand in a vote, an array of hands belonging to the executive directors and associated employees would rise simultaneously. It did not matter what the issue was or whether the argument for a different view was overwhelming—all the hands went up. Some have said privately to me that it was probably a case of follow the boss or lose one's job. No one can convince me that that is an open and transparent way of operating—and I certainly cannot be convinced that it is in the interests of either patients or communities.

As a result of that experience, I am predisposed towards taking action to improve matters; in fact, in the previous parliamentary session, I voted for Bill Butler's member's bill. Like other members, I congratulate Mr Butler on his efforts in getting us to this point, and commend the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Wellbeing for taking the matter forward. In that context, I am happy to support the bill's general principles, while echoing some of the concerns that have already been expressed about detail.

The bill does not directly improve health boards' accountability to the public. Scottish Government officials have made it quite clear that nothing in the bill changes the current situation and that the board will still be responsible in policy terms to the cabinet secretary, whether or not its members are elected. I understand the reason for that; after all, it is important to have consistency across the NHS in Scotland. However, there is a very real possibility of creating tension between an elected member's responsibility to their electorate and their responsibility to ministers. I am thinking in particular of cases of substantial service change on which there might be a clear difference of views. Inevitably there will be frustration and, ultimately, there might even be disillusionment, which is something that none of us wants.

As Ross Finnie rightly pointed out, we need to ask fundamental questions about corporate governance; how health boards work—or, indeed, do not work; and why in some cases they are so at odds with their communities. Although having directly elected members might have a positive effect—as I believe it will—it does not solve the underlying problem of governance structures that are perhaps tired and detached.

Given that opinion on direct health board elections is very divided, we should welcome the suggestion that pilots should be carried out. Initially, the Government intended to hold two identical pilots for direct elections using STV and extending the franchise to 16 and 17-year-olds. Before I turn to the detail of that proposal, I point out that the cabinet secretary has rightly accepted the Health and Sport Committee's strong view that the Government must pilot more than one approach, and I look forward to seeing the details of those alternative pilots before we reach stage 3.

I want to raise three issues about the current pilot proposal. First, on extending the franchise to 16 and 17-year-olds, significant concern was expressed with regard to setting out details of 15-year-olds on a register with their date of majority. Such a move clearly raises child protection issues. The committee is looking for information on that point prior to stage 2 and I hope that the cabinet secretary will address it when she winds up.

Secondly, on ward boundaries, many of my constituents will be disappointed if it is decided that a ward should cover an entire health board area. In fact, I agree with Mary Scanlon on this point. How can we ensure representation from the very large and diverse geographical areas covered by NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde or, indeed, by NHS Highland? If we do not have smaller wards, there is little chance that people in my area, who care passionately about their health service, will be elected.

The third area of concern is, as Christine Grahame pointed out, the lack of personal identifiers in a postal ballot. The Electoral Commission, local authorities and returning officers, as well as the committee, have said clearly that such identifiers must be used in a postal ballot. Given the experience of our May 2007 elections, any new elections must be rigorous and robust, and there should be confidence in the system and the people elected. The cabinet secretary has indicated that she is not minded to use personal identifiers. The committee has made it clear that, if that remains the case, she should reconsider the proposal for an all-postal ballot. If we are serious about making this work, we should follow the experts' advice and ensure that no questions can be raised about the validity of the elections.

It is essential that, before any roll-out takes place, an independent evaluation of all the piloted approaches is carried out, with further consideration of the cost estimates. As a member of both the Finance Committee and the Health and Sport Committee, I have had two opportunities to scrutinise the bill. It is fair to say that the costs set out in the initial financial memorandum were quite basic; in fact, between evidence sessions, they were revised upwards by about £3 million. It has also been pointed out to the Health and Sport Committee that the financial memorandum does not include fees for returning officers, so there is obviously more work to be carried out in that respect.

Although the cabinet secretary has made a commitment to fund the pilots, there has been no commitment to fund any roll-out centrally. The health boards themselves have suggested that that might have an impact on public engagement budgets while, in written evidence, others have raised concerns about the impact on front-line services.

Nicola Sturgeon: That point was also raised in the committee's evidence sessions. Does Jackie Baillie accept that, although I might state a personal opinion that any roll-out should be centrally funded, I cannot bind future Governments or indeed future Parliaments in that regard? After all, these decisions might be at least one spending

review and one or two parliamentary elections away.

Jackie Baillie: I entirely accept that, but any indication of the cabinet secretary's intentions with regard to roll-out would be very welcome.

The bill leaves substantial matters to subordinate legislation that in many cases is subject to negative procedure. I will not repeat Jamie Stone's points in that respect, but the fact is that Parliament requires more scrutiny of these matters. I am pleased that the cabinet secretary has recognised that and I look forward to the amendments that will be lodged at stage 2.

Finally, on the bill's real-time impact, I am pleased that the cabinet secretary recognises the importance of public participation and consultation. I share her view: this bill is additional to that essential local engagement. As she will be aware, my local community is going through a consultation exercise on the Vale of Leven hospital; indeed, meetings are being held this and next week. One of my community representatives, who has campaigned about local health services for a long time now, asked an executive director of NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde whether any of the pre-consultation discussions or written submissions had changed the content of the consultation. A deafening silence fell, and was broken by his response: "No." Although he was then rescued by another senior executive officer, the cat was unfortunately out of the bag. Changing the attitudes of and culture among health board senior executive officers with regard to the legitimacy of the community's views obviously remains a challenge, and I believe that having directly elected members on the board might make that kind of difference. I therefore support the bill's general principles.

10:43

Gil Paterson (West of Scotland) (SNP): Before I begin, I want to acknowledge Bill Butler's pioneering work on and commitment to this issue.

Having direct health board elections is fundamentally about restoring public confidence in the way in which health boards reach conclusions on issues of profound importance to the Scottish public, such as the future of hospital services—or, indeed, the future of hospitals themselves. Any changes that impact on people who have been made vulnerable as a result of illness must not only be made in their best interests, but be seen to be made in their best interests, and any rationale for such change must stand up to public scrutiny. However, as a result of what has happened for many years now in some health board consultations, the public's confidence in their being listened to has reached an all-time low. The

fact that the public no longer trust health boards must be addressed urgently for the good of not only the public, but health boards.

My experience of changes to vital services that Greater Glasgow and Clyde NHS Board has undertaken is that that public body has had a predetermined agenda. No matter what the evidence has been or the number of people who have been against its proposals, it was always going to be the winner. We got what it wanted, no matter the strength of our argument.

The Vale of Leven hospital provides a prime example of a health board complying with Labour's centralisation master plan, which was going to be pushed through, no matter what the public said. The hospital had a fine record, but it was deliberately salami sliced to make it fit the bill for closure. If one bit and then another is taken away, the rest will fall. It was like undermining a building in perfect condition. It was bound to fail because its foundations were undermined. It was not until the Scottish National Party Government was elected that the centralisation agenda was challenged. In the case of the Vale of Leven hospital, independent experts contradicted the health board's plans. As a result, we still have that hospital, and its long-term future is assured with the Government's full support.

Jackie Baillie: Will the member join me in asking the health board to reconsider its proposals to remove services that are currently at the Vale of Leven hospital and transfer them to Paisley?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Perhaps we could get back to the bill, Mr Paterson.

Gil Paterson: I would like to answer Jackie Baillie's question, because it is valid and fundamental to understanding why we should have elected members on health boards. She and I know about the salami slicing that I mentioned earlier. The position now is that there has been an independent evaluation of what happened, and, unfortunately—I think that we are discussing anaesthetics—that report says that it would be dangerous if anaesthetic services remained at the Vale of Leven. I do not know about other members, but I would not be brave enough to suggest that they should stay, because of what happened. It shows that, if something is removed, the bricks start falling down and there is no longer a wall.

St Margaret's of Scotland Hospice in Clydebank has made the claim, which it can justify, that when decisions were made about the removal of beds from that hospice that were funded by Greater Glasgow and Clyde NHS Board, the board did not consider how fundamental to the wellbeing of the hospice those beds were. No real consultation took place; in fact, Glasgow representatives took

decisions in Glasgow on the removal of funding for those beds. At the same time, funding for the same number of beds was being committed to a new private finance initiative project in Glasgow. I am quite happy to accept that I am a cynic, but I am not the only one who can be called that. I think that everybody in Clydebanks would consider themselves cynics about the health board.

Direct elections to health boards will have benefits. If people are elected, they can be removed by the public in the same way that parliamentarians can. Anybody who is not paying attention to their electorate deserves exactly what they get. People will have confidence in any hard decisions that need to be taken, because board members will be answerable to the public. As Unison said, the proposals are not a panacea for improving health engagement, but they are an important step in changing the culture of engagement within health boards.

To put things simply, although hard decisions will be taken that I am sure not all members of the public will be happy with, they will be safe in the knowledge that decisions have been taken for legitimate reasons rather than on the basis of a preconceived agenda, and that they have not been taken only by people such as health board managers, for example, who are dependent on a job and may or may not keep schtum on any given matter that is handed down from on high. I like the idea of decisions being taken on merit after debate, rather than on the basis of a highlighted recommendation on a buff-coloured bit of paper. The balance of power must shift. The public must have their say to legitimise the boards and bring back confidence into the system.

I support the concept of elected health boards. They might be a little inconvenient for those who think that they know best or they might cost a little bit of money to administer, but I have a simple question: what will the real cost be if we do not have them?

10:50

Nanette Milne (North East Scotland) (Con):

As members have said, there is no doubt that there has been growing dissatisfaction in the past few years with how health boards engage with the public on the provision of local services. We all remember during the previous session, under the previous Administration, the vociferous campaigns that were conducted to save maternity and A and E units in various parts of the country, very few of which were successful.

The enthusiasm and optimism ahead of the Kerr report, when people thought that they were, at last, to have real and meaningful input into the shaping of their NHS, soon gave way to anger and

frustration when it came to the reconfiguration of local health service provision. Throughout the country, there was a sense that health boards were consulting the public on faits accomplis and pressing ahead with change in the teeth of local opposition. I am sure that I am not the only member who attended angry public meetings at which health board staff were accused of having closed minds and no real interest in local input.

It is generally recognised that there needs to be better engagement between the NHS and local communities—the cabinet secretary spelled that out, and it has been borne out in evidence to the Health and Sport Committee—but there seems to be little agreement about the best way of achieving it. The current situation is confusing. A number of bodies are responsible for various parts of public and patient involvement, such as the public partnership fora, the CHPs and the Scottish health council. There is a deal of scepticism about the effectiveness of those bodies. Only yesterday, I heard a popular practitioner decrying his local CHP. They said that it is a talking shop that is heavy with management and that general practitioners no longer engage with it. Such comments do not inspire public confidence; rather, they substantiate the general feeling that the consultation and engagement methods that NHS boards use still do not take sufficient notice of the views of patients and the public, and that the situation must improve.

In that context, I sympathise with the concept of having a proportion of directly elected members on health boards in order to give the public a place at the health board table when important matters and changes are being discussed and a direct input into the process before decisions are made. However, it is clear that there must also be significant input from professionals who are involved in running a service that is important to our wellbeing and extremely costly to run. A balance must be struck.

Two years ago, when Bill Butler proposed that health boards should have a majority of directly elected members, I voiced my concern that that could lead to short-term decision making, single-issue candidates and, occasionally, distorted priorities or delays in making difficult decisions, which could lead in some instances to care inequalities and an undermining of regional services planning. I am probably seen as part of the establishment, but I still have concerns about the bill's proposals. I am concerned about directly elected members and appointed councillors—who are likely to be political recommendations—constituting a majority on health boards, although I accept that, as a group on their own, directly elected members would be in a minority. I certainly do not go along with Bill Butler's continuing

commitment to having an outright majority of directly elected members.

Other valid concerns were expressed during the Health and Sport Committee's consideration of the bill. For example, will elections to health boards result in genuine public representation or will they merely attract people who are time and financially rich or who are standing on a party ticket? As a result, will they lead to the politicisation of boards? Will the extension of the franchise to 16 and 17-year-olds lead to their representation on boards, or will time and money costs preclude that? Will the public actually become engaged with the electoral process or will there be voter apathy, as there has been in New Zealand? We know that turnout in New Zealand has decreased from 50 per cent, which it was at the outset in 2000, to 43 per cent in 2007. Will the costs outweigh the benefits? Will money be spent on elections that could be better spent on front-line services? Many questions are as yet unanswered.

I am relieved that, rather than seeking to introduce nationwide elections at this stage, the bill provides for pilot elections to be undertaken in certain health board areas. It is also right that, if the Parliament approves the bill, the Scottish Government should meet the costs of running the pilots and that those costs should not be paid out of health board budgets. However, I am concerned that if the pilots are a success and the roll-out of elections throughout Scotland is eventually approved, boards might have to divert money from front-line services to pay for them.

As there is a clear demand for the public's views to be better represented and for greater involvement in decision making, and as that is not being achieved by other methods currently, I am content with my party's willingness to support the general principles of the bill at stage 1. The proposed pilots should provide the substantive evidence that currently is not available on the workability and cost-effectiveness of health board elections.

It is important that the pilots are fully and thoroughly evaluated and that the results are presented to Parliament so that they can be scrutinised and debated ahead of any possible roll-out of elections. I welcome the cabinet secretary's assurance to the Health and Sport Committee that the lodging of a roll-out order will only follow a completely independent evaluation of the pilots and that that roll-out will depend on the super-affirmative procedure, as recommended by the committee.

The costs of direct elections are considerable, so it is right that the Government intends to amend the bill at stage 2 to ensure that the cost of the pilots and any potential roll-out costs will be fully

considered as part of the independent evaluation of the pilots.

As requested by the committee—this is also the subject of Ross Finnie's amendment—it is right that other methods of increasing public engagement and involvement should be evaluated alongside the piloting of elections. I am pleased that the cabinet secretary has undertaken to present details of such methods, which will be piloted concurrently with elections.

The Health and Sport Committee is to be congratulated on its painstaking scrutiny of the bill and its recognition of the need for thorough evaluation and consideration of the results of the pilot schemes before any possible adoption of a national scheme for elections to health boards. Given the cabinet secretary's undertakings in her response to the committee following its consideration of the bill, I am content with my party's decision to support it at stage 1. However, as Mary Scanlon said, our support at stage 3 is by no means guaranteed.

10:57

Angela Constance (Livingston) (SNP): I put on record my thanks to Unison for its briefing, which cut succinctly through the verbiage of objections from health boards, called a spade a spade and got to the heart of the matter when it said:

"Opposition to the Bill in the main comes from the health establishment".

Like Ian McKee and Michael Matheson, I object to the suggestion that health is too complex for mere mortals to comprehend. Implicit in many of the consultation responses that the Health and Sport Committee received is the idea that elected members would be too stupid. Indeed, I think that it was stated explicitly that elected members would be of variable quality. However, people of different abilities communicate with different people. The rather *douce* councillor or elected member might well be able to communicate a message more effectively to some parts of the community than would a polite professional accountant. The complexity of health issues and the size of budgets—£8 billion in Scotland and the best part of £1 billion in NHS Lothian—mean that there is all the more reason to address the democratic deficit. We are, after all, talking about vast amounts of public money.

As I drove into Parliament this morning I listened to Radio Scotland, on which doctors' leaders were reported as saying that direct elections would lead to cliques and manipulators. I argue that a lack of democracy leads to cliques and manipulators. That level of debate exemplifies the establishment desperately hanging on to the status quo and its

disproportionate power and influence at the expense of public accountability and engagement.

Local authorities and elected members are not without criticism, but they make difficult and, from time to time, unpopular decisions and they prioritise resources to intervene and improve quality of life and indeed, to save lives in cases of child protection and the protection of vulnerable adults, which are complex areas. They have to make decisions about universal service provision and targeting services based on need.

There are, of course, more considered objections based on the experience of direct elections to health boards in other countries, such as low turnout, decreasing numbers of candidates and a lack of diversity among those who are elected. As Unison says, democracy is not a panacea, particularly not when it comes to improving diversity and representation of the underrepresented. We have only to look around the chamber to see the lack of women and ethnic minorities, but that is not an argument against democracy; it is a reason to find the right democratic process. It is also a good reason to have pilots.

The current system of appointments has failed to improve diversity in health boards. Indeed, the local health concern campaign expressed concerns that although the appointment system gave the impression of public involvement, people were not enabled to put forward their views through fear of deselection. I have a constituency case involving a woman from an ethnic minority who was a non-executive lay member of NHS Lothian. She is a woman of exceptional ability, non-political and non-partisan, who I believe was forced to resign in a non-transparent and underhand manner. That is an example of why the culture has to change.

Health boards have expressed some concerns about single-issue candidates. Again, they represent a misunderstanding and misrepresentation of the democratic process. The debate about the pros and cons of a single-issue candidate should be had in an election. I also suggest that it is the actions of NHS boards that have breathed life into single-issue campaigns, possibly because boards' decisions were wrong, they had not persuaded the community of their decision, they had not meaningfully consulted the community or their decisions were not transparent in the first place. We have experienced all those failings in West Lothian.

I was disappointed by NHS Lothian's evidence to the Health and Sport Committee, and I noted with interest Michael Matheson's comment that NHS Lothian said that it had consulted when, in reality, it had not. I was disappointed by the comments about an elected councillor from West

Lothian who was elected on issues relating to St John's hospital. The evidence led by NHS Lothian singled him out and stated that his contribution was of limited value. NHS Lothian's evidence also said that directly elected members posed a risk of destabilising boards and contributing to a lack of unity.

Mary Scanlon: Will the member give way?

Angela Constance: No, not today, thank you.

The tenor of some of NHS Lothian's evidence would do more to damage unity of purpose and demonstrated an intolerance of difference and community concerns.

Perhaps I should not be too hard on health boards, because their views and experience are hampered by their lack of exposure to democracy—in essence, they just do not get it. I speak as a nationalist who has long been accused of being in a single-issue party. The reality is that elected members roll up their sleeves and, where there is common purpose, get on and work with their opponents for the greater good of the community. As Ian McKee said, the pilot elections to NHS boards offer an ideal opportunity for boards to embrace change and elected members.

Direct elections are desired and discussed in my constituency because they are seen as part and parcel of keeping health care local. Addressing the democratic deficit is part and parcel of celebrating value and protecting local services.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Trish Godman): We now move to the wind-up speeches. I call Ross Finnie.

Ross Finnie: I seek clarification on that, Presiding Officer. I was invited to speak second because I moved the amendment.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I am afraid that you are first according to my script.

Ross Finnie: If I am summing up officially on the amendment, I think that I should do so after hearing from the Conservative and Labour speakers.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We usually follow the party order but, in this instance, I will call Jackson Carlaw.

11:05

Jackson Carlaw (West of Scotland) (Con): I genuinely looked forward to the debate, because it seems a long time since we first touched on health board elections in this third parliamentary session. In one way or another, all parties have been prepared to explore ways to extend the democratisation of health boards but, as time has passed, the devil has proved to be in the detail. I

am especially interested in understanding how all members' thinking has evolved as they have wrestled with the complexities.

I appreciate the cabinet secretary's case and her commitment to it, and I sympathise, but when members generally agree to a bill's principles we have a responsibility to play devil's advocate on the detail. One concern is that we should not overpromise. The bill will introduce public participation in determining who in a health board makes decisions, but not in taking those decisions. If the public were to take the decisions, the engagement process between health boards and the public would have to improve substantially. Perhaps the involvement of directly elected health board members will realise that, but we cannot promise that.

Bill Butler was spot on when he detailed his understanding of the public's perception of how health boards operate the consultative process and when he said that the belief is widespread that outcomes are long predetermined. Ross Finnie complemented that by emphasising that many of us lack understanding of how health boards arrive at decisions and discharge their duties.

Cathy Jamieson made a comprehensive speech that touched on many issues, but particularly on costs. We share her concern that the financial memorandum might understate the position. Mary Scanlon underscored that point.

I was not sure about Michael Matheson's point that directly elected health boards would take decisions in the interests of the public and not of health board members—I think that he said that. I might have fundamentally disagreed with health boards' decisions and with their consultative processes, but I have never felt that health board members were taking decisions in their own interests.

Michael Matheson: The member picked up what I said incorrectly. I said that health boards have, to an extent, forgotten that their purpose is to serve the communities to which they provide services. Directly elected members would provide a more focused approach to engaging effectively when listening to communities.

Jackson Carlaw: I am happy to accept that.

Jackie Baillie gave a balanced critique and raised questions that are of common interest to us. I noted her point about the size of wards. She was right to say that voters in the NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde area who live in East Renfrewshire would be unlikely to be concerned about what is happening in the Vale of Leven hospital, if they have even heard of it. Similarly, people who live in the Vale of Leven might be unconcerned about what is happening to residual geriatric services in Mearnskirch hospital. Ward size

is a potential factor in public participation. However, as my colleague Mary Scanlon made clear, we will support the bill at stage 1.

As a Subordinate Legislation Committee member, I join Jamie Stone in acknowledging the cabinet secretary's explicit response to the concerns of the committee, on which we serve with Ian McKee and others.

I say to Ross Finnie that discussions of the super-affirmative procedure are the stuff that keeps the Subordinate Legislation Committee going. At one point in the debate, I saw that about half the members in the chamber had been members of that committee this session. I am sure that they will testify that such discussions have all the fizz of a sparkling champagne.

Nicola Sturgeon: Will Jackson Carlaw enlighten the Parliament and explain in detail the super-affirmative procedure?

Jackson Carlaw: I fear that time does not permit that, even when the opportunity to speak is open ended.

Bill Butler: Will the member say what champagne he drinks?

Jackson Carlaw: In relation to the discussion that we are having, it is flat.

I will elaborate on a few matters that we need to understand more clearly if we are to support progress on pilot areas at stage 3. Our manifesto contained a commitment to support direct elections, but my confidence has been, if not shaken, certainly stirred by a deeper examination of the practicalities and potential consequences.

When the subject was first raised, I wondered about directly elected members' ability to participate meaningfully in the detailed discussion of many substantive health issues. A feature of boards has been the widespread public perception that lay members have often felt obliged to defer to clinical or professional managerial experience, which is passionately represented, because lay members lack alternative advice or experience or the confidence to go out on a limb and oppose others' wishes. The cabinet secretary imaginatively addressed the potential consequences of that situation at the extreme by establishing her independent scrutiny process, which allowed her to refer a decision by an appointed health board to independent scrutiny. As we all know, that was crucial in vindicating those who fought long and hard against proposed A and E closures.

In similar circumstances, how acceptable would such a referral be if the decisions were made by a health board the majority of whose members were directly elected? Surely that would make a referral more politically difficult and questionable. We need

to be assured that all directly elected members, who might well—although not necessarily—possess less working knowledge than appointed members, will have access to independent advice and support. That might be easier said than done, but if we are not satisfied of that, we could make dealing with issues that are of enormous public concern more difficult than at present.

Members have referred to the practicalities of standing for election, which reminds me of the arguments about establishing the Parliament. Some hoped that the Parliament would not be organised on party lines and that it would be a Parliament of all the talents. We have a distinguished independent member and other independent members have been elected, but the reality is that the requirement for the apparatus to mount and sustain a campaign leads inevitably to the involvement of political parties. It is therefore difficult to argue with certainty that in larger health boards at least, the practicalities of mounting an effective campaign would not be insurmountable for individuals, so we might end up with party-politicised health boards. That would be unhelpful. Heaven forbid that politically ambitious elected health board members should showboat in a dry run for political advancement and posture for political expedience rather than act in the NHS's best interests. We need more evidence on how genuinely independent candidates are expected to manage an effective campaign and on how they are to manage the geography of a health board area as they represent the community in it—Mary Scanlon mentioned that.

How engaged the public will be is suspect on the basis of international evidence. Ian McKee quoted the figures from New Zealand, which showed a lack of engagement in local elections and health board elections, from which we cannot take comfort.

The British Medical Association made the practical point that an older person—perhaps one who suffers from cancer—could be appointed as a board member, but that such a person would be unlikely to stand for election. Direct elections could mean that some demographics would not be represented on boards, because of the age of people who felt able to participate in elections.

The proposal that the cabinet secretary should be able to dismiss elected members is curious—Bill Butler and others touched on that. I appreciate that she can dismiss appointed members—that is not peculiar—and that since a minority of members will still be appointed, all must be treated equally. However, the principle is somewhat curious.

On balance, we support the principle of having pilots. However, if we are to commit funds to them,

we will need to be convinced at stage 3 that they are realistically expected to succeed.

11:13

Ross Finnie: Presiding Officer, I apologise for forgetting that, in our standing orders, amendments are irrelevant to winding up debates. My personal opinion is that that is curious, but that does not reflect on your good self.

I say to Jackson Carlaw that, as a substitute member of the Subordinate Legislation Committee, I am all too familiar with the fizz and excitement that pervade that committee as it proceeds not line by line as subject committees do, but comma by full stop, definite article, less-definite article, subject, noun, object and—occasionally—verb.

Jamie Stone: Prepositions.

Ross Finnie: Prepositions, too—occasionally. I am well aware of the situation.

More important, my claim to fame on the matter is that I am aware that the super-affirmative procedure is not new. It has not been created for this purpose. To my knowledge, the procedure has been applied on at least two previous occasions.

Jackie Baillie: Will the member take an intervention?

Ross Finnie: Not on a comma or other grammatical matter. When I reach a more substantive point, I will be happy to take an intervention.

The debate has been interesting and constructive. Indeed, it has exposed the difficulties that surround the management of health boards and the range of views that contribute to the process.

Bill Butler made an excellent speech, in which he articulated the position that he has long held on the need for directly elected health boards. However, he also wishes to introduce elements that are perfectly legitimate but which raise questions on what we mean when we talk about the structure of health boards. Bill Butler's concerns may prompt him to lodge an amendment, the aim of which would be for directly elected members only to count in the majority. His proposal raises interesting questions, including the question whether the votes of councillors—given that they are appointed and not elected members—should be discounted.

Another issue is the position of the non-executive chairman. If the arrangement is for the non-executive chairman and all other non-executive members to hold to account the executive, it would be curious indeed for us then to say, "Well, that is what you are supposed to do,

but actually you do not have the same rights as them." If people are asked to hold to account an executive, the non-executive chairman and all those who are not directly elected—those who are, to use the more pejorative phrase that Jackie Baillie introduced into the debate, the payroll vote—should be separate. That should be made clear to them, irrespective of whether direct elections are introduced.

Bill Butler: In terms of the payroll vote, perhaps the solution is to return to the situation of the late 1970s, when the people who held those positions sat on boards simply to give advice.

Ross Finnie: Curiously, I was about to address the matter. I understand that Unison holds that position, although I should make it clear that it said in evidence that, although it would go along with the proposal as far as it goes, it wishes to see health boards run on identical lines to local authorities.

With respect to Bill Butler, although debate on the issue that he raised is legitimate, it is not the matter that the cabinet secretary has brought before the chamber. She is not suggesting any change to the process for appointing those who are appointed to executive roles because of their clinical expertise. If one makes the argument that clinical expertise should be retained on an executive, one must also make it clear who the non-executives will be, who will act together and who will hold the executive to account. My concern is the great lack of clarity that there appears to be across Scotland on the matter.

Michael Matheson made a typically robust speech. However, when he and other members spoke about problems on health boards, I was struck by the fact that, although they spoke about health services, almost to a person they focused their remarks on hospitals. Given that 80 per cent of care is provided in our communities and only 20 per cent is provided in hospitals, there is a degree of dishonesty in making hospitals the great focus of attention. I accept that the situation might not change until we have more honest public debate on health service provision and where services are to be provided.

Ian McKee gave another typically robust speech, in which he spoke of the inadequate procedures in the appointment of board members. If people do not understand their role or if the wrong people are being selected, from a narrow choice, it begs serious questions on our procedures for appointment if an element of democracy is not involved. The question is equally valid across all forms of public life.

That issue leads me to address another area of difficulty: how to appoint those who hold executive responsibility. If we end up with a master-pupil

relationship, something is fundamentally wrong with the appointment process. If appointees believe that they form part of an echo chamber for the executive, they clearly lack understanding of their role in the organisation. Those points will not disappear simply because we bolt on another structure for the appointment of non-executive directors. That is the fundamental point that I want to raise in this stage 1 debate.

The Liberal Democrats remain sceptical on the subject of direct elections to health boards. Democracy does not happen simply by having elections; it operates and functions properly in a range of structures, all of which have to be put in place and to operate in what I would describe as a liberal democracy. Elections do not of themselves produce a responsive democratic result. That remains my position.

I am pleased that there is unanimous support for the Liberal Democrat amendment, which places on the record the expressed views of the Health and Sport Committee. The wording of our amendment was lifted directly from paragraph 123 of the committee report. Our intention in so doing was to reflect accurately the committee's findings. As Mary Scanlon said, we must be honest and open in the debate. On the basis of the evidence that was given to the committee, the case for direct elections was not wholly made.

I accept that some board members and boards display a lack of connection with the public view. That said, we should not denigrate all those who serve as non-executive directors on health boards. They are not some alien species who have an agenda for doing great harm to communities. Appointees may not wholly understand their role, the basis on which they were appointed may not be understood by the public, and the people with the right qualifications to fulfil the job may not have come forward. Notwithstanding all that, those who are appointed are not necessarily misguided.

The Liberal Democrats support the general principles of the bill. As I said, I am glad that there is widespread support for our amendment.

11:22

Dr Richard Simpson (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): Clearly, there is almost unanimity across the chamber for the principles of the bill. In no small measure, that is due to the work of the Health and Sport Committee and to those who gave evidence and responded to the consultation. I pay tribute to the responses that the cabinet secretary made in working with the committee. She also worked with the grain of the committee report in agreeing to make changes to the bill at later stages.

Cathy Jamieson outlined some of the history. There is no doubt that there is still a considerable measure of public dissatisfaction with the workings of health boards. That is notwithstanding the fact that since the Stobhill inquiry report—on which I had the pleasure of acting as reporter to the Health and Community Care Committee and which led to significant change in the consultation process at the beginning of the Parliament—we have seen the decluttering under which the number of boards fell from 42 to 14; the implementation of patient-focused public involvement in 2004; the creation of the Scottish health council in 2005; and the latest innovation of the independent scrutiny panel. From the evidence that the committee received and the general public discussion to which many members have referred, there is no doubt on the matter.

I think that we all can agree on the need to strengthen the public consultation process. Albeit that many members have made the point, it is important that we all say on the record that direct elections to health boards will not of themselves entirely solve the problem. The purpose of the bill—I hope that it achieves it—is to improve the accountability of boards. Among many members, Jackie Baillie, Michael Matheson and Gil Paterson referred to public dissatisfaction about the perception, at least, of the lack of accountability.

A number of members including Ian McKee and Angela Constance raised the issue of the diversity of boards. Based on Inclusion Scotland's evidence, it is true to say that the boards do not have wide representation. That is the case for those who apply for board membership and for appointees. Indeed, women make up 35 per cent of board membership and yet form 52 per cent of the population. The age range of the majority of those appointed is between 51 and 60. There is also an underrepresentation of the disabled, although there is reasonable representation from the black and minority ethnic community, in that representation is almost equivalent to the BME population of Scotland.

Bill Butler and other members, including Michael Matheson, referred to the need for a change of culture. That is perhaps the bill's most important potential achievement—we will see from the pilots. The culture needs to be changed. The decision by diktat, which was manifest in most boards in the 1990s, has changed to a culture in which attempts at consultation are made, but the diversity of consultation and the variations in practice have not yet been ironed out by the Scottish health council—although it is only just over three years old. It has some way to go to ensure that best practice is followed in consultation. Whether that is done using an open forum, citizens' juries, or independent facilitators, the measures that are taken must provide confidence. If boards give

answers of the sort that Jackie Baillie mentioned, and it is revealed that no changes were made to the consultation process despite various pre-consultation discussions, that betrays a continuing attitude problem. The cabinet secretary and other members have indicated clearly that boards will still need to take some very hard decisions that will be against, or will appear to be against, certain communities.

Today's debate has sparked some interesting discussions, some of which do not come under the general principles of the bill that is before us, although they will nevertheless be important for the Parliament to consider. The structure of the board as a whole is important, not just the questions of directly elected members and of the appointment of lay members and how the lay membership might be made more diverse. There is a question around the role of executive members and whether they are in effect a composite group, the bulk of which, as a result of their health expertise and knowledge, are able to exert a disproportionate effect and act as a payroll vote, as someone described it. As a collective, their contributions might have an overbearing effect on boards. Perhaps we need to address that in future.

The issue of whether board membership should be 50 per cent plus one directly elected, or 50 per cent plus one local councillors and directly elected members will be determined at stage 2. Bill Butler has indicated his intention to move an amendment to apply the minimum to directly elected members. I very much welcome the fact that local councillors will have a legislated-for position on health boards, which will be helpful.

One pilot that the cabinet secretary might like to consider would be to have 50 per cent plus one councillors on one board. That would certainly be a lot less expensive, and it would incorporate the local communities' views—councillors can be dismissed if they oppose the wishes of their communities.

Most members have welcomed the intention to consider other pilots. Another pilot might be to give money to a board to strengthen the consultation processes in a way that is proportionate to what the elections would have cost. We could see what difference that makes. Hopefully, we are genuinely proceeding with what we have all agreed is necessary.

Many members stressed the need for an independent review. That will be important for establishing the benefit of the directly elected boards under the pilots.

Many of the problems to which members have referred involve the postal voting system. Christine Grahame, Cathy Jamieson and others indicated

that, if the elections are to be valid, postal vote verification will probably be necessary. We have had trouble with elections before, and we do not want something to happen with the postal vote—perhaps because of a strong community issue—that would throw discredit on to direct health board elections. We recognise that postal voting would increase the costs.

Members raised the issue of 16-year-olds and 17-year-olds voting; the problem is not so much their voting, but whether the register, which would include 15-year-olds, should be open. That is a significant problem.

The costs of the election pilots have risen from £2.85 million to £3.63 million. The costs of the elections themselves have already risen from £13.5 million through £16.65 million to £20.52 million, if we include—according to the letter from the cabinet secretary—postal vote verification. I am sure that she will correct me during her summing-up speech if that is wrong. The Royal College of Nursing was concerned about the diversion of funding from front-line services.

Mary Scanlon and Jackie Baillie referred to the problem of the diversity in size of boards, and asked whether different constituencies within the board areas could be represented. That is indeed a significant problem, which will need to be examined closely. The need to ensure diversity and equality in the boards in totality once elected members join appointed members will create considerable administrative problems if we are to ensure that all groups are represented.

The pilots will allow us to test the important point on which the Parliament now appears to be entirely agreed: given that the current boards, notwithstanding the best efforts of lay members, are still not adequately accountable—or are not perceived to be adequately accountable—changes are necessary. The pilots, which our party will support—including the Liberal Democrat amendment—will test that adequately. They will allow us to ensure that Scotland's health boards are recognised by their communities as accountable.

11:31

Nicola Sturgeon: I thank everyone who has contributed to the debate, which has been good and constructive. It has brought to the fore some important practical and philosophical issues.

First, I will respond to some of the points that were made in the opening speeches, beginning with Ross Finnie. Before this morning's debate started, Ross Finnie promised me a Shakespearian performance. I will leave it to others to make up their minds; for my part, I think that he delivered admirably. I count Ross Finnie

among the bigger sceptics when it comes to direct elections to health boards. I have always found that passing strange, given that his colleagues south of the border are enthusiastic supporters of directly electing people to health authorities. I think that I detected a possible softening of Ross Finnie's position, however. If I was a Labour minister, I might refer to that as the green shoots of conversion—but I will leave that there.

Ross Finnie suggested that the bill did not start from the right place. I disagree on that. The principle of democracy is always exactly the right place to start. However, I agree with Ross Finnie's view that the corporate governance of boards and the roles of non-executive members need to be better defined. There is some merit in that. Ian McKee was right to say that we must ensure that non-executives have the right training for the roles that they are asked to undertake. However, those arguments are neither here nor there in the consideration of whether those non-executive members should be appointed by ministers or directly elected by the public.

A restrained Christine Grahame is not a sight that I am used to; I am sure that it is not a sight that I will get the opportunity to become used to. Christine Grahame mentioned Bill Butler's contribution, and I add my thanks to him. Bill Butler did much to progress the case for direct elections, and I can tell that he is delighted to have a Government in place that backs his view on the issue.

Christine Grahame reiterated many of the Health and Sport Committee's recommendations, and she acknowledged that I have responded positively to many of them. Jamie Stone also made that acknowledgement when he spoke on behalf of the Subordinate Legislation Committee.

On Cathy Jamieson's speech, I am pleased to have Labour's support for pilot elections—at least at stage 1. Cathy Jamieson was right to narrate some of the improvements in public engagement that have taken place in recent years. NHS boards have come in for a fair bit of criticism today. I acknowledge and pay tribute to the work that boards have done in recent years to improve the quality of public engagement. The bill is not a substitute for that; it builds on and develops the work that has gone before.

Cathy Jamieson and other members raised the issue of 16-year-olds and 17-year-olds and private registers. I can inform members that, following discussions with electoral registration officers, we have, I think, identified a way forward, which will allow them to record details of 16-year-olds and 17-year-olds and attainers in their own way, using solutions that are right for them locally. I have no doubt that we will discuss that issue further at the later stages of the bill. It is important to remember

that the vast majority of relevant data for 16-year-olds and 17-year-olds is already on local government registers in the form of attainer materials.

Cathy Jamieson, Jackie Baillie, Nanette Milne and possibly other members mentioned the costs of roll-out. It is important to stress that the evaluation that we propose will include a full assessment of the cost. It will ultimately be for the Parliament to consider the costs in the context of the decision that it makes about the roll-out of elections. As I stated at the committee, my opinion is that, should roll-out happen, the costs should be borne centrally. However, as I said in my intervention on Jackie Baillie, I cannot bind future Governments or Parliaments.

Mary Scanlon pointed out that the bill is not wholly welcomed. She is, of course, absolutely right. That should not necessarily surprise us, because no radical change ever attracts unanimous support. As Michael Matheson said, it is not surprising that the people who would be most affected by the change—should it happen—are, at this stage, the least enthusiastic. However, health boards have worked hard to improve engagement and I have no doubt that they will also work hard to embrace elections if they happen.

Mary Scanlon welcomed many of the suggested amendments, although she raised a number of other issues, such as distance. In geographic areas such as the Highlands, distance is an issue whether members are appointed or elected. That is one of the reasons that she is enthusiastic—as I am—to advance and extend the use of technology such as videoconferencing in the NHS.

Mary Scanlon asked how easy it would be for a minister to overturn decisions that had been taken by directly elected boards. Having overturned health board decisions, I can tell her that it is never easy, regardless of how the board is put together. I hope that having directly elected members on boards would minimise the need for decisions to be overturned, although I readily acknowledge that it would not remove it altogether. Decisions that require ministerial approval will always have to be considered carefully case by case, and no minister who decides to go against a local board will find it easy.

Jackson Carlaw, Mary Scanlon and Richard Simpson raised issues with the size of electoral wards. There are judgments to be made on that, and the judgment at which the Government has arrived is that single-ward areas and STV diminish the chances of single-issue candidates dominating elections. On the other side of the debate are the issues that Mary Scanlon and Jackson Carlaw raised. People in one part of a health board area will not share the same priorities as those in other

parts. Ultimately, it is for the Parliament to decide where the balance should lie.

Our proposals in the bill undoubtedly represent a significant and radical change. Involvement and participation in the NHS must extend right into the board room. Ross Finnie is absolutely right that the discussion about better involvement too often centres on involvement beneath the board level. However, direct elections will ensure that the public voice is heard at the board table.

I agree with all members who, like Angela Constance, take issue with the idea that health is too complicated a matter for mere mortals to be involved in. I make no apology for the fact that the bill is a radical move. As Michael Matheson said, the NHS spends record sums of public money: almost £10 billion every year, which is nearly a third of the Parliament's budget. Gil Paterson is right that those spending decisions have a direct impact on people's lives. Ian McKee was also right to point to the important relationship between decisions and their cost impact.

Given Bill Butler's contribution to the overall debate, I conclude by reflecting on something that he said and with which I agreed thoroughly. The bill does not mean that all—or even most or many—decisions that health boards take are wrong. I agree with Ross Finnie that the people who labour away in our health boards are doing a good job and tend to be doing it for the right reasons. Nor does the bill mean that health boards will no longer take decisions that are difficult, are unpopular or will be campaigned and protested against. However, it will mean that, in future, all those decisions will be influenced by the people who feel their impact. That is right. It is an important step forward and it builds on the work that has been done and what has been achieved to date. It is also why I am pleased that it appears that the general principles of the bill will be approved at stage 1. I look forward to the further discussions that will come at stages 2 and 3.

Health Boards (Membership and Elections) (Scotland) Bill: Financial Resolution

11:40

The Presiding Officer (Alex Fergusson): The next item of business is consideration of motion S3M-2937, in the name of John Swinney, on the financial resolution in respect of the Health Boards (Membership and Elections) (Scotland) Bill.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament, for the purposes of any Act of the Scottish Parliament resulting from the Health Boards (Membership and Elections) (Scotland) Bill, agrees to any expenditure of a kind referred to in paragraph 3(b)(iii) of Rule 9.12 of the Parliament's Standing Orders arising in consequence of the Act.—[*Nicola Sturgeon.*]

The Presiding Officer: The question on the motion will be put at decision time.

Question Time

SCOTTISH EXECUTIVE

General Questions

11:40

Gaza

1. Bashir Ahmad (Glasgow) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government when it last had discussions with representatives of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office regarding the situation in Gaza and any implications for the Scottish Government's international development policy. (S3O-5524)

The Minister for Europe, External Affairs and Culture (Linda Fabiani): Officials have been in regular contact with colleagues in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office to monitor the on-going situation and identify where the Scottish Government may be able to offer assistance in relation to its commitments in its international development policy.

During the recent debate on Gaza, the Deputy First Minister and I made it clear that our international development policy already confirms our commitment to consider assistance in times of humanitarian crisis and that the Scottish Government stands ready to respond favourably to any requests for humanitarian assistance for Gaza. That message was further reinforced by the First Minister during First Minister's question time and endorsed by the Parliament.

Bashir Ahmad: I have been proud of Scotland's response to the humanitarian disaster in Gaza as we have lived up to the country's reputation as a caring and compassionate nation. However, the depth of the humanitarian crisis in Gaza means that the aid operation in the region will be lengthy. Will the minister meet members of different aid organisations that work on the ground there to discuss Scotland's continuing commitment to the people of Gaza?

Linda Fabiani: Scotland's readiness to respond to the crisis has been admirable and reinforces our role as a responsible nation that is determined to play its part to help those who are in greatest need. It is worth mentioning that a fundraising dinner for Islamic Relief Scotland that Sandra White attended in Lanarkshire last night raised £98,000 for medical aid and equipment for Gaza. That is a mark of the commitment of people in Scotland.

I have arranged to meet Scotland-based organisations later this month to hear of their work

first hand and to discuss how best the Government can assist them at this sensitive and dangerous time. I have mentioned previously the contact that we have constantly with the Department for International Development, the FCO and colleagues across the Scottish Government, the United Kingdom and the health boards in Scotland. The Government's response will be informed by those discussions, and I will ensure that all members are aware of the progress of that response because I am well aware of the unanimous agreement that Scotland should help.

Pauline McNeill (Glasgow Kelvin) (Lab): Will the Scottish Government welcome the efforts of Glasgow the Caring City, which managed to get £200,000-worth of aid into Gaza from Jordan this week? I will collaborate with that charity next week to support another delivery of humanitarian aid for Gaza, which is desperately needed. I am also involved in the Scotland to Gaza convoy, which is organised by Edinburgh Direct Aid. Will the Scottish Government support, even symbolically, all the efforts of the Scottish people to do what they can to ensure that medical aid and equipment get to the Gazan people who desperately need it?

Linda Fabiani: Yes. Glasgow the Caring City is an amazing organisation for the speed and appropriateness of its response to humanitarian crises throughout the world. I am aware of its work over the past month or so, and officials in our international development department have been in discussion with Mr Galbraith from the charity.

Urban Woodland

2. Bill Kidd (Glasgow) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what plans it has to encourage the spread and development of new and existing woodland areas in urban environments. (S3O-5538)

The Minister for Environment (Michael Russell): In May last year, I had the pleasure of launching the second phase of Forestry Commission Scotland's woods in and around towns programme. That three-year, £24 million programme continues to support the creation and management of urban woodlands to help deliver health, education and regeneration benefits to people who live and work in Scotland's towns and cities. The programme now supports around 140 schemes, and we are all working hard to ensure that that figure continues to increase.

Bill Kidd: The minister is aware of the excellent work of the Drumchapel woodland group in Glasgow, to which he presented the Tim Stead award for social and community forestry. Does the Scottish Government plan to ensure that other urban communities are made aware of the various forestry challenge funds through, for example, the

creation and promotion of a register of urban areas that are suitable for woodland development?

Michael Russell: That is an interesting idea. I am enthusiastic about the work of the range of organisations in this field, and Drumchapel is an inspirational example. The Forestry Commission is in close contact with local authorities, community groups, woodland organisations and, indeed, landowners to ensure that there is a comprehensive awareness of the woods in and around towns challenge fund and the forestry for people challenge fund. Interest in those funds remains high, and the results of the first judging round will be announced later this month.

High-priority locations for woodland creation have been identified through the work of local initiatives, such as the central Scotland forest and the Glasgow and Clyde green valley network, and by using data sources that are available to the Forestry Commission, such as its social investment through forestry tool and the register of vacant and derelict land. Individual members have a role, too: knowing that there is interest in their communities, they will be welcome to approach me or the Forestry Commission directly for further information.

Elaine Murray (Dumfries) (Lab): In the minister's answer of 18 December last year to my written question S3W-18586, he confirmed that land in the public forest estate that had been leased to private interests, as envisaged in his consultation document "Climate Change and the National Forest Estate: Consultation on forestry provisions in the Scottish Climate Change Bill", would be eligible for grant payments under the Scotland rural development programme. Is the minister not concerned that, should those proposals be implemented, there will actually be less public funding available for the organisations that he mentioned in his answer to Mr Kidd, whether community groups or other landowners, to develop woodlands in urban or, indeed, rural environments?

Michael Russell: I am not concerned about that in the slightest, because it is simply not going to happen. The reality is that the funding that I have just mentioned will continue to be available, including, I hope, in future tranches of funding and spending rounds. There is no relationship between the two sets of funding, so I would advise the member to look at the facts and not to listen to some of the spin from her Westminster colleague, who has been particularly active in spinning a web on this matter that has little contact with reality.

Transport Developments

3. Dave Thompson (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Executive whether the strategic transport projects review is the only

means by which it will progress transport developments. (S3O-5547)

The Minister for Transport, Infrastructure and Climate Change (Stewart Stevenson): I have set out the 29 strategic transport investment priorities for the next 20 years, which will inform our decisions about future spending beyond the current programme. The STPR has identified the projects that should be owned and promoted by the Government, and it has been clear on where other delivery partners, such as local authorities and regional transport partnerships, are best placed to lead.

Thanks to the historic concordat between the Scottish Government and local authorities across the range of services, local authorities now have far more space to get on with the job of delivery. They have the ability and the responsibility to focus effort and resources on local priorities and needs within the overall purpose of delivering the national outcomes and purpose.

Dave Thompson: Will the minister give an assurance that he will work with Highland Council, Highlands and Islands Enterprise, British Waterways, Historic Scotland and Highlands and Islands strategic transport partnership to progress the western section of the Inverness bypass trunk link route? Will he particularly give an assurance to the Liberal Democrat-led Highland Council, which, despite allocating £119.25 million to that project over the next six years in its capital programme, is misleading the public by claiming that it cannot go ahead?

Stewart Stevenson: I will of course work with all the interested bodies. Like the member, I have noted that Highland Council has made substantial financial provision. We have already assisted by taking responsibility for the A9 to A96 part of the network—that will be of considerable assistance—and, as the responsible minister, I will work with the British Waterways board and HITRANS. The only remaining risk appears to be that the local Liberals could decide that they will unilaterally start to implement the £800 million cuts that the Liberals wish to make each year in our infrastructure budget.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): The A9 north of Inverness exercises my attention, and it was disappointing that the recent announcement did not include significant investment for that stretch of road. Will the minister agree to meet the Nuclear Decommissioning Authority and European Commission representatives to establish what additional funds may be available to bring forward some much-cherished projects, such as the improvements on the A9 at Berrisdale?

Stewart Stevenson: I will be happy to sit down and discuss with major stakeholders such as the Nuclear Decommissioning Authority—I know how important its activity is to the economy of the A9 area north of Inverness. As other information that I have put out makes clear, we are not simply supporting trunk roads; we are supporting other roads, and we will continue to work with the appropriate bodies on the development of proposals that are outwith the STPR. I am happy to give that assurance.

Electricity Supply Interruptions (Compensation for Small Businesses)

4. Keith Brown (Ochil) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government whether it considers the compensation arrangements for small businesses in the event of electricity supply interruptions to be adequate. (S3O-5525)

The Minister for Enterprise, Energy and Tourism (Jim Mather): The regulation of compensation, including payment levels, is the responsibility of the Office of Gas and Electricity Markets. It specifies guaranteed standards of performance in supply restoration and the compensation due to businesses whose supply is disrupted for lengthy periods. Research undertaken by Ofgem suggests that businesses place a higher priority on being reconnected as quickly as possible than on compensation.

Ofgem is undertaking a consultation on possible refinements to the standard levels as part of the next price control period, which will run from 2010 to 2015. That includes a proposal to increase compensation levels in line with inflation. Ofgem has indicated that it is prepared to consider any representation from individual MSPs on the matter, while the Scottish Government is engaging with it on the consultation and will make a formal response. However, it is important to emphasise the obvious objective, which is that when disruptions to the electricity supply occur, especially in winter, the focus should always be on reconnecting customers and businesses as quickly as possible.

Keith Brown: Is the minister aware of the series of related power cuts that occurred in Alloa in my constituency in the vital trading week before Christmas, which led to some businesses losing thousands of pounds? Does the minister believe that the Ofgem scheme that he mentioned should allow for the repayment of verifiable losses by businesses and, indeed, domestic users?

Jim Mather: I am very aware of the interruptions in Alloa, which were caused by a number of separate cable faults on the network that supplies Alloa town centre, during the week prior to 25 December. Ofgem has commissioned research to ask business how it would value a range of

potential improvements in the electricity supply service. More than 1,000 business customers have taken part in the survey, and the results show that business customers value a reduction in the time taken to restore electricity supplies more highly than a number of other potential network service and environmental improvements.

There has been no significant—

The Presiding Officer (Alex Fergusson): Order. Perhaps I may be so bold as to suggest that the minister is verging on a speech.

Jim Mather: There has been no indication that there is any willingness on the part of business to pay for increases in compensation.

Public Transport (Roxburgh and Berwickshire)

5. John Lamont (Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con): To ask the Scottish Executive what support it will give to Scottish Borders Council to develop public transport in Roxburgh and Berwickshire. (S3O-5456)

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Sustainable Growth (John Swinney): The Scottish Government encourages all local authorities to promote public transport. Scottish Government funding for bus services is considerable and includes some £280 million per year, which is invested through local authorities, to help drive down fares, encourage more routes and increase passenger numbers. We are also committed to developing rail services, including an investment of between £235 million and £295 million in the Borders railway project to improve public transport provision for communities located along the new rail line and those who will be linked to it by local bus services.

John Lamont: Presiding Officer,

“The Scottish Government wants to open a single track branch railway line to Tweedbank from Millerhill. That is as much good as a chocolate teapot if the roads around it, to feed it, are not upgraded.”

Those are not my words but the words of the Scottish National Party councillor for Selkirk. What plans does the Government have to work with Scottish Borders Council to improve the A7, the A68 and other local roads in my constituency so that people can actually get to the railway stations?

John Swinney: I am delighted to hear that our councillors in the Borders are on message. I can assure Mr Lamont that, as I said in my earlier answer, the Government will encourage the integration of bus services with the Borders railway to ensure that communities that are not directly connected to the railway have public transport connections to it, in order to maximise the number of passengers who use the railway. A

series of measures are being taken in the Borders to improve the roads network and public transport services, which are funded to the tune to which I referred, and I am sure that those measures will benefit Mr Lamont's constituents. I will continue to keep the issues under review.

Christine Grahame (South of Scotland) (SNP): In the cabinet secretary's discussions—amicable, I am sure—with Scottish Borders Council, which has responsibility for bus companies, will he highlight the need for buses with low-rise platforms to enable the elderly, those with limited mobility and those with wheelchairs and pushchairs to access public transport, whether to use the Borders railway or otherwise? Those buses are in short supply in the Borders.

John Swinney: I am sure that Scottish Borders Council is in discussions with the relevant local bus companies. Low-rise buses are now available extensively throughout the country, and I know from my constituents how much they are appreciated because they improve the accessibility of services. I am sure that Scottish Borders Council will be aware of that important information and will take action in its discussions with the relevant transport providers.

Shop Workers (Redundancy Support)

6. Bill Butler (Glasgow Anniesland) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive what action it is taking to support shop workers recently made redundant as a result of the closure of several leading high street stores. (S3O-5469)

The Minister for Schools and Skills (Maureen Watt): During the Christmas period, partnership action for continuing employment—PACE—teams made a huge effort to get out to Woolworths stores throughout the country. Last week in Parliament, the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning put on record her thanks for the support that PACE teams have offered in their work with Woolworths staff. Local PACE teams continue to work with many companies, including those in the retail sector such as Zavvi and Adams Kids.

Bill Butler: I am sure that members will agree that the events of recent weeks have meant a worrying time for shop workers, many of whom find themselves in the deeply disturbing situation of going to work each day not knowing whether they will still have a job at the end of their shift. Is the minister aware that the Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers is extremely keen to meet the ministerial team to discuss how the Scottish Government can best respond to the needs of shop workers during these worrying times? Will she give a commitment to Parliament that the ministerial team is willing to participate in such a meeting at the earliest opportunity?

Maureen Watt: I assure the member that we will have discussions with any relevant organisations to help shop workers and others through this difficult period. PACE teams are being as flexible as possible so that they can cope with the wide variety and spread throughout the country of shop workers and others who face redundancy. By creating a new national helpline from next month and a revamped website for better information resources, as well as by tasking 80 Skills Development Scotland staff to work jointly with Jobcentre Plus, we believe that we will be able to help those who experience redundancy.

Ian McKee (Lothians) (SNP): What actions of the Scottish Government, if any, have led to the widespread loss of jobs in the retail trade industry in Scotland?

Maureen Watt: As I said in answer to the previous question, PACE teams are reacting as best they can to help workers who face redundancy.

First Minister's Question Time

12:00

Engagements

1. Iain Gray (East Lothian) (Lab): To ask the First Minister what engagements he has planned for the rest of the day. (S3F-1348)

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

Iain Gray: Like the First Minister, I am old enough to remember the recession of the 1980s. I was a teacher in this city then, and I remember watching hope drain away from every youngster in the school in the face of that recession. That must not happen again. Now is the time that we must show confidence in our young people. In recent days, Labour ministers have announced thousands of new apprenticeships; bonuses for teachers in the most deprived communities; more help for students from poor backgrounds to go to and get through university; and an aspiration to reduce the number of unskilled workers in this country from 5 million to 500,000. However, that has not happened here in Scotland, under the Scottish National Party. What action will the First Minister take?

The First Minister: The Scottish Government is taking substantial action to do everything within its powers to combat the forces of recession. I point out to Iain Gray that the figure of 36,000 modern apprenticeships and skillseekers places in Scotland is far higher pro rata than the figure south of the border. Even with the most recent announcement, at least another 30,000 places would be needed in England to achieve the rate that we already have in Scotland. Incidentally, our target of 50,000 suitable training places over the next few years is far higher than anything south of the border.

I hope that Iain Gray will take the opportunity to apologise for James Purnell's attack on the Scottish Government for not using European social fund money. In fact, we announced that we would do so last August—five months before the Westminster Government.

Iain Gray: The trouble is, what the First Minister says seldom reflects reality—just ask the Scottish Inter Faith Council. The SNP will not tell us what is counted in the 50,000 training places that the First Minister mentioned. The equivalent number south of the border is 7.5 million—a far higher rate.

Ask the tourism industry. Recently, the First Minister said:

"We need to take advantage of economic circumstances to give a substantial boost to the Scottish tourism industry, which is the greatest industry in Scotland."

That is what he says, but the reality is that the SNP has done away with adult apprenticeships in tourism—not just some, but all of them. The message to anyone over 18 is that there is no future for them in the "greatest" industry. Will the First Minister reinstate those training programmes now?

The First Minister: Let us look at the increases in the number of the training places that the SNP Government has announced. There are key increases not just in engineering and the construction industry but across the college sector. Before he got to his fantasy figure of 7.5 million—he had better check that—Iain Gray omitted to inform us whether James Purnell, who presumably got his facts from Scottish Labour, was right or wrong to make an attack on the Scottish Government for not using European social fund money that the UK Government announced recently. Is it correct or incorrect—I have the details here—that that money and the enhanced training places for which it allows were announced in August? Am I right or wrong in saying that James Purnell and the Labour Party were five months out of date?

The Presiding Officer (Alex Fergusson): It is for Mr Gray to ask the questions. If I recall rightly, he asked about tourism.

Iain Gray: Thank you, Presiding Officer. In his answer, the First Minister moved on to some of the traditional trades, so let us deal with those. Yesterday, Michael Levack of the Scottish Building Federation told the Parliament that, last year, it had more than 2,200 apprentices in trades such as joinery and plumbing. This year, the projected figure is just 1,500, with 250 of those facing redundancy.

This morning, I was contacted by a worried father of two apprentices. He told me of a company in Tranent and another in Musselburgh, in my constituency, that are laying off apprentices who are already in the third and fourth years of their time. In Northern Ireland, the Executive has given redundant apprentices a guarantee that they can complete their training. If my young constituents were in east Belfast rather than East Lothian, they would have a guarantee that they could serve their time and qualify. Can I phone that father back tonight and tell him that the First Minister will give the same guarantee?

The First Minister: We have announced 1,000 extra modern apprenticeship places in engineering and construction alone.

European social fund money is important. Almost 300 Scottish projects are already benefiting from the announcement; £200 million of the money that was announced in August is being used to support economic development, enhanced skills, increasing turnover and the creation of new jobs. At some stage, Labour MSPs will realise that the Labour Government's economic mismanagement might have something to do with the recession that is afflicting people in Scotland, or does Iain Gray think that "green shoots" of recovery are evident in the economic circumstances that we face?

Iain Gray: This is a global recession. What matters is the response that we make. In Northern Ireland, the guarantee that I mentioned has been given; I hope that my young constituents are watching so that they can see our First Minister ignore their plight.

We should go further in showing our confidence in Scotland's young people. Under Labour in England, every young person who is qualified for one and wants it will be guaranteed the right to an apprenticeship. Under Labour in Glasgow, every young person who leaves school this year with the appropriate qualifications will be entitled to an apprenticeship. Wherever it can do so, Labour is delivering a future for our young people, but here it is up to the SNP. Will the First Minister match Labour and guarantee an apprenticeship to every 16-year-old who qualifies for one and wants it, or will he let Scotland's youngsters down?

The First Minister: Youngsters have the opportunity, through the more choices, more chances initiative, to take up a place in training or education in Scotland.

At some point, the Labour Party had better understand that the figure of 36,000 modern apprenticeships and skillseekers places in Scotland is far higher pro rata than the number south of the border. Lord George Foulkes is shaking his head, but I will send him the figures so that he realises that we have more of our young people in apprenticeships and training in Scotland than the Labour Government does south of the border. Given that Iain Gray could not bring himself to acknowledge the fact in a succession of three questions, is there anyone on the Labour benches who disputes that the social fund money was used by the Scottish Government in August? The projects that will benefit from that social fund money will affect community partnerships across Scotland. That is real, effective action by the Scottish Government.

Iain Gray suggests that Downing Street has nothing to do with the current recession. It is interesting that the current Prime Minister was able and willing to claim all the credit for the years of economic growth, but Iain Gray and the Labour

Party want to disavow their responsibility for the downturn, which affects not only young people but the whole population of Scotland.

Secretary of State for Scotland (Meetings)

2. Annabel Goldie (West of Scotland) (Con):

To ask the First Minister when he will next meet the Secretary of State for Scotland. (S3F-1349)

The First Minister (Alex Salmond): I have no plans to meet the secretary of state in the near future.

Annabel Goldie: Does the First Minister agree that the Scottish criminal justice system must be seen to demonstrate integrity, impartiality and fairness to the victims and to the accused? Can he assure the Parliament that any political decisions taken about the release of Mr Al Megrahi, the Lockerbie bomber, will be consistent with those principles?

The First Minister: Yes, I can. As there was a report in today's paper, I will say that it is true that Scottish Government officials met Libyan officials at the request of the Libyan Government in October and November, as did United Kingdom Government officials, I believe. The information that was provided to the Libyan Government officials was purely factual information about the processes of the Scottish judicial system.

On the questions of conditional or compassionate release and a prisoner transfer agreement, if Annabel Goldie looks through the record, she will see that on every occasion I have emphasised the critical importance of upholding the integrity of the Scottish judicial system, and that will be done.

Annabel Goldie: Does the First Minister recognise that there would be widespread and deep unease if any convicted terrorist prisoner were allowed to leave Scotland prior to completion of their sentence? This is a very serious issue, and we need a serious answer. We need to know the position of the Scottish Government. Is the First Minister minded to release a convicted terrorist back to their home country before they have served their full sentence? Unfortunately, Tony Blair created confusion around this issue, but I implore the Scottish National Party not to compound that.

The First Minister: As I have also said a number of times, apart from defending the integrity of the Scottish judicial system, which we will do at all times, a minister cannot prejudge or comment on decisions that they might be asked to make. I do not intend to do so on any case. I am sure that Annabel Goldie, as a qualified lawyer, understands that no minister can anticipate a decision before it is placed before them. Such things have to be done within the integrity of the

system. Just as it is important to uphold the overall integrity of the Scottish judicial system, it is important that particular cases are not prejudged, so I do not intend to do that.

Cabinet (Meetings)

3. Tavish Scott (Shetland) (LD): To ask the First Minister what issues will be discussed at the next meeting of the Cabinet. (S3F-1350)

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

Tavish Scott: As of this morning, parliamentary motion S3M-3226 has been signed by almost 50 members of the Scottish Parliament across the political parties. The motion calls on the First Minister to apologise for stating that the issue of funding for the Scottish Inter Faith Council was resolved when it was not. Will he apologise?

The First Minister: No, I will not. As Tavish Scott well knows, on 20 December, as soon as the minister was informed of the difficulties that were facing the Scottish Inter Faith Council, and because of that organisation's importance, he contacted it to assure it that its funding would be continued. It is possible that people outwith politics and those who have not been ministers might not understand that when a minister gives a commitment, that commitment is met. That is how the process works. Therefore, on 20 December, when Fergus Ewing gave that commitment, the issue was settled in the best interests of the organisation and, because of the organisation's importance, in the best interests of Scotland.

Tavish Scott: Our issue is not with what Mr Ewing said but with what the First Minister said. Last week, the First Minister said four times that the situation was resolved, not that it would be or was being resolved. If the First Minister thinks that it was resolved last week, what on earth was Mr Ewing doing at a meeting on Tuesday night this week still trying to sort it out? Why was the Government unable to place a shred of written evidence into Parliament last week as I asked? Why did Government spin doctors scurry around journalists yesterday with an e-mail in which they forgot to delete the sentence that makes it plain that the issue was never going to be resolved until this week? However much he wants to, the First Minister cannot just make stuff up in response to parliamentary questions. *[Applause.]*

The Presiding Officer: Order.

Tavish Scott: In responding to the cross-party motion, the First Minister needs to do more than simply apologise. He needs to think before he speaks, and to choose his words so that they accurately reflect the true situation. People expect

him to respect the values of the Parliament in his answers. Will that happen?

The First Minister: The e-mail from Major Dixon, to which Tavish Scott refers, was a response to the ministerial assurance. It welcomes Mr Ewing's intervention and his assurance that the funding will continue. The issue was resolved and settled. Clearly, the ministerial assurance is the thing that matters. That is what commits the Government. Once the ministerial assurance is given, the issue is resolved.

Iain Smith (North East Fife) (LD): Rubbish.

The Presiding Officer: Order.

The First Minister: I would have thought that Tavish Scott might be interested in a statement that was made by Major Dixon this morning. He said:

"The commitment of Ministers and the Scottish Government to the development of inter-faith relations is well documented and we are pleased to know that we continue to be one of its partners in this important work."

I would have thought that the chamber could unite around the fact that effective action by a minister resolved a funding issue and allowed the important work of the Scottish Inter Faith Council to continue.

I heard on the radio this morning that there had been an earthquake in Shetland. At about 3 on the Richter scale, it did not amount to much—rather like Tavish Scott's questions.

John Lamont (Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con): The First Minister will be aware of the devastating job cuts that have been announced in Hawick in my constituency this week: 38 jobs lost at Slumberdown; 35 jobs lost at Emtelle; and 20 jobs lost at Thornwood Motors. With many more job cuts apparently to be announced in the next few days and weeks, Gordon Brown's recession is hitting my constituency hard. Can the First Minister tell me and my constituents what his Government is doing to address the growing jobs crisis and say what action he is taking to protect many of the skilled jobs that might be lost for ever?

The First Minister: I know that the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Sustainable Growth has visited the member's constituency twice already to talk about the jobs situation.

The recession and the state of the economy mean that we have to face the fact that many constituencies, workers and factories are going to face similar situations across the country. However, I hope and believe—as, I think, the constructive nature of yesterday's budget debate indicated—that there is widespread support in the Parliament for the recovery plan that the Scottish Government is pursuing. There is widespread support for the acceleration of capital investment

and the announcement of projects and there is a widespread acknowledgement that the Scottish Government realised the opportunities of using enhanced European social fund money substantially earlier than Westminster did.

The member has my assurance that the Administration will do everything within its power to protect families and businesses across the country as they face the ravages of recession. However, it is also the case that, if we had more economic powers in Scotland, that response could be greater.

Robin Harper (Lothians) (Green): The First Minister will be aware that, this week, the European Parliament voted by a substantial majority to tighten up on the use of pesticides in agriculture. The proposed legislation places tight curbs on crop spraying, bans the use of pesticides near schools and hospitals and proscribes 22 chemicals, some of which are said to be carcinogenic—a move that will be particularly relevant in Scotland, given the Parliament's approval of the right of land access, which provides for walking on field margins. Does the First Minister support the decision of the European Parliament? Will he ensure that people in Scotland are fully protected from the harmful health impacts of certain chemicals by expressing his intention to implement the proposals in full?

The First Minister: Everyone in Parliament wants to ensure good public health among the Scottish people. However, it is not always the case that every regulation that emanates from Europe on pesticides and other matters is proportionate to the dangers. Although public health is the greatest priority, we have to be proportionate in the implementation of proper regulations.

I will ask the Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs and the Environment to write to Robin Harper to discuss the detail of the proposals, state what doubts and difficulties the Scottish Government—and, I think, the Westminster Government—has with the proposals and set out the areas that we will undoubtedly be able to support.

Financial Sector Jobs

4. Shirley-Anne Somerville (Lothians) (SNP): To ask the First Minister what steps the Scottish Government is taking to secure financial sector jobs in Scotland. (S3F-1353)

The First Minister (Alex Salmond): The Scottish Government is taking a range of measures to secure financial jobs in Scotland. Quite clearly, the Parliament's concentration towards the end of last year was—and still is—on the merger of Lloyds TSB with HBOS. The concerns that many of us had, which were shared across the Parliament, were well ventilated.

However, I can indicate that we have had productive discussions with Lloyds TSB. Some of its more recent announcements should give the Parliament encouragement that the new banking group will have a strong commitment to Scotland.

Shirley-Anne Somerville: As the First Minister is well aware, the financial services sector is one of Edinburgh's largest employers, providing more than 43,000 highly skilled jobs in the city. There is understandable concern in the sector about the impact that the economic recession will have. Can the First Minister provide reassurance that the Scottish Government will continue to work with the financial institutions and the unions to provide support to protect Edinburgh's reputation as a vibrant and successful financial centre?

The First Minister: Yes, I can give that assurance. It should be remembered that, although two of the Scottish banks suffered greatly from the financial tsunami and the huge prevalence of tightening credit conditions last autumn, the Scottish financial sector is broadly based across insurance, pensions and investment management. Relative to the conditions that they face, many of our outstanding financial companies in Scotland are doing extremely well in the markets that they pursue.

Through the Financial Services Advisory Board—FiSAB—and our other initiatives with the financial sector, we will market that performance and the comparative advantage that we have in Scotland. We will maintain the focus on skills and the promotion of Scotland's locational advantage. As the time is right, Scottish Development International continues to work to secure investment by promoting Scotland's costs and skills. Scotland has a substantial relative cost advantage in our high-quality financial sector compared with many other locations in Europe. Those assets and the skills of our workforce—and, indeed, Scotland's reputation in financial matters—will be key points of the marketing campaigns that FiSAB and others pursue.

Jeremy Purvis (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD): In light of concerns about potential job losses in the sector, calls were made before Christmas for a specific financial sector jobs task force to be established by the Scottish Government at high levels. The Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Sustainable Growth replied that, although such a task force had not been ruled out, FiSAB was the correct structure. According to the Scottish Government's website, FiSAB last met on 2 September—four months ago. Can the Government act more urgently, in view of the potential for job losses, by establishing a high-level task force, chaired by the First Minister, on what is a vital sector of the Scottish economy?

The First Minister: FiSAB is the body that brings together the financial sector in Scotland. Obviously, the Scottish Government has concentrated on and had a great deal of activity in relation to the HBOS position. In recent days, I have spoken to both Susan Rice and Archie Kane about the recent announcements by the Lloyds TSB banking group. There are some things that the Parliament should welcome in those announcements. For example, the convening by Archie Kane of a Scottish board across a range of the group's activities is a useful step forward, as is the appointment of Susan Rice as chief executive. She has a strong reputation in the financial sector in Scotland. Rather than reinvent another body, it is appropriate that FiSAB is the key body to look at, promote and enhance the skills of the financial sector in Scotland. We have a strong body and a strong set of skills that we should build on. I am sure that everyone is willing to take part in that.

John Park (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): As the First Minister may be aware, the trade union Unite has developed a social charter that outlines measures that could help workers in the financial services sector. Would he and other ministers be prepared to meet the union to discuss that proposal?

The First Minister: Yes, I would. Of course, there is trade union representation on FiSAB, so views can be made through that body, but I would be very happy to have a specific meeting on those proposals. Indeed, we recently accepted a Confederation of British Industry Scotland proposal on skills enhancement in the financial sector and had a specific meeting to take forward that initiative. I would welcome and support a meeting with the union.

Homecoming Scotland 2009 (Funding)

5. Lewis Macdonald (Aberdeen Central) (Lab): To ask the First Minister what additional funding has been provided for homecoming Scotland 2009 since 5 November 2008. (S3F-1374)

The First Minister (Alex Salmond): Recognising the importance of homecoming Scotland 2009 as a means of boosting tourism to support the Scottish economy at this time, the Government allocated an additional £0.5 million on top of the £5 million core budget that was already in place for homecoming. Most of the additional budget will be used to extend the marketing and promotion of homecoming, including playing the "Caledonia" television advert to audiences of more than 100 million people in North America and in other parts of the United Kingdom.

Lewis Macdonald: That modest additional support will be welcomed, but will the First Minister explain why £0.5 million in new marketing support

was not worth a mention when we raised concerns about the funding of homecoming in the debate last week? Total public investment in homecoming, even now, is half of the investment that was made in the 2007 year of Highland culture, so does the First Minister intend to provide any more additional funding in the months ahead?

The First Minister: As I recall the debate, Jim Mather spelt out what the international marketing campaign of homecoming was going to be. That is what the extra money will go towards.

Despite the comments that he occasionally makes in the press, I know that Lewis Macdonald is right behind the homecoming initiative. I am glad of that. Although it is early days, there are substantial indications of great success in the initiative. There is huge awareness of it in Scotland, which will be a critical part of its success. The international programme is achieving substantial results as well.

On websites affiliated to homecoming, notes of interest from North America are at a rate of one every 35 seconds. Of those, 75 per cent say that they are either “interested” or “very interested” in coming to Scotland because of the homecoming initiative.

In addition to mentioning the indications of success in, for example, the gathering—for which 6,000 of the 8,000 tickets have already been sold, five months before the event takes place—it is only fair that I should make a special mention of the great Celtic Connections festival, which starts this weekend and which, the following weekend, will have the homecoming series of events. I understand that virtually all the events are sold out, so I advise members to pull as many strings as possible if they want to get to them. I am sure that Celtic Connections—a great and growing music festival in Glasgow—will, as a homecoming event, be worthy of that great city and will be supported by Lewis Macdonald and by everybody else in the chamber.

Unintentional Homelessness

6. Ross Finnie (West of Scotland) (LD): To ask the First Minister what progress the Scottish Government has made towards ending unintentional homelessness. (S3F-1372)

The First Minister (Alex Salmond): The 2012 target, as enshrined in the Homelessness etc (Scotland) Act 2003, is to abolish the distinction between homeless households currently assessed as “priority” or “non-priority” and to ensure that all unintentionally homeless households are treated equally. The Scottish Government has agreed a four-point plan for moving towards the target with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities. The plan focuses on investing in housing supply;

maximising access to existing stock; preventing homelessness where possible; and promoting better joint working between services. A joint letter from Scottish Government and COSLA officials to local authorities setting out action under this plan, and related developments, was issued on 23 December. Progress against the interim 2009 targets that were set by the previous Administration will be monitored later this year.

Ross Finnie: On the basis of the construction that the First Minister now wishes us to assume should be put on his answers—given his response to my colleague Tavish Scott—I think that we can take it from that answer that unintentional homelessness has now been resolved.

However, given the current economic recession, and given that it is acknowledged that the recession is likely to impact the most on those who are least able to cope, will the First Minister explain why, despite the Government’s announcements of accelerated investment in affordable housing, the investment plan for Glasgow and Edinburgh—cities that arguably contain the areas of greatest housing and economic need—is exactly the same as it was not just this time last year but this time two years ago?

The First Minister: I would be concerned if anything that the Government did were the same as what was done by the previous Administration. The previous Administration produced

“the best homelessness legislation in the world, but we didn’t build the housing to make it work”.

Those were not my words but Iain Gray’s words on 21 August last year. Ross Finnie was part of the previous Administration, so if I were him, I would not trumpet its record on housing too much.

I am delighted to give the chamber the latest statistics on new-build starts by local authorities in Scotland. To get the sweep of the evidence—I would not like to be accused of being selective—let us consider the figures over a few years. In 2003-04, there were zero new-build starts by local authorities. In the following year, there were also zero. In the year following that—the last year of completions under the previous Labour Government—there were six, all of them in Shetland. There have now been 432 under the current Scottish National Party Administration, and the figure will move higher, year by year, as local authorities once more assume their role in the provision of affordable social housing in Scotland. I am sure that Ross Finnie will welcome that.

Presiding Officer's Statement

14:15

On resuming—

The Presiding Officer (Alex Fergusson): Before I suspend the meeting, I will make a brief statement to the chamber.

I have said on numerous occasions that the Presiding Officer never has been, is not and cannot be responsible for the veracity of what is said in the chamber. That said, I note that such points of order are on the increase, which indicates to me a growing sense of frustration among members. I strongly believe that Parliament is, ultimately, ill served by that type of exchange. I also believe that all members must play their part in ensuring that we have the highest standards of probity, scrutiny and accountability. I have, therefore, today written to the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee asking it to launch an inquiry into the wider issue of the veracity of members' responses and how that is best policed.

12:31

Meeting suspended until 14:15.

Question Time

SCOTTISH EXECUTIVE

Health and Wellbeing

Housing Associations

1. Mary Mulligan (Linlithgow) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive what it is doing to support housing associations. (S3O-5494)

The Minister for Communities and Sport (Stewart Maxwell): We are working with housing associations to increase the supply of affordable homes, despite the current economic climate. They receive over 95 per cent of our affordable housing investment programme and we continue to provide housing association grant at higher levels than in other parts of the United Kingdom.

We are accelerating £120 million in funding to associations to help them deliver those homes. That brings the total for 2008-09 to £533 million and for 2009-10 to £644 million, which will be the highest ever level of support provided to housing associations.

In addition, we support action by housing associations to tackle poverty, worklessness and community decline through the wider role fund for registered social landlords. That fund will provide £36 million for community regeneration activity for the three financial years from 2008 to 2011.

Mary Mulligan: In a statement released on 17 December, the Scottish Federation of Housing Associations said that the Scottish Government's cut in the level of HAG per house means that

"schemes will require around an extra £10,000 private loan per unit at a time when the availability and costs of this borrowing is more restricted".

Does the minister agree that the cut in the level of HAG per house could result in fewer houses being built? Will he consider returning to the previous HAG funding arrangement—it was more generous, but also more acceptable and better understood by funders—and ensure that housing associations are able to continue to build the new houses that I believe that we all want?

Stewart Maxwell: I agree with Mary Mulligan that we all want to see many good, high-quality homes being built throughout the country for affordable rent and for low-cost home ownership.

I clarify for the member that almost 5,700 public sector houses were started in 2007-08—the first year of this Government—which is more than in

any year since the early 1990s. Nearly 5,000 houses for social rent were started—again, the highest figure since the early 1990s.

The demand from housing associations to access the affordable housing investment accelerated programme means that the programme has been oversubscribed. Housing associations throughout the country are able to build new properties with the housing association grant.

It is clear that, at a time of unprecedented difficulties and of pressure on public expenditure, we must ensure that there is more effective use of that expenditure and of all resources across all the different sectors of housing. It is essential that public resources are deployed as effectively as possible to maximise supply. We are looking to RSLs to work with us on that. Of course, we always keep those matters under review. We have constant conversations with the Scottish Federation of Housing Associations. We will ensure that the HAG rates are appropriate to maximise the number of houses that we can build.

Jamie Hepburn (Central Scotland) (SNP): The minister might be aware of the on-going problems that many of my constituents in Cumbernauld who are owner-occupiers in multistorey flats are having in respect of their dealings with the Cumbernauld Housing Partnership, which acts as their factor. What support is available to housing associations in respect of their role as factors for many owner-occupiers throughout Scotland?

Stewart Maxwell: The Scottish Housing Regulator already monitors and regulates services to owners where a housing association is providing factoring services. If there is an issue with the particular homes that the member mentioned, the best option would be for him to write to the regulator in the first instance to see whether it can look at the issue that he raises.

Jamie McGregor (Highlands and Islands) (Con): Does the minister accept that housing associations in Scotland are finding it difficult to deliver the affordable housing units that we all want, due to confusion about how housing association grant is applied?

I have been contacted by a housing association in Argyll. The association has been given Scottish Government grant approval for a scheme at £88,000 per unit, which will be awarded only if it gets the balance from the local authority. However, a neighbouring association is being assessed at £107,000 per unit. Can the minister explain the discrepancy?

Stewart Maxwell: As I said, I do not think that there is confusion among housing associations about the HAG regime in Scotland, which is clear. I point out again that the number of houses that

were started in the Government's first year is the highest since the early 1990s.

Every application is assessed individually and the amount of HAG to be given is assessed individually. Of course, rates vary from case to case, due to local circumstances. That is entirely reasonable and predictable and has always been the case. I cannot explain the difference between grant levels for the two projects that the member mentioned, because I do not know to which projects he was referring. However, it has always been the case that HAG rates can vary from project to project, which is quite right.

Malcolm Chisholm (Edinburgh North and Leith) (Lab): I welcome the significant acceleration of housing expenditure for 2009-10. However, not a penny of that additional money will go to Edinburgh. How can the minister justify that? Given that we are moving towards our historic 2012 homelessness target, does the minister accept that the City of Edinburgh Council faces by far the biggest challenge, because Edinburgh has by far the biggest shortage of affordable rented housing? Surely Edinburgh desperately needs money in 2009-10, as well as in subsequent years.

Stewart Maxwell: The third tranche of the accelerated funding for this year has not yet been announced, so members should not prejudge where it will go.

Mary Mulligan: When will it be announced?

Stewart Maxwell: Very shortly.

Projects throughout the country, including in Edinburgh, have been submitted for accelerated funding. I am sure that Malcolm Chisholm will consider the situation with great interest when the third tranche of funding has been finalised.

The level of funding for Glasgow and Edinburgh will remain the same between 2008-09 and 2010-11, as a result of the agreement with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities that underpinned the 2007 local government settlement. We presume that COSLA wanted the affordable housing investment programme allocations to both cities to be fixed for three years because of the size of the delegated funds that it wanted to be protected.

NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde (Meetings)

2. Bill Aitken (Glasgow) (Con): To ask the Scottish Executive when the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Wellbeing will next meet the chief executive of NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde. (S3O-5459)

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Health and Wellbeing (Nicola Sturgeon): I have no immediate plans to meet the chief executive of NHS Greater Glasgow and

Clyde. However, I will meet the board chair on 26 January.

Bill Aitken: Will the cabinet secretary use the meeting to raise with officials the concerns of my constituents in Glasgow about health visiting? Can she confirm whether she has received assurances that general practice-attached health visitors will remain attached to general practice, where they offer a universal and informed local service?

Nicola Sturgeon: The short answer is yes, but I will give the member the courtesy of a longer reply. As he is aware, NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde recently agreed with Glasgow local medical committee a way forward on the health visiting review. At its meeting on 27 October, the committee formally agreed principles to guide local planning and implementation groups on implementation of the review of health visiting. I understand that the board has written to all health visitors to inform them of the agreement. In addition to its work with general practitioners, the board has been working with trade unions and professional organisations, to discuss their concerns.

As part of the agreed principles, it has been agreed that every GP practice will have an attached health visitor in the primary health care team. Every patient and GP practice will know who their health visitor is and how to contact them. That is an important step forward, which has been welcomed by people who have an interest in the matter. Like other members, I will keep a close watch on progress on development and implementation.

Ian McKee (Lothians) (SNP): When the cabinet secretary meets the chair of NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde, will she inquire about the possibility of removing the car parking charges at Glasgow royal infirmary and the likely cost to the board of buying out that element of the private finance initiative contract into which the previous Government entered?

Nicola Sturgeon: PFI hospitals and car parks and all the attendant issues and problems that they create for patients are a legacy of the previous Administration. I am glad to say that this Government has moved away from PFI. The new Southern general hospital, which we will discuss in a later question, is being built entirely using public capital.

On the specific issue of the car parking arrangements at the Glasgow royal infirmary, as Ian McKee will be aware, I have instructed NHS boards that have such PFI contracts in place to enter into discussions with their PFI providers to explore what opportunities might exist for limiting or reducing charges for parking and, as part of that process, to investigate whether such contracts

could be ended or have their terms varied. I understand that NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde is proceeding with such discussions and will report to me in due course on the progress that it has made in them.

Dr Richard Simpson (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): When the cabinet secretary next meets the chairman or the chief executive of NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde, will she discuss C difficile, in the light of the inquiry into the issue at the Vale of Leven hospital and of the most recent figures, published yesterday, which show that the number of cases across the NHS rose by 10 per cent in the year to September 2008. Even Health Protection Scotland's preferred rate, the number of cases relative to the number of occupied beds, shows no diminution in comparison with the rate in England, where there has been an annualised reduction of 20 per cent. Will the cabinet secretary look at Labour's comprehensive proposals to tackle the problem? Will she raise some of those issues with the chief executive or the chair of NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde?

Nicola Sturgeon: I will answer those points as briefly as I can. Many of the points in the 15-point plan that Labour produced this week are already being implemented by this Government, but I will always look at ideas that can help us to improve in the fight against infection, given that it is such a high priority. Why were none of those 15 measures introduced when Labour had the opportunity to do so, during its eight years in government?

As I am sure that Richard Simpson appreciates, C difficile is on the agenda in most of the conversations that I have with board chairs and chief executives. That is certainly the case in Glasgow. Following the situation at the Vale of Leven hospital last year, we agreed with NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde a clear action plan for it to implement, and it is making good progress with that. Just before Christmas, the independent review team, which is led by Professor Cairns Smith, did a follow-up review on the Vale of Leven hospital, and it will submit its report to me shortly.

I hope that members appreciate that I would never seek to underestimate the challenge that we face with infection in our hospitals. I will do everything in my power to drive those infection rates down. I am not sure whether we will ever be able to declare that we have won that battle, but it will remain a priority.

For the sake of staff in the national health service, it is incumbent on all of us to acknowledge progress when it is made. As well as showing that we now have the lowest rates of MRSA in Scotland since records began—that is a fantastic achievement by NHS staff—the figures that Health Protection Scotland published yesterday show

some early signs of progress on C difficile. There has been a 17 per cent reduction in the number of cases since last quarter and a 2 per cent reduction on the figures for the same quarter last year. Some of that might be seasonal, so I would not claim that those figures amount to a trend, but they represent early signs of progress. I am determined to see that continue.

Poverty and Income Inequality

3. Paul Martin (Glasgow Springburn) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive what it is doing to tackle poverty and income inequality. (S3O-5485)

The Minister for Communities and Sport (Stewart Maxwell): The Scottish Government is taking a wide range of measures to tackle poverty and income inequality in Scotland. Those measures are set out in three major social policy frameworks that were launched last year: "Achieving Our Potential: A Framework to tackle poverty and income inequality in Scotland"; "Equally Well: Report of the Ministerial Task Force on Health Inequalities"; and the early years framework.

Over the next two years, we will invest up to £7.5 million in a range of measures to support implementation of "Achieving Our Potential". The fairer Scotland fund is providing £435 million over three years to assist community planning partners to work together to achieve sustainable economic growth by focusing on the regeneration of our most disadvantaged neighbourhoods, tackling individual poverty and overcoming barriers to work.

We have taken steps to remove taxes on ill health by progressively abolishing prescription charges and hospital car parking fees. We will legislate to abolish council tax and to introduce a local income tax, which it is estimated would give back between £300 and £480 a year to low and middle-income households, and would lift 85,000 people, including 15,000 children, out of relative poverty.

We have allocated an additional £10 million for the central heating programme this year, to allow us to help more fuel-poor households. To date, the delivery through the programme of a benefits health check has also secured £1.8 million in extra benefits for Scotland's pensioners.

We are committed to extending free school meals to all pupils whose parents or carers are in receipt of working tax credits from August 2009, and to all primary 1 to primary 3 pupils from August 2010.

The Presiding Officer (Alex Fergusson): We are into speech territory, minister.

Stewart Maxwell: Sorry, Presiding Officer—the question was on what we are doing about income inequality and poverty, and I am answering it.

The Presiding Officer: I ask you to bring your answer to a close as soon as possible, please.

Stewart Maxwell: Yes.

My final point is that we are setting out immediate actions in the Government economic recovery programme to help those who have been hit by the current economic downturn.

Those are just some of the measures that the Government is taking to tackle poverty and income inequality.

Paul Martin: I thank the minister for that comprehensive answer. However, why does the Scottish Government's document "Achieving Our Potential: A Framework to tackle poverty and income inequality in Scotland" not contain year-on-year targets for achieving the aims that he has set out?

Stewart Maxwell: "Achieving Our Potential" is, of course, a consultation document. We are working closely with all the groups throughout Scotland to ensure that we achieve the United Kingdom targets on child poverty to which—as the member is well aware—we have signed up. We are happy to have registered our support for those targets, and we will do all that we can to assist the UK Government in achieving them.

Care Home Staff (Fife)

4. Helen Eadie (Dunfermline East) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive what discussions it has had with NHS Fife, Fife Council and nursing trade unions on training carers in homes for people with complex needs to replace fully qualified nursing staff. (S3O-5473)

The Minister for Public Health (Shona Robison): The deployment and training of social care and health professionals—based on assessed needs and local priorities—is the responsibility of local authorities and health boards. We would expect all social care and health staff who support people with profound and complex needs to be fully trained in meeting their needs.

Helen Eadie: Will the minister explain how the change from resident nurses, who can administer prescribed medication, to carers at night and to district nurses and community learning disability nurses in the day time, will improve care? My clear view, which is supported by the Royal College of Nursing and other trade unions as well as patient organisations, is that any changes to services must provide the same or a better level of service to patients.

My Lumphinnans constituent tells me that her brother, who is an in-patient at Kilrymond house and has very special and complex needs, will now be at increased risk as a consequence of the changes that NHS Fife has proposed. How can the Scottish Government argue that such changes maintain or improve services to those patients with very special needs?

Shona Robison: I will make a couple of points about that. First, I understand that NHS Fife and Fife Council have based their decisions about the level and skills of staffing in Kilrymond on the assessed needs of the residents who are currently living there. I assure the member that the resource level that is available for the service that Kilrymond provides has remained the same. She will be well aware that the resettlement programme is aimed at ensuring that people with learning difficulties do not have a hospital as their home. As part of that programme, only those who were clinically assessed as being fit for discharge were moved to community settings, with care packages based on individual need.

It is not at all unusual for the level of nursing staff to be reduced as care staff become more skilled in providing appropriate care. The skills mix of staff in any care setting should be based on the needs of those who require care and support, and I understand that the proposed changes to nursing provision at Kilrymond are in line with that. I hope that that provides the reassurance that the member requires.

Southern General Hospital

5. James Kelly (Glasgow Rutherglen) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive what progress has been made on the planned new build of the Southern general hospital. (S3O-5481)

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Health and Wellbeing (Nicola Sturgeon): Since the approval of the outline business case on 22 April last year, NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde has been preparing the project for procurement through the appointment of advisers, the development of detailed design requirements and the development of a robust procurement strategy. The project team and advisers are currently working to complete phase 1A of the project to be ready to go to market in early April 2009. The entire project is completely on track.

James Kelly: Can the cabinet secretary guarantee that the timescale of the project will not be threatened by the need to divert capital funds to fund a new Forth bridge, or by a skills shortage and resultant rise in construction costs, such as Michael Levack of the Scottish Building Federation reported to the Local Government and Communities Committee?

Nicola Sturgeon: Yes, I can give that absolute, 100 per cent guarantee with no ifs and no buts. I hope that that is good enough for James Kelly.

The reality is that the Government is committed to the new-build Southern general and has made available the resources for the project. It will be built entirely within the public sector and it will be a first-class infrastructure project and hospital not just for the people of Glasgow, but for the people of other parts of the west of Scotland as well.

There is no threat to the Southern general. All the Labour scaremongering in the world will not change that basic fact.

Sandra White (Glasgow) (SNP): With regard to the proposed new maternity and children's hospital on the Southern general campus, what is the situation with Ronald McDonald house, which is a fantastic and unique facility? Will it be replicated in full on the new site, and is there a timescale for that?

Nicola Sturgeon: I appreciate the importance of Ronald McDonald house. My understanding is that NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde is making good progress on the matter with the separate board of Ronald McDonald house and the intention is to reprovide facilities on the site of the new south Glasgow hospital. As I understand it, a location for the site has now been agreed and a schedule of accommodation is being jointly developed. I am more than happy to ask NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde to keep Sandra White informed of progress on that important development.

Telehealth and Telemedicine

6. Mary Scanlon (Highlands and Islands) (Con): To ask the Scottish Executive what progress is being made in the use of telehealth and telemedicine. (S3O-5461)

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Health and Wellbeing (Nicola Sturgeon): I visited the Scottish Centre for Telehealth as part of my visit to NHS Grampian on Monday, and I was encouraged to see for myself the progress that is being made. The centre's role is to identify and evaluate telehealth solutions that can be applied nationally and to provide practical support to help NHS boards to develop and implement telehealth projects as part of their service redesign. I had the opportunity to hear about a range of interesting telehealth initiatives. Such initiatives provide a great opportunity to improve patient care, particularly in more remote parts of the country.

Mary Scanlon: In the "Better Health, Better Care" action plan, the Government stated that a managed knowledge network would be launched in April 2008 and that a self-management framework would be in place in each community

health partnership by the end of 2008. Will the health secretary give an update on those two initiatives in relation to telehealth? How is the new technology being used to support self-care by patients and how is it being used by GPs?

Nicola Sturgeon: I am happy to send Mary Scanlon a full written response with the detail of progress on the two projects that she mentioned, which, as she rightly said, were set out in "Better Health, Better Care".

I agree with Mary Scanlon that telecare, telehealth or telemedicine—the terms are used interchangeably—are important because they have enormous potential to improve the way in which clinical services are provided. I saw examples of how stroke care, mental health services and out-of-hours minor injury services can be improved through the use of telehealth. As Mary Scanlon rightly said, it also has great potential to improve the education of health care staff and the efficiency of the administration of the health service. In this morning's debate on elected health boards, Mary Scanlon raised the issue of people who live in remote parts of Scotland and the difficulties that they face with travel; videoconferencing can be a big part of the solution.

Telehealth is an exciting area and Scotland is leading the way. In some respects, we are ahead of the game, but because of the potential to improve services, we must attach considerable importance to the area. I assure Mary Scanlon that the Government will continue to do so.

GHA (Management) Ltd (Regulation)

7. Charlie Gordon (Glasgow Cathcart) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive whether it considers that the operation of GHA (Management) Ltd should be regulated and, if so, how. (S3O-5477)

The Minister for Communities and Sport (Stewart Maxwell): This Government believes that it is important that owners get a high-quality service from their factors. The Scottish Housing Regulator already monitors and regulates factoring services that are provided to owners by housing associations, including Glasgow Housing Association. In those circumstances, we do not consider it necessary at present to introduce further regulation of the operations of GHA (Management) Ltd or other registered social landlords' separate factoring subsidiaries.

In its inspection report on the GHA in 2007, the Scottish Housing Regulator stated that the delivery of services to owners required serious improvement. The GHA has now addressed a number of the issues that were identified and the service is beginning to show clear signs of improvement.

Charlie Gordon: I thank the minister for that answer, although I am somewhat puzzled by it. A specific complaint that I made to the Scottish Housing Regulator was rejected for consideration because it focused on GHA's factoring arm. Given the fact that the Office of Fair Trading recently produced a survey on regulation of property managers throughout the United Kingdom, that recommendations from the OFT are imminent, and that Patricia Ferguson MSP has a propose bill on regulation of property managers, will the minister keep an open mind about the possibility of regulating not just GHA (Management) Ltd but all property managers and factors in Scotland?

Stewart Maxwell: I assure the member that I very much have an open mind on the wider issue in his supplementary question. His original question was limited to RSLs, and particularly to GHA (Management) Ltd. If he wants to write to me about the specific question that he raised and the problem that he had, I will be more than happy to look into the matter.

A voluntary accreditation scheme is being developed. We will give close consideration to the conclusions of the OFT report, which could include a recommendation to introduce registration for property managers. If doing so is appropriate, we will not hesitate to do so.

Specialist Nurses (Motor Neurone Disease)

8. Christina McKelvie (Central Scotland) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what progress has been made in providing specialist nurses for motor neurone disease sufferers. (S3O-5542)

The Minister for Public Health (Shona Robison): The planning of the workforce, including specialist nurses for motor neurone disease sufferers, is a matter for national health service boards, which are responsible for planning services in their area based on clinical need. In doing so, and as part of their plans to ensure that services meet the needs of people living with long-term conditions, they are required to consider the role of specialist nurses, and nurses with a broader remit to work in the community.

NHS Quality Improvement Scotland has been consulting on draft generic and specific standards applicable for neurological health services, including motor neurone disease. The publication of the standards is likely to take place this summer, and NHS boards throughout Scotland will be expected to comply with the generic and specific standards drafted by NHS QIS.

Christina McKelvie: I ask the minister to encourage health boards to work with the Scottish Motor Neurone Disease Association to support the 327 people in Scotland who have been diagnosed

as having motor neurone disease—the highest recorded number yet—and to join me in sending best wishes to the association for the launch of its new identity at Stirling castle next week.

Shona Robison: I join Christina McKelvie in paying tribute to the work of the Motor Neurone Disease Association. It does a tremendous job, and I am sure that the event to which she referred will go very well indeed.

It is important that the partnership involving the voluntary sector and the health service continues to grow. It is a strong partnership, which has delivered some innovative ways of working in the health service. As a Government, we will continue to encourage boards and to support them in working with the voluntary sector to deliver not just specialist nurses, but a range of other services that are important to the patients who receive them.

Alcohol Misuse Services (Aberdeen)

9. Richard Baker (North East Scotland) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive what discussions it has had in relation to the provision of alcohol misuse services in Aberdeen. (S3O-5465)

The Minister for Public Health (Shona Robison): The Scottish Government has provided £2,014,386 to NHS Grampian for the provision of alcohol brief interventions and alcohol treatment and support services in Aberdeen, Aberdeenshire and Moray. The Scottish Government does not determine which services should be delivered through those funds, which is a decision best made locally according to identified need. Officials will be visiting each NHS board over the coming months to discuss progress on delivering brief interventions and the allocation of resources among brief interventions and other services.

Richard Baker: I am sure that minister will be aware of the excellent work of Albyn house in Aberdeen in providing alcohol misuse services. Is she aware that despite a sharp increase in new referrals to Albyn house, there is still no certainty about a funding package to ensure that the facility does not have to close? Given national policy on designated places, will she tell us what she will do to encourage Aberdeen City Council, Grampian NHS Board and Grampian Police to come to an agreement as soon as possible to preserve that vital local service?

Shona Robison: I remind Richard Baker that we have committed about £120 million for tackling alcohol misuse between 2008 and 2011, the majority of which has been allocated for provision of treatment and support services.

A number of partners are involved in decisions on funding in regard to the services that are offered by Albyn house. The process is not simple,

and I am sure that all the agencies involved are fully aware of the need for a decision, and will make a decision as soon as possible in the normal manner.

Brian Adam (Aberdeen North) (SNP): What progress has been made as a result of the recent setting up of an online service offering advice on alcohol issues in the north-east? Can the minister give us an update?

Shona Robison: Alcohol Focus Scotland is working with Alcohol Support Ltd in Aberdeen to provide the online counselling service to which Brian Adam refers. The scheme has been in operation for only a short time, so it is too early to assess the results. However, Alcohol Focus Scotland will conduct an evaluation at the end of the pilot, before considering whether the scheme can be developed and then rolled out to other areas. I will take a keen interest in that evaluation.

National Health Service Dentists (Grampian)

10. Mike Rumbles (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (LD): To ask the Scottish Executive what action it is taking to increase access to NHS dentistry in Grampian in light of an increase to 30,936 in the number of people in Grampian waiting to be registered with an NHS dentist. (S3O-5516)

The Minister for Public Health (Shona Robison): NHS Grampian is of course aware of the long-standing problems with access to NHS dental services in the area, and the board has been working with dental practitioners to try to increase provision.

In addition to the establishment of a new dental school for Scotland in Aberdeen on 6 October 2008, the Scottish Government has provisionally allocated to NHS Grampian £6.62 million under the primary and community care modernisation programme for 2009-10 and 2010-11. A priority for the funding is the development of new dental centres for independent general dental practitioners working in the NHS.

Mike Rumbles: After almost two years in office, the Scottish National Party Government is presiding over an increasing dental crisis in Grampian. Instead of the piecemeal approach that has been described and taken by previous and current health ministers, will not the minister and the British Dental Association get round the table with the aim of changing terms and conditions in order to encourage private dentists to take on NHS patients? That is the only way to reduce the increasing waiting list dramatically and quickly for my constituents.

Shona Robison: I remind Mike Rumbles of the bit that was missing from his question—the fact that his party was part of the previous

Administration that negotiated the contract in 2005, and which we inherited. Mr Rumbles's efforts to pass the buck to the Labour health minister at the time, as he tried to do on the BBC this morning, will not have gone down well in parts of the chamber.

I will answer Mr Rumbles's question directly: yes, we are concerned about waiting lists and we want to get them down. However, we also have to consider other measures of performance in dentistry. Registration figures are one such measure. I am pleased to be able to tell Mr Rumbles that, in the year to June 2008, the number of registrations of children in Grampian increased by more than 5,000 and the number of registrations of adults increased by more 16,000. We now have more dentists working in Grampian, and we have a programme of new build for premises—30 new dental units have been built since 2005. That is good, and over the next 12 months another six new premises will be opening in Grampian.

By making dental premises a priority in the community care modernisation programme, this Government has certainly given dentistry a priority that it has not had before.

We have also delivered the dental school. Mr Rumbles talked an awful lot about a dental school during the eight years when he had influence, but he delivered very little indeed.

Mike Rumbles: It is not a dental school; it is a—

The Presiding Officer: Order, Mr Rumbles.

Repossessions (Homeowner Support)

11. David Whitton (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive whether it will provide an update on the measures that it is taking to help those facing repossession of their houses. (S3O-5503)

The Minister for Communities and Sport (Stewart Maxwell): On 8 December 2008, I announced an extra £5 million for the mortgage to rent scheme this year. That increases our investment in the home owners support fund to £30 million over two years. We have also made £3 million available over the next two years to expand in-court advice and other legal advice services, and we have given Citizens Advice Scotland an extra £1 million to increase the amount of face-to-face advice services.

We will implement section 11 of the Homelessness etc (Scotland) Act 2003 in the spring, which will require lenders to inform the relevant local authority when they take court action for repossession.

We have supported with nearly £400,000 of funding a television and online advertising

campaign with charity the Money Advice Trust to encourage people to tackle their debt problems as soon as possible by contacting the National Debtline telephone helpline.

From April, we will increase the income limits for civil legal aid to ensure that more than a million more Scots become eligible, meaning that three quarters of Scots will be able to get free or subsidised help to protect their legal rights.

We have also set up a short-life working group to consider whether the current legal protection for home owners who are at risk of repossession needs to be strengthened and whether any further non-legislative measures are required.

I shall shortly make a further announcement in which I shall provide details of the revised mortgage to rent scheme and the new mortgage to shared equity scheme.

David Whitton: I thank the minister for that speedy run through. I will correct what the First Minister said at First Minister's question time. The fact is that 30,842 houses were built by housing associations and 342 by councils between June 1999 and June 2007. While the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Wellbeing has been busy congratulating herself and putting out misleading press releases that deliberately isolate the figures for council housing, conveniently ignoring the number of housing association homes that were built under the previous Executive, the Scottish Federation of Housing Associations has said of the SNP's housing proposals:

"we believe the Scottish Government has missed the opportunity to use more of the accelerated funding announced by Alistair Darling in his Pre-Budget Speech for social housing."

With less than a fifth of the much-publicised £100 million allocated—

The Presiding Officer: Question, please, Mr Whitton.

David Whitton: I just wonder whether the minister is going to get a move on and spend some of the £100 million on building houses.

Stewart Maxwell: I will correct David Whitton. The fact is that local authorities in Scotland started 432 council houses in 2007-08, compared with a total of six that were completed in the last four years of the previous Administration. The member will also be interested to hear the following figures on housing association houses. Almost 5,700 public sector houses were started in 2007-08—more than in any year since the early 1990s. Of those, nearly 5,000 houses were for social rent, which is the highest figure since the early 1990s. We have accelerated £120 million of funding for affordable housing into this year and next, with 25 per cent of this year's accelerated funding of all

capital going into housing. Next year will see £644 million of expenditure on affordable housing—the highest such figure that Parliament has ever seen.

“Financial overview of the NHS in Scotland 2007/08”

12. Derek Brownlee (South of Scotland) (Con): To ask the Scottish Executive what action it will take to respond to the challenges highlighted in the Audit Scotland report “Financial overview of the NHS in Scotland 2007/08”. (S3O-5460)

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Health and Wellbeing (Nicola Sturgeon): The Scottish Government will continue to work with NHS bodies to reduce further their reliance on non-recurring resources and to ensure that they are able to manage their expenditure within the resources that are allocated to them. In addition, we will continue to monitor the progress of equal-pay claims and assess any related risks.

Derek Brownlee: Another issue that is raised in the report is the progress that is being made towards meeting the requirements of the European working time directive by the looming August deadline. Having considered the health boards’ action plans to ensure compliance, is the cabinet secretary in a position to guarantee that every health board in Scotland will comply fully with the requirements of the guidelines by August?

Nicola Sturgeon: I thank Derek Brownlee for raising this important issue, which is high on my personal agenda. We are monitoring carefully and regularly the improving compliance of NHS boards. All NHS boards are working extremely hard—for example, through redesign of services—to meet the target date of August, and good progress is being made. I do not deny that there are some challenging areas around, for example, neurosurgery. Nevertheless, we are monitoring progress carefully and will continue to do so to ensure that boards are compliant by August.

Malcolm Chisholm (Edinburgh North and Leith) (Lab): Given that a significant financial pressure on the NHS is caused by the provision of new cancer drugs, can the cabinet secretary update us on progress on innovative arrangements with pharmaceutical companies to make the drugs available cheaper? Can she also tell us how many responses she has had to her consultation on the arrangements for NHS patients receiving private health care, which relates mainly to cancer drugs? On that final point, does she think that it was reasonable for the consultation period on such a controversial measure to last only from 12 December to 12 January?

The Presiding Officer: If the cabinet secretary could answer those three questions in 20 seconds, I would be very grateful.

Nicola Sturgeon: Okay.

On Malcolm Chisholm’s first question, the Scottish Medicines Consortium has set up a working group to examine market access schemes. I understand that the group is to report to me by March, after which I will, of course, update Parliament.

On the other consultation that Malcolm Chisholm referred to, I cannot just now give him the number of responses that were received, but I will provide him with that information. The consultation’s timescale was shorter than usual because it was directed principally at the health service. However, the issue is very important and, given the parliamentary debates that we have had on the matter, I am sure that people will want to have their say about it.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes themed question time.

Forth Crossing

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Trish Godman): The next item of business is a debate on motion S3M-3214, in the name of John Swinney, on the Forth road crossing. Once again, I remind members that the Presiding Officers are no longer giving a one-minute warning before the end of each speech. As time is very tight, members will be kept very tight to their speaking times.

14:56

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Sustainable Growth (John Swinney): The Government's commitment to constructing a Forth replacement crossing is based on a concern that we inherited: the Forth road bridge's main suspension cables are deteriorating and the bridge might have only a limited future life in carrying traffic across the Forth. That said, the results of the Forth Estuary Transport Authority's recent inspections provide some grounds for optimism about the strength of the existing crossing and its ability to be repaired and refurbished to cope with future use.

George Foulkes (Lothians) (Lab): The cabinet secretary has just said something that is absolutely material to the rest of the debate. Last Thursday, at a briefing that I and some other members attended, engineers from his department made it clear that the existing bridge has a future that goes as far as they can see. They did not indicate any threat to or question about the length of time that it will be available.

John Swinney: If Lord Foulkes had been listening, he would have heard me say that the deterioration in the cables is affecting the bridge's ability to continue in its current form and to carry current levels of traffic into the foreseeable future. Reports that we have received—we have all seen them as they are publicly available—suggest the need for remedial action to improve the bridge. The choices that we face concern prolonged closure of the bridge to ensure that that refurbishment can be carried out, which, after all, would result in significant economic damage to the constituents that Lord Foulkes and other members represent.

The Government has decided to act now to counter the remaining risk that the existing bridge might have to close at some stage, and its proposals, which were set out to Parliament in December, revolve around two important elements. First, the existing bridge will carry public transport, pedestrians and cyclists. Initially, it will take buses and taxis, but it could be adapted to carry a light rapid transit system. Secondly, the

replacement crossing will cost between £1.7 million and £2.3 billion, which is a saving of about £1.7 billion on the cost estimate that I set out in my earlier statement to Parliament. I point out that the quality of the project has not been reduced along with the costs; in fact, the refined scheme has just as many traffic lanes across the firth, more public transport options and less environmental impact and can be delivered as promised by 2016.

Jeremy Purvis (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD): Will the cabinet secretary confirm that the cost estimates for a full multimodal crossing, which was the Government's previous stated policy, still stand and are still accurate? After all, what he has announced is not necessarily a cost saving on the same design; the proposal is for a different bridge with a different specification.

John Swinney: We are setting out the proposal for a managed crossing scheme, which essentially involves the two elements of the replacement Forth crossing and the existing bridge. That is how we can secure the saving of around £1.7 billion on our previous cost estimates.

Ministers have carefully considered the project, as it represents the largest capital investment project that will be undertaken in Scotland in a generation. Different options were considered. The first that was considered and rejected was a possible contractual arrangement involving a lease concession with public funding, augmented with user tolls. In accounting terms, that option offered the possibility of solving the affordability issue with off-balance-sheet classification, but it was poor value for money. The costs would have included capital costs for certain elements of the road improvements, long-term lease charges for the approach roads and bridge, and toll charges to users. Through summing those costs over an 80-year contract and discounting to provide a net present value, it was found that the cost was higher than that of alternatives.

The novelty of an 80-year finance deal also created uncertainties. If the finance were more expensive—assuming that it would be available at all in the current climate—the cost of that unattractive option would increase further still. Operationally, tolling levels would be in the hands of the operator, and the public interest would never own the bridge.

The second option that we examined was a not-for-profit scheme and a public-private partnership route. That option represented value for money, but such a scheme was judged to contain significant risk and uncertainty for constructing a replacement crossing at this time.

Andy Kerr (East Kilbride) (Lab): The cabinet secretary referred to a “not-for-profit scheme”. Did he not mean a non-profit-distributing model?

John Swinney: I accept Mr Kerr’s terminology.

As I said, the second option represented value for money, but the forthcoming changes to accounting practices that the United Kingdom Government has chosen to introduce from April 2009 will fundamentally change the viability of the proposition. The incorporation of the international financial reporting standards means that almost all infrastructure projects, including private finance initiative and PPP schemes, will come on balance sheet. The budgetary impact of PPP is that the capital cost is recognised in the year that construction is completed, which would be 2016 for the replacement Forth crossing. The affordability consequence would be that a capital obligation of around £2.15 billion would fall in 2016-17, which is a higher burden than that which would arise with conventional procurement as a consequence of capitalising the cost of the capital used during the construction period.

Malcolm Chisholm (Edinburgh North and Leith) (Lab): I am not arguing for the option, but is the cabinet secretary absolutely sure that it would be a hit on the Scottish budget in one year? If he is, would not that scupper his Scottish Futures Trust as much as PPP?

John Swinney: The Scottish Futures Trust performs a different role, which I will come on to in a moment.

The second option questions the viability of PFI or PPP schemes because of the implications of costs coming on balance sheet in one particular year. The £2.15 billion obligation is additional to the annual charges that would arise in the normal way with such a contract, starting in 2017-18 at more than £130 million a year over a 25 to 30-year period. In effect, the public purse would be paying twice for the bridge, at significant costs.

Jeremy Purvis: Will the cabinet secretary take an intervention?

John Swinney: I am afraid that I have a lot of details to give. I have given way several times, and I need to put more detail on the record.

We also concluded that there would be major issues in funding the project by private means because of the difficulties of accessing finance in the financial markets at this time. Experience indicates that, instead of the project being funded by one financial institution, a number of financial institutions would have to be involved. Recent experience shows that, in such cases, the time that is required to ensure that the project can be put in place is significantly extended. As a consequence, it is likely that there would be a

further delay in the preparation timescale for the bridge and our ability to start construction in 2011, when all the finance would have to be in place, would be put in jeopardy.

Accordingly, after thorough consideration, we concluded that, in the current challenging and volatile economic climate, a design-and-build option using Government capital finance represents the lowest risk. That form of contract has been used for major trunk roads during the past 18 years. It has been reliable, it levers private sector inventiveness and efficiencies into the design, and it effectively controls the cost paid after tenders have been submitted. Importantly, it is the most secure form of achieving the project on time and to budget, and it will provide the greatest level of confidence and certainty to potential contractors because they will know that the proposal will be delivered.

In December, we set out the approach that we are taking using the traditional procurement method of Government capital expenditure. The Cabinet made that decision, and I wrote to the Treasury in advance of Mr Stevenson’s statement to Parliament to set out our proposal to pay for the crossing with traditional Government capital budgets while spreading that cost over a longer period of time. I set out to the Chief Secretary to the Treasury a well-reasoned proposal that asked that consideration be given to reprofiling the Scottish capital budget from 2011 to 2031. We did not ask for more money; we simply asked for our capital budgets to be reprofiled. The Chief Secretary to the Treasury informed me that my request had been rejected on the ground that the UK spending framework does not allow for bringing forward investments in that way.

Jim Tolson (Dunfermline West) (LD): Will the cabinet secretary take an intervention?

John Swinney: I am afraid that I cannot; I have more to say.

I merely note in passing that exceptional circumstances sometimes call for exceptional measures, and the Forth crossing is an exceptional project. I also note that there has been criticism that our proposed approach would bind future Governments to spending commitments. I pose the question to Parliament: what exactly does PFI do? Future Governments will be paying up to £1 billion in repayments each year until 2024 because of decisions made by previous Governments.

As I said to Mr Chisholm, the Scottish Futures Trust will be actively engaged with Transport Scotland and its advisers on all its major road and rail projects, including the Forth replacement crossing. SFT has supported Transport Scotland on issues such as non-profit-distributing models,

value for money and current market conditions, and that work will continue.

I point out that borrowing powers, for example, would have added to the deliberations of the Parliament on the ways in which we could deliver the Forth crossing and, in that respect, we need to consider the Parliament's powers to deliver such projects. I will move the motion in my name and recommend that the Parliament supports the Government's position.

I move,

That the Parliament notes the Scottish Government's choice of conventional capital funding for construction of the Forth Replacement Crossing and welcomes the fact that Scotland's biggest infrastructure project for a generation will be delivered without the need for tolls.

15:07

Des McNulty (Clydebank and Milngavie) (Lab): Mr Swinney and Mr Salmond are both on the record as claiming that the Scottish Futures Trust will be the funding mechanism for Scotland's biggest infrastructure project in a generation. Before the election, and for months afterwards, they claimed that the SFT would match Labour's investment in new schools brick for brick, and they repeatedly said that the SFT would be the preferred procurement method for those and other major capital projects.

On "Newsnight" yesterday, Mr Chris Bone, managing director of Bone Steel of Wishaw, who makes steel frames for new buildings, said that his company has been involved in the building of approximately 35 schools in Scotland in the past 18 to 24 months but that the lack of new projects in the pipeline—thanks to the Scottish National Party—means that the schools construction programme in Scotland is starting to decrease considerably and that his company is now working on some major education projects in the midlands and the south of England.

This is an issue not just for contractors and education authorities. The Deputy First Minister delivered her verdict on the SFT when she chose conventional procurement for the Southern general hospital, and now the architect of the SFT, Mr Swinney himself, has been forced to admit that the Scottish Futures Trust is not a suitable mechanism for the Forth replacement crossing.

It could be argued that Mr Swinney's comments about the SFT are coming to resemble Michael Palin's efforts to convince John Cleese that there is still life in the Norwegian blue in the Monty Python dead parrot sketch, but the consequences of the failure of the Scottish Futures Trust are unfortunately not a humorous matter.

During the debate that followed the statement on the Government's Forth replacement crossing,

Jeremy Purvis and I asked whether ministers had been in dialogue with the UK Government. At the time, ministers dodged those questions but, later in the month, it emerged that they had written to Treasury ministers less than a fortnight before the strategy was announced to Parliament. Is that when they finally admitted to themselves that the SFT offered no way forward, or did they realise that much earlier and simply fail to take the necessary steps to secure prior agreement on the funding mechanism? Either way, the SNP has placed the project at unnecessary risk.

I am pleased that the Scottish Government will now have discussions with the UK Government, at the instigation of Jim Murphy, the Secretary of State for Scotland, and I agree with the Conservatives that the UK and Scottish Governments should work together constructively to deliver the project at the earliest opportunity.

John Swinney: Does Mr McNulty accept that the Scottish Government's commitment to delivering the Forth replacement crossing through traditional capital expenditure budgets gives the absolute assurance that the resources are available to pay for it, because those budgets are worth £3.5 billion every financial year?

Des McNulty: That does not necessarily ensure that the project will be delivered on time and to budget. A reasonable question to ask is why the Scottish Government did not hold back at least some of the £900 million reserve to which it had access when it came to power to fund the vital Forth replacement crossing. Ministers were well aware that substantial funding would be required, even if they did not know the precise amount, yet they cleaned out the kitty in pursuit of short-term political advantage and narrowed their funding options to the dead end of the Scottish Futures Trust. Now, with their flagship funding scheme in tatters, they have gone cap in hand to seek a huge advance.

As the Liberal Democrat amendment makes clear, the situation will have huge knock-on consequences for other capital projects. By far the best thing would be for the Government to be completely honest about what can and cannot be progressed and to set out a programme with costings and timescales. If discussions with the UK Government had been progressed earlier, we might have had much more certainty—the certainty to which Mr Swinney referred—about the Forth replacement crossing's impact on other transport projects.

Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green): Does Des McNulty agree that the best way to make progress economically is for the Government to be clear about what can be progressed with the existing bridge? Does Labour accept that the existing

bridge can be repaired and that, if that is possible, a second bridge is unnecessary?

Des McNulty: I will describe the paradoxes in the detail of the bridge strategy now. Labour's priorities are to avoid disruption to travellers across the Forth, ensure maximum flexibility in all transport modes, deliver value for money and provide a solution that meets longer-term as well as short-term requirements. In December 2007, the Government announced that its preferred option was a multimodal replacement bridge. Many people—especially engineering experts—thought that the costings were considerably out of line with outturn prices for similar bridges of an equivalent length elsewhere in the world.

We now have revised proposals for a “refined, sleeker replacement bridge” that will operate alongside the existing bridge in “a managed crossing strategy”. Nearly £100 million has been spent on consultation and planning—most was on consultancy fees. Dr Iain Docherty told the Transport, Infrastructure and Climate Change Committee that professional expertise has been

“brought to the table from countries across Europe and the world that have dealt with similar problems”

and that robust peer review by senior engineers has taken place behind the scenes. I certainly hope that that is the case, but I am concerned by this comment:

“I believe that the long-term future of the existing bridge is still in doubt in some ways. Once the replacement crossing is up and running and we transfer the existing traffic to the new bridge, we will be in the same position in capacity terms as we are in today. We will then have to begin to think long and hard about the long-term future of the existing structure. It will take a long time to remediate it, and we will have to find the money to do that.”

He said that it might be

“possible to extend the life of the bridge, but only if we reduce its physical capacity so that it has, for example, only two lanes rather than four for many years”.—[*Official Report, Transport, Infrastructure and Climate Change Committee*, 6 January 2009; c 1233.]

That is a lot of maybes and additional costs that have not been factored into the scheme that the minister presented. The replacement Forth crossing was deemed necessary because of uncertainty about the existing bridge's deterioration. Now, the replacement's design seems to be predicated on the assumption that the existing bridge's life can be extended indefinitely.

We cannot face both ways. If we build a road-only bridge that is intended for the use of private vehicles, are we accepting that public transport could be excluded from crossing the Forth if the existing bridge's deterioration cannot be prevented? Although the early indications from FETA show some slowing in the rate of deterioration, no explanation has been made thus

far of why the condition of the current bridge presents an unacceptable risk to the continuity of provision for private vehicles but an acceptable risk for public transport. That is a crazy situation.

We need the fullest possible information on the Government's new crossing strategy and on the previous strategy that it has now discarded. It is unacceptable for ministers to argue that they know best or to say that we should leave things to the experts when ministers have so radically altered their stance in a short space of time—presumably on the basis of expert advice.

I want a solution that provides maximum flexibility and the greatest certainty—a solution that is future proofed, as far as it is possible to do so. Having spent £2 billion or more, we need to be sure that access across the Forth is at least as good as it is at present and under any foreseeable eventuality. It is for that reason that my amendment requires the new bridge—if that is what we are going to have—to be

“capable of operating on a multi-modal basis to ensure continuity of provision for public transport as well as private vehicles.”

Even if it makes sense in the short term to separate out public and private vehicles, surely it must be possible to construct the new bridge so that all modes of transport can use it. I listened to what Mr Swinney said on the possibility of light rail using the new bridge. That possibility was not made sufficiently explicit in the documentation that I have seen thus far—that said, if it is a change of stance, it is probably welcome.

The argument that the price of the crossing has come down because of the approach that the Government has taken to funding is ridiculous. The bridge is narrower and considerable reductions in motorway and access road alterations that being incorporated into the scheme. Earlier this week, Mr Stevenson was either unable or unwilling to tell me what proportion of the cost reductions stemmed from changes to the bridge design and how much stemmed from changes to the associated road works. That approach has to change: we are all partners in the project and we are acting not on our own behalf but on behalf of future generations.

I move amendment S3M-3214.3, to leave out from “and welcomes” to end and insert:

“; expresses concern that the lack of prior consultation with the UK Government raises questions over the delivery of the project on time and on budget, and considers that the new bridge should be capable of operating on a multi-modal basis to ensure continuity of provision for public transport as well as private vehicles.”

15:17

Derek Brownlee (South of Scotland) (Con): I will focus on funding and construction issues around the new Forth bridge, but I will first touch on other areas.

As our amendment makes clear, the priority must be to ensure that the new Forth bridge is constructed as soon as possible. Some people dispute the need for a new bridge, but it would be unacceptable to put at risk the entire economy of the east of Scotland in the belief that they might be correct. The project must be completed as a matter of urgency.

As we see in the Labour amendment, and as Des McNulty made clear in his remarks, concern has been expressed in some quarters about the design of the bridge. I assume that any changes to the design would add costs and perhaps lead to further delay, both of which we can ill afford.

We understand that Jim Murphy will raise the design of the bridge at his meeting with the Scottish Government on 27 January. The UK Government has an important role to play in relation to potential funding options for the bridge. However, the design of the new crossing should be a matter not for the Secretary of State for Scotland but for the Scottish Parliament and the Scottish Government. Indeed, issues around bridge design may have been raised as a smokescreen to shield from discussion the more fundamental issue of funding, to which I now turn.

If the Scottish Government is correct in its assessment of how a privately funded bridge, whether under PFI, PPP or SFT, would be treated in the Scottish Government's accounts, it is difficult to escape the conclusion that the only show in town for funding the bridge is the Scottish Government's budget. We have no ideological objection to that. The capital budget stands at more than £3.5 billion a year. In theory, the Scottish Government could fund the bridge in full from the budgets that we expect it to have. However, it is clear that the scale of the project is so large that it will inevitably displace many other capital infrastructure projects—whether national health service, transport or schools projects—across the country.

It may well be the case that, at the end of the day, there is no option other than to fund the bridge from the capital budget. We take the view that the Forth bridge must be built. It has to be the number 1 transport priority in Scotland. Whatever the funding method, some projects will be delayed while resource is provided to the bridge. The real question is about the scale of resource to be diverted from those projects and the length of time for which they will be delayed.

The new Forth road bridge project will be progressed after the next Scottish and UK general elections. Indeed, it might not be finished until after the next two Scottish and UK general elections. As such, it is right that it has an element of stability and certainty and, for that reason, the Conservatives have offered discussions between our shadow Treasury team and the Scottish Government. That constructive, positive offer is a sign of our willingness to discuss the question whether there are options to mitigate the impact of the construction of the bridge on other projects.

The Treasury's response to the Scottish Government's request can be characterised as conceding—almost, but not quite—that PPP is not a likely solution. It offers two alternatives: the switching of Scottish Government revenue spending to capital spending, and the use of accumulated underspends. The scale of underspends—£42 million last year—shows that unless there is a marked change they will not provide a meaningful sum towards the construction of the bridge. In any case, the Treasury has already suggested that underspends will compensate for the reduction in the capital budget from 2010-11. That money cannot be spent twice. It is certainly possible to switch revenue funding to capital funding, but to do so on a scale sufficient to offset significant delays in other programmes will require an appetite to reduce spending on those programmes over a sustained period of time, for which I do not think there is likely to be a parliamentary majority.

A critical issue with the construction of the bridge is that there is no inherent reason why the public sector cannot pay for the bridge using a fixed-price contract, with penalty clauses for delay. However, we know that public sector projects have a history of exceeding their budget and their timescale. That would be unacceptable for this project.

Managing the risk of cost overruns and delays is crucial, and it is essential to do so in a way that provides a cast-iron guarantee that none of the risk is passed back to the taxpayer. Ultimately, this is a project of high prestige to contractors. It will also be recognised as being too big to fail, and it will be too tempting for contractors to underbid, in the expectation that the Government will have to step in if things go wrong. That issue must be resolved in the contracting process.

The issue of tolls has been raised around the margins of the debate on funding. As the new bridge is to be a replacement, rather than additional, crossing, there is no logic in introducing tolls on it, having abolished them on the existing bridge. Indeed, the level of toll income from the existing bridge would be a drop in the ocean compared with the projected costs of the new

bridge; a larger income would require tolls of a level that would be unacceptable on a route to which there is no ready alternative.

Although I accept what Iain Gray said today about tolls, both the Labour and Lib Dem amendments, in removing the part of the motion that addresses tolls, are unacceptable to the Conservatives. We accept, however, the concept of prioritising projects, as set out in the Lib Dem amendment, although that is a little ironic. In March 2007, Tavish Scott was asked to publish a list, in priority order, of the then Government's transport projects. His answer was:

"All these projects are considered as a priority, which is why they have been included in the programme".—[*Official Report, Written Answers*, 23 March 2007; S2W-32430.]

I expect that that answer will be repeated today by Mr Scott's successor.

I move amendment 3214.1, to insert at end:

"and calls on the Scottish and UK governments to work together to ensure that the new crossing is delivered at the earliest possible opportunity."

15:23

Jeremy Purvis (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD): A year ago to this very day, the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Sustainable Growth told the Transport, Infrastructure and Climate Change Committee:

"I said that the strongest and clearest lesson that I have learned about any major transport or other infrastructure project in the brief time that I have been in government is that governance arrangements have to be crystal clear before a project gets under way. If a project gets under way with any uncertainty as to its direction or where the responsibility or power lies, it will be a difficult project."—[*Official Report, Transport, Infrastructure and Climate Change Committee*, 15 January 2008; c 361.]

What a total mess there has been since then: a totally different specification for the bridge, no agreement on a funding structure, a game of chicken with Westminster ministers, and a shadow of doubt that will hang over other major transport projects between now and 2016. There has been awful governance of this project, which is of national significance and of huge significance to the communities of Fife and the Lothians.

As recently as September last year, the Government's clear policy was to take forward a multimodal crossing. On 9 September, the cabinet secretary told the Transport, Infrastructure and Climate Change Committee:

"there will be multimodal capacity, which members of the Parliament have clearly said is important, because it will open up an entirely new prospect for transport links between Fife and other parts of the east of Scotland. The bridge offers a comprehensive transport solution, involving road design and the establishment of multimodal facilities. I wanted to put things in context."—[*Official Report*,

Transport, Infrastructure and Climate Change Committee, 9 September 2008; c 826.]

The First Minister told us at lunch time today:

"when a minister gives a commitment, that commitment is met. That is how the process works."

I think that I quoted him accurately. Well, within eight weeks of the cabinet secretary's attendance at the 9 September meeting of the Transport, Infrastructure and Climate Change Committee, we learned that the new crossing was not to be multimodal.

There are significant questions about the longevity of the existing bridge because, as the cabinet secretary told the Parliament, we will not know whether dehumidification has been successful until 2012-13. We also know nothing about the multimodal capacity for light transit or guided busways on the hard shoulder of the new, multibillion-pound crossing.

That confusion has been compounded by the confusion over the funding route. The SNP's first policy, as we all recall, was to allow queues of patriotic Scottish families to buy patriotic bonds to pay for a new Forth bridge. Then the Scottish Futures Trust was to deliver the new bridge. The First Minister was inadvertently candid last week at First Minister's questions when he was asked why the SFT had been ruled out in delivering the bridge:

"The reason why is obvious: the Forth crossing is the biggest capital project in Scottish history that is on a strict timetable to be built by 2016-17 and needs certainty of approach."—[*Official Report*, 8 January 2009; c 13817.]

To be fair, that is why the SFT has been ruled out.

Next, the SNP was to fund the bridge through a not-for-profit mechanism, but that has now been ruled out. When John Swinney was interviewed by Lesley Riddoch last Friday, he said—and he confirmed today—that he has ruled out any borrowing for the bridge. Therefore, he has ruled out forward payments into the future, because borrowing would mean that the bridge would have to be paid for twice, in effect. However, that is exactly the funding option that has been chosen for the £295 million Borders railway. It will be funded entirely through borrowing, with lifecycle costs in the region of £1 billion. It will be designed, built, financed and maintained for profit by the private sector. We now know that the assets—the actual railway—will be vested in the private sector contractor, too, with an accounting mechanism that allows a system of unitary payment to be branded "not for profit". However, that option is ruled out for the new crossing. I have asked why it is okay for one project but has been ruled out for the other. The answer is that it depends on the best value for the public purse, but the two funding

options cannot both be right, and no comparative assessment of them been published.

The Minister for Transport, Infrastructure and Climate Change (Stewart Stevenson): Has the member looked at international accounting standards 37 and 31 on the International Accounting Standards Board's website? They explain precisely the entirely different character of the income stream in rail projects from that in road projects. That is precisely why it is possible to apply a funding mechanism to the Borders railway that cannot be applied to the bridge.

Jeremy Purvis: I have looked at those. The accounting procedures for a design, build, finance and maintain approach would be identical to the NPD accounting structure that the cabinet secretary seems to have ruled out.

Clarifying the SFT policy in Parliament on 23 June 2005, Stewart Stevenson said:

"It is not about bringing things back on to the balance sheet; it is about getting better value from our banks."—
[*Official Report*, 23 June 2005; c 18257.]

We were told then that the policy was nothing to do with the balance sheet, but he tells us now that it is everything to do with the balance sheet.

When Stewart Stevenson told Parliament on 10 December that the crossing was going ahead, he said that it would be funded directly out of the Scottish budget, albeit through an interest-free loan from the Treasury. That makes it four policies in as many years. Notwithstanding the brass neck of a party of independence seeking a 20-year interest-free loan from the UK Treasury, it is simply not acceptable that the Treasury should have two weeks' notice of the SNP seeking an agreement between the two Governments to deliver

"the greatest construction project in Scottish history",

as the First Minister described it. Indeed, he said last week to Iain Gray:

"the Treasury doesnae do anything in two weeks."—
[*Official Report*, 8 January 2009; c 13820, 13818.]

The new crossing is of national importance. The world's financial services and planning sectors are watching us. We have to get it right but, so far, the Government is not doing so.

I move amendment S3M-3214.4, to leave out from "and welcomes" to end and insert:

"; condemns the actions of the Scottish Government in bringing before the Parliament a proposal for the Forth Replacement Crossing (FRC) that has no agreed funding package; notes that under the Scottish Government's plans "a significant number of other very deserving capital projects will have to be displaced to make room for the FRC", and therefore calls on the Scottish Government to bring before the Parliament immediately a prioritised list of capital projects between 2009 and 2016."

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We now move to the open debate. Speeches should be of six minutes. There will be no warning: members should keep their eyes on the clock, because I will move on to the next member after six minutes.

15:29

Tricia Marwick (Central Fife) (SNP): The new Forth crossing is the most important infrastructure project for generations and ends years of uncertainty for businesses and commuters alike. It is vital not only for Fife's economy, but for the economy of the whole of east central Scotland. It is a pity that the arguments that we have used in the past have not been accepted and that there seems to be some doubt about whether the bridge should go ahead. Of course it should. The SNP recognises the importance of a new Forth bridge.

That brings me to the nub of the argument. The previous Labour-Liberal Administration would not give any commitment to the building of a new crossing as it had no funding plan in place, beyond retaining the tolls. In the strategic transport projects review, the Scottish Government confirmed that the new crossing will be built at a cost of between £1.72 billion and £2.34 billion and that it will be funded through public procurement. It will not be funded through PFI, and it will certainly not be funded through the tolls so beloved of Labour and Liberal members that they refused to remove them from the existing bridge when they were in office.

Although the Scottish Government has produced proposals that will ensure that the new crossing is toll free, can we rely on the Opposition parties to support that move? On "Good Morning Scotland" on 10 December, Des McNulty—

Andy Kerr: Will the member give way?

Tricia Marwick: If the member lets me finish my point, I will be delighted to let him in.

On 10 December, Des McNulty confirmed that the Labour Party would look at "all possible options" for funding the bridge. He was followed by David Whitton, who said on "Newsnight Scotland", when asked whether Labour would consider PPP or tolls for the project:

"I don't know if that rules them out or in."

Iain Gray was at pains this morning to say that Labour rules out the introduction of tolls. This is the hokey-cokey politics of Labour: it rules tolls in, it rules them out, it rules them in and shakes them all about—depending on what way the Forth wind blows.

Andy Kerr: I think the member will find that the ruling in of tolls was done by her—the measure was not suggested by any Labour member.

However, for clarity, Iain Gray has resolved the matter.

Did the member stand on a manifesto that said that the Scottish Futures Trust would fund the crossing?

Tricia Marwick: I certainly ruled in a manifesto that said that the SNP Government would get rid of the tolls, which Labour and the Liberal Democrats refused to do. I am delighted that that was the first action of the Scottish Government, and that the bill to do so was the first that the Scottish Government brought in.

There is a limited number of ways in which the new bridge can be financed. We believe that the costs should be met by public procurement, and we have sought Treasury permission to spread them over 20 years. The alternatives are either PFI or tolls: tolls on the existing bridge to pay for the new bridge, tolls on the new bridge, or tolls on both. The Treasury agrees that PPP is no longer an option, given that its use would not solve the budgeting problems were the scheme to be classed as a public spending scheme. Labour is now saying no tolls. Frankly, that leaves only the SNP Government's preferred method of funding. It is beyond time that the Labour Party, both north and south of the border, stopped playing its stupid, childish games with the bridge and the east of Scotland economy and gave its support to spreading the costs.

We have it from Gordon Brown himself that methods other than public procurement are unacceptable. In 1985, the future Prime Minister said that he would bring forward a private member's bill to abolish tolls on the Forth road bridge—he did not do so, although he said that he would. At the time, he called the funding mechanism for the present Forth bridge

“an unfortunate experiment in privatisation”.

He also said that

“motorists crossing have to pay for the bridge four times over”,

and asked:

“What explanation can the government now give for their refusal even to consider the finances of the bridge, which is clearly an essential element of our road system?”

The Treasury's refusal to allow the SNP Government to spread the costs over 20 years is bizarre. Unlike local government and the Northern Ireland Executive, the Scottish Government is not allowed to borrow. No one would argue that the whole £2 billion cost should be found out of one budget, because that would have a devastating effect on the overall budget and on other capital projects.

The Treasury's claim that the Scottish Government cannot meet the capital costs from budgets that have not yet been allocated is simply not credible, because that is precisely the method that is used to repay the costs of PFI and PPP projects that have been completed since 1999. I am grateful to the Scottish Parliament information centre for providing me with the sums that the Scottish Government—and future Scottish Governments—must find to meet the costs that have already been committed to PFI projects. In 1999-2000, £51 million had to be found to meet the costs of PFI. In 2008-09, £608 million has had to be found. The cost of meeting PFI-PPP payments will rise steadily until 2016-17—and beyond—with a staggering cost of £914 million in that year's budget.

Budgets that have not yet been allocated are already committed to meeting the PFI costs to which the Labour and Liberal Administration committed itself between 1999 and 2007. Given that future budgets are committed, perhaps the Labour Party and the Treasury can explain why the SNP Government cannot spread the capital costs of the new bridge over 20 years.

The Scottish Government is committed to providing the replacement Forth crossing by traditional procurement methods and to delivering it on time, on budget and, most important, toll free to the people of Scotland. The Labour Party should stop playing games and support the Government.

15:35

Marilyn Livingstone (Kirkcaldy) (Lab): The one issue on which most of us can agree is that the case for a new Forth crossing has been made. Having represented a Fife constituency since the Parliament's inception in 1999, I believe that this debate is crucial to the people whom I represent. Nobody should be playing games this afternoon.

The project must be our number 1 priority, and of course it must go ahead. Surely this debate should be about how the new crossing is to be delivered on time; whether it is fit for purpose, makes provision for public transport and is future proof; and whether appropriate funding has been identified. I will consider each of those crucial issues in turn.

On 15 January 2008, the cabinet secretary told the Transport, Infrastructure and Climate Change Committee that the reason for the decision to build a new bridge was the risk to the existing Forth bridge. George Foulkes talked about the meetings that took place last week. The timescales have been changing: the latest information shows that the rate of deterioration has slowed and that the

earliest that closure of the existing bridge might be required is between 2018 and 2020.

In November 2008, Stewart Stevenson announced that the Scottish Government intended to keep the existing bridge open to public transport and to build a cheaper, new bridge for private vehicles. I am concerned that we are moving too far away from the multimodal element of the new bridge, which I think is important.

The plans for the replacement bridge have changed. The multimodal element is now being moved over to the existing bridge. I think that I heard the cabinet secretary say how that would be done, but that approach raises more questions than it answers. What will be the cost of upgrading, maintaining and converting the existing bridge? What assessment has been made to confirm the lifespan of the existing bridge? For how long will the existing bridge need to be closed to allow remedial work to be done? The Parliament should be asking those questions.

Patrick Harvie: I would like to add another question to the member's list. How would she, as a representative of Fife constituents, argue against the inevitable political pressure to open the existing bridge to road traffic once the new one is built and is congested to the same extent that the existing bridge is?

Marilyn Livingstone: I thank the member for his intervention. I will address the issue that he raises.

Another question that we should ask is whether there is a robust engineering case for saying that the Government's current plan is the optimum solution. Although we have some information, it would be really good for Parliament to have the detail.

The new bridge must be fit for purpose; otherwise, we will be letting down generations of Scots. As I said, the new bridge needs to be multimodal. My concern is that there have been many changes of mind about design and that the changing information on which we have to base a decision on this crucial project leaves questions unanswered. In a nutshell, my concern is whether the Government is making the right choice and whether there is evidence to support that.

To address Patrick Harvie's intervention, I am concerned that the Government's current proposals will not meet transportation needs over the projected 120-year lifespan of the bridge. Transport Scotland has stated that the new, narrower replacement bridge will not be able to cope with extra traffic over its 120-year lifespan. On current traffic projections, the new bridge would be full the day it opened. Surely that gives cause for concern, to say the least, and must be addressed as a matter of urgency.

I continue to support a multimodal option for any new crossing over the Forth estuary. Since the bridge was opened in 1964, the level of traffic has increased from 4 million vehicles to 21.4 million vehicles in 2008, with public transport accounting for only 17 vehicles per hour.

Many members share my concern that unless there is significant modal shift to public transport—reliable public transport—the problems that commuters experience at peak times will continue. Use of the hard shoulder for trams and buses sounds like a good idea, but what happens if bridge traffic has to be reduced to one lane because of a breakdown or accident?

The opportunity to achieve our aspirations to increase public transport options and reduce carbon emissions is at risk, but the cabinet secretary has an opportunity to take the right decision for all Scotland's people. Will the new, cut-price proposal meet the needs of communities and businesses in the east of Scotland?

The cabinet secretary must address the concerns that members have expressed. He is aware that there are real concerns about how the project will be funded and about the impact of the funding decision on transport, school and hospital projects. Will he assure members that the project will be regarded as central to an integrated transport strategy for Fife that will address the economic and social needs of mid-Fife in particular? All available statistics support the need for such an approach, which is crucial to the development of the new city region. As part of the approach, the Redhouse interchange will need to be upgraded. I want to hear when work will start on that crucial project.

Once in a lifetime, we get a chance to do what is right for the people whom we serve. It is time for the Government to listen and to build a bridge that will serve the people of Scotland.

15:41

Shirley-Anne Somerville (Lothians) (SNP): At a time of recession, some issues are of such vital importance to Scotland's economy that they transcend party politics. The Scottish Government's plans to build the replacement Forth crossing, which will be the greatest construction project in a generation, should be one such issue.

Almost all members accept that we need a replacement bridge. The Forth crossing is of fundamental importance to the infrastructure of Scotland and its loss would be nothing less than a catastrophe for the east of Scotland economy.

The most recent prognosis for the existing bridge is more optimistic. However, it is clear that closures would be required over a number of

years to allow repairs to take place, which would result in unprecedented gridlock if the traffic load was not reduced. Given that 70,000 vehicles cross the bridge every day, members can imagine how long the tailback of stationary cars would be on the road to Kincardine.

The Labour-led Executive committed—eventually—to a new bridge. Whether it would have got round to building the bridge is another matter. Jack McConnell procrastinated, like a modern Hamlet, wondering whether to build or not to build, and the result could have been a tragedy for the economies of the Lothians and Fife. I am thankful that the SNP Government showed no such inertia. Decisions were taken, preparatory work was begun and the bridge will be built by 2016. Even better, a dedicated public transport corridor for buses, taxis, pedestrians and cyclists has been guaranteed. The extended life of the existing bridge will ensure that public transport is prioritised, while the vital road crossing will be safeguarded. That is a win-win scenario and I welcome the Scottish Government's work to take the proposals forward.

Andy Kerr: I do not recall any procrastination, but I will take the member's word for it. She talked about the need for definitive commitments to projects. The First Minister said:

"If we have a new bridge, a bond issue is definitely the way to do it."

Does the member share that definitive view?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: The cabinet secretary dealt with such statements in his speech and said how the SFT will be involved in the delivery of the Forth replacement crossing—

Andy Kerr: No, he did not.

Shirley-Anne Somerville: Yes, he did. The member had better check the *Official Report*.

In a time of financial crisis we should welcome the SNP Government's decision to fund the replacement crossing through a conventional procurement strategy, which will offer the best value for money and the lowest risk. It is disappointing that the chancellor has chosen not to support the SNP's sensible proposal to bring forward capital spending for this crucial project. If the Scottish Government had normal borrowing powers, as local councils, Network Rail and the Northern Ireland Executive do, the issue would be resolved without conflict or debate. However, that is another story, which I hope—without expectation—that the Calman commission will tell.

Jim Tolson: Did the member listen to what the cabinet secretary said about funding? More important, did she note what he did not say? He failed absolutely to explain how the new crossing will be funded. Plans to hold out the begging bowl

to Westminster or to use the Scottish Futures Trust have failed. It would be nice to hear from the Government how it will fund the project.

Shirley-Anne Somerville: The cabinet secretary explained in great detail how the project will be funded: it will be funded through public procurement. However, I did not hear in the Liberal Democrat opening speech how the Liberal Democrats would fund the bridge. For that matter, I have not heard how any other party would fund the bridge.

Mr Darling's reasoning—that that approach is one that the Government just does not take—is breathtaking in its hypocrisy. While the chancellor rejects that sensible path for the Scottish Government, the Prime Minister promotes the bringing forward of capital spending to ease the recession.

The Labour Party's dogmatic determination to press the case for PFI, despite the wealth of evidence of its wastefulness, is staggering. It is common sense, not ideological dogma, that has driven the SNP to reject PFI. After the £27 million buyout of the Skye bridge, one would think that Opposition colleagues would be more cautious about going down that route again.

PFI projects are hyper-expensive and provide poor value for money, and they leave a legacy of debt. As has been mentioned, the irony should not be lost on members that Labour has been more than happy to saddle future Scottish Governments with billions of pounds of PFI debt over the next 30 years but is unwilling to allow this Government to borrow over the same period.

Given the chancellor's inexplicable rejection of the SNP's solution to the budgeting issue, anyone would think that Alistair Darling did not want the new bridge to be built. Perhaps he still harbours doubts about its necessity from his days as a member of the ForthRight Alliance, which opposes the project, even though, when he was the UK Secretary of State for Transport, he intervened to declare his absolute commitment to the project when Jack McConnell was dithering over the decision.

Marilyn Livingstone: Will the member give way?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: I am afraid that I do not have time.

It is clear that the chancellor is not above changing his mind. I hope that he does so again and agrees to work with the Scottish Government to help spread the cost of the crossing, thereby avoiding unnecessary delays in other capital projects.

Even though the SNP Government has not, at this time, received Treasury support for the new

bridge, I am delighted that the SNP Government has recognised how crucial the project is to Scotland and that it is prepared to provide fully for the construction costs from existing budgets, if necessary.

The Forth replacement crossing is not a vanity project. It is about maintaining a fundamental link across the Forth. I am delighted that, under an SNP Government, the waiting is finally over for the people of the Lothians and Fife, and that the bridge building can now begin.

15:47

George Foulkes (Lothians) (Lab): As I mentioned earlier, last Thursday, Transport Scotland officials held a helpful briefing about the new bridge for Fife and Lothian MSPs, at which I think they revealed rather more than they had intended to. I thank them for their frankness.

Incidentally, I think that the project is misnamed. It can no longer be described as the Forth replacement crossing, because the existing bridge will continue to operate as a vital part of the network. It is an additional bridge, not a replacement.

As the cabinet secretary confirmed, it is planned that the current bridge will be converted for use by public road traffic—in other words, buses and taxis—with the result that it will have a lower loading. I worry how the buses will be affected when there are high winds.

The redesigned new bridge—on which the officials told us that a 40mph limit will apply—will now have only two lanes in each direction, which will be for cars and lorries. That means that there will be no net increase in the total crossing capacity. Moreover, the project will not provide for a light rail system and, as I see it, will not result in any decrease in carbon dioxide emissions.

When we asked the officials how more road traffic from Fife would be accommodated in Edinburgh, they said that that was a problem for the city of Edinburgh and was nothing to do with them, so we will have greater gridlock in Cramond.

Stewart Stevenson: Is the member simultaneously arguing that while additional capacity across the Forth should not be provided because of the implications for Edinburgh—which I recognise—if a new bridge is built it should provide additional capacity? Can he clarify his position?

George Foulkes: I am arguing that we should have joined-up government, whereby if we plan to provide additional capacity on the crossing, we do something to cope with the effect that it will have on Edinburgh. Nothing is being done in that regard.

When the costing of the new bridge was queried, it became clear that it was based on highly speculative paper calculations. No account was taken of what might happen with competitive tendering. Despite our questioning, no detailed explanation was provided of how the £1.7 billion that is supposed to have been saved was saved, although I can tell the Parliament that Transport Scotland's officials made it clear that that saving was certainly not attributable to the funding method, as the First Minister claimed in the chamber last week in yet another of his misstatements.

John Swinney: One of the factors that has resulted in reduced cost estimates is the fact that the Government has gone for a more predictable financial basis, thereby reducing the exposure to risk. That was one of the points that the First Minister made to Mr Tolson at First Minister's question time last week.

George Foulkes: I will come to that in a moment.

It is clear that the savings will be made, according to the technical officials, by reducing the specification. As Marilyn Livingstone said, we are getting a cut-price crossing. We are ending up with the worst of both worlds—we are spending billions, but getting no significant improvements. If there is to be a new bridge, the one important addition from the start must be a light rail transit element, which we have proposed ought to be included. I asked the officials why there was no detailed examination of how rail services over the current rail bridge could be substantially improved, but there was no answer. I hope that the transport minister, at least, will reply.

I will move on to the funding, which is crucial. It would be madness to press ahead with what the minister and Tricia Marwick described as the traditional method of funding. This Parliament and previous Governments built something using the traditional method of funding—Holyrood, in which we are standing. Was it on budget or on time? Did the traditional method of funding succeed in that case? It is a pretty awful example.

I will make what I hope is a positive suggestion to the cabinet secretary—I want to be helpful in relation to the crossing, and not unduly party political. Why does he not consider the possibility of funding the crossing by having a consortium of local authorities get together to propose a scheme to the Public Works Loan Board, which exists to lend money precisely for such schemes and has a sensible and reasonable interest rate? The local authorities have the power and can act as a proxy for central Government.

I hope that that is helpful. I also hope that the cabinet secretary will realise, after hearing all the

criticisms from members in this debate and from outside the Parliament about the funding and design of the bridge, that it is now time to pause for a few months, examine the project and hold discussions with the United Kingdom Government—as Jim Murphy suggested—on all its aspects. We must ensure that we have a budget to fund a bridge that is fit for purpose.

15:52

Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I never thought that I would live to see the day when George Foulkes made constructive suggestions to the SNP Government, but it is welcome nonetheless.

The future of the new Forth crossing is vital for my constituents in Fife, Perthshire and Angus and for everyone in the east of Scotland. It is essential to the economy of the whole country that we secure a new crossing. As we have heard, the real danger is that the existing bridge, unable as it is to cope with the weight of traffic, might have to close to heavy goods vehicles and thereafter to vehicles altogether, with devastating consequences.

It is, therefore, good news that the new Forth crossing is moving forward. I remind the Labour and Liberal members who have spoken in the debate that the SNP Government—whatever its faults—is at least taking forward plans for the new crossing, when all we had from the previous Administration was dither and delay.

Margaret Smith (Edinburgh West) (LD): Will the member take an intervention?

Murdo Fraser: No. If Margaret Smith will forgive me, I want to make progress, but she will be pleased to hear that I am now turning my fire elsewhere.

None of that excuses the SNP Government for the extraordinary situation in which it has managed to get itself in relation to the funding of the new bridge. A wholly avoidable state of confusion has been created over how the new crossing will be paid for. When the transport minister, Mr Stevenson, announced the Government's plans for the new crossing in the chamber on 10 December 2008, he said that the bridge would be paid for from the Government's capital budget, and that an approach had been made to the Treasury to secure budgetary cover. He did not, however, say that the Government had not written to the Treasury until 27 November, which was less than two weeks before.

How have we ended up in a situation in which Scotland's most important capital project of this generation faces such uncertainty over its funding? There are three possible explanations.

John Swinney: Will the member take an intervention?

Murdo Fraser: If Mr Swinney will forgive me, I will develop my points, then he can tell me which of my possible explanations is correct.

The first explanation is that the situation is simply an example of incompetence. The Government did not get around to speaking to the Treasury until it was too late, but it thought that it could carry on regardless and announce the new crossing without getting clearance. Even I have to question the credibility of that explanation. However we characterise the behaviour of the Government and the cabinet secretary, it would take a harsh critic to accuse him of such gross incompetence.

The second explanation is that, like Baldrick, the cabinet secretary had a cunning plan, although this Baldrick is somewhat larger and better fed than the original. The cunning plan was to announce that the new Forth crossing would go ahead before the Treasury had approved the proposed funding method, in the hope that doing so would bounce the Treasury into saying yes. However, that explanation requires a degree of naivety on the part of the cabinet secretary and his Government colleagues that has not been characteristic of their actions so far.

That leads me to the third explanation, which is that the Government approached the matter with the expectation and, indeed, the hope that the Treasury would say no, which is exactly what it did. That would have two great benefits as far as the Scottish Government was concerned. First, we know that the Government loves nothing more than to stir up a constitutional fight with Westminster. Like a junkie desperate for its next fix, it cannot resist the sweet, sweet drug of conflict with London. The prospect that the Treasury would say no and SNP ministers would then be able to go in and, as they would put it, fight for Scotland was simply too enticing to miss.

Secondly, that approach would have the beneficial side effect of finding a scapegoat for the delays in every other capital project that the Government has proposed—that scapegoat being the perfect one as far as the SNP is concerned, namely the Labour Government in London. When the conclusions of the strategic transport projects review were announced on 10 December, it was noticeable that, for none of the 29 important projects, which includes ones that are dear to my heart such as the dualling of the A9, was a single date mentioned. There were no start dates, no completion dates and no prioritised list. No doubt SNP ministers hoped that the Treasury in London would say no to their proposal for Forth bridge funding so that, as a result, the failure to progress all or any of those vital projects could be placed

firmly at Labour's door. There would be no dualling of the A9, no upgrades to the A82 or A96, no electrification of the rail network and so on, and Labour would get the blame.

Mr Swinney will tell us what really happened.

John Swinney: I certainly will tell Mr Fraser what happened, because that fantasy tour was worthy of comment. His little tour de force ignored the fact that the Government has given certainty that payment for the Forth replacement crossing will come from traditional capital budgets. That was expressly made clear in Mr Stevenson's statement to the Parliament on 10 December.

Murdo Fraser: Mr Swinney has given us no certainty at all about what will happen to every other project in the strategic transport projects review.

I do not know which of the three explanations comes closest to the truth. Perhaps the actual explanation is a combination of two of them, or perhaps all three. Wherever the truth lies, however, this is no way to run a Government.

Nor should Labour be absolved of all blame in the matter. The future of the Forth crossing is too serious for parties to play political games with it. We need both parties to sit down and work together to try to find a solution. It was Winston Churchill who famously said:

"To jaw-jaw is always better than to war-war."

Both parties in the dispute need to learn that lesson quickly, or they will not be forgiven.

15:58

Margaret Smith (Edinburgh West) (LD): Despite his earlier jibe, I associate myself with the comment that Murdo Fraser made just before he sat down. I agree that the matter is far too important for the SNP and the UK Government to continue to deal with it in the way in which they have approached it so far.

Most of us agree that the continuity of transport links across the Forth is fundamental to Scotland's economy, and that the new crossing should be our number 1 transport priority. That position is shared by the vast majority of my constituents, but many of them now view the project with bemusement and concern. Last October, I asked Stewart Stevenson when affected residents would be told about the impact on their homes and their right to compensation. He said that officials would answer my constituents' specific questions after the announcement was made in December. However, one constituent has now received from officials an e-mail that says that it will be a year before that information is available and that the compensation scheme

"may or may not differ from previous schemes."

No wonder the affected residents are concerned as they face years of blight and uncertainty.

The lack of clarity around what has become an increasingly confused project affects all of us in one way or another. We need clarity on cost. In December 2007, John Swinney and Transport Scotland put a price tag of £3.25 billion to £4.22 billion on the project. At First Minister's question time last week, the First Minister claimed—not once, not twice, but three times—that £1.7 billion of savings had been made because of the funding mechanism that was chosen. That flew in the face of the briefing that was given to me and other MSPs both before and after FMQs by Transport Scotland, at which the issue was clarified by my colleague Jim Tolson. It also contradicted parliamentary answers received by Jeremy Purvis, which I am happy to hand to Mr Swinney for him to look at.

It is clear that the savings have been made by taking away the multimodal element of the new bridge, by reducing the amount of connecting road that will be built and by reducing risk costs as a result of the investigatory work that has been undertaken on site. It would be fair to all of us to give detailed breakdowns of where the £1.7 billion of theoretical savings have been found, rather than more misleading statements.

The taxpaying public is entitled to ask why Transport Scotland got the figures so wrong in the first place. There are many unanswered questions—on carbon emissions, the timetable and compensation—that we do not have time to cover today. However, I know already from community organisations and affected residents that they are not happy with the way in which the project is being taken forward.

We need a crossing that deals with the capacity issues. We have heard from Marilyn Livingstone and others that what Transport Scotland has come up with is unlikely to deal with the extra 1,000 vehicles every day that will use the bridge, which is why many of us were pleased that there was a focus on the multimodal element of the new crossing. In December 2007, Mr Swinney trumpeted the importance of that when he gave the ministerial assurance to Parliament that the link would

"incorporate the opportunity for a real change through multimodal public transport provision."—[*Official Report*, 19 December 2007; c 4553.]

Instead, we have a reliance on the old bridge to take buses, cyclists and pedestrians; a new bridge that relies on a hard shoulder to deal with breakdowns and diverted buses from the old bridge during high winds; and potentially, at some point in the future, trams. That is not the vision of a

21st century crossing that we all had in mind, and it is certainly not fit for the next century.

Stewart Stevenson: Will the member take an intervention?

Margaret Smith: No, I would like to get through more of my speech.

We all agree that we need proper continuity for public transport on the crossing.

We were also told that the existing bridge was at risk of being closed in a matter of years because of corrosion in the cables and that time was running out, yet now the Government proposals are predicated on the structure being around for another 80 years. We need to do further work to find out exactly what the maintenance costs of continuing to use the existing bridge will be. Mr Stevenson has already admitted that there is a range of possibilities and probabilities for the deterioration of the bridge and that he does not know how bad it is. For example, we have no idea about the state of the anchorages. We are told that there is the possibility of a tram being put on the existing bridge, yet we know that that was rejected by Transport Scotland at the exhibitions that were held in Queensferry and elsewhere prior to the announcement of the decision that the new crossing would be a bridge and not a tunnel.

Stewart Stevenson: For clarity, a key point of the statement that I made in December was that new work had established that it would be possible to put trams on the existing bridge.

Margaret Smith: The minister must accept that one message was given out when it suited the Government. Since then, it has brought in another lot of consultants and given them another bung of money from the £100 million that has been spent so far to provide it with the answers that it wants. We need some clarity on what will be achieved and whether it will do what we need it to do on public transport and traffic continuity across the river.

The people are entitled to ask what we are getting for our money. The truth is that we are getting a lot less than we were promised and that the crossing will cost a lot more than comparable projects worldwide. The SNP has U-turned all over the place. In advance of the election, the First Minister said that he supported a tunnel. Uncertainty has dogged the funding of the project on the SNP's watch. Originally, we were told that it would be funded through Scots buying bonds. Then Fergus Ewing said that it would be paid for by not going ahead with the Edinburgh trams project and the Edinburgh airport rail link. The money for the Edinburgh airport rail link is not sitting in a vault somewhere, ready to be used for that purpose. Then we were assured by John

Swinney that the Scottish Futures Trust would do the trick. We know that that is a load of rubbish.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Alasdair Morgan): I am sorry, but the member's time is up.

16:04

Keith Brown (Ochil) (SNP): I rise to support the motion in the name of John Swinney. I cannot help but mention the inherent irony in Des McNulty's amendment, which refers to

"the lack of prior consultation".

Many of us remember the lack of prior consultation by Gordon Brown during the Dunfermline West by-election, when he announced that any consideration by the Labour-Lib Dem Executive of a proposal for a £4-plus toll on the existing bridge was pointless because he was ruling it out—even though the decision was one for the Scottish Cabinet to make. That, it would seem, was the level of respect in new Labour for prior and proper consultation on devolved issues.

I almost felt sorry for Jeremy Purvis yesterday after the dispiriting and bruising defeat that he suffered during the budget debate. He then woke up this morning only to find that he had to try to defend a contradictory and incoherent amendment, so I almost felt sorry for him again today.

Jeremy Purvis: Will the member give way?

Keith Brown: No, I would like to make some progress first.

As the Lib Dem amendment says, the new Forth crossing may result in the displacement of

"a significant number of other very deserving capital projects"

because of the—admittedly absurd—absence of borrowing powers. However, it is unbelievable that such an argument can be made with any sincerity by a party that is committed to carving £800 million out of the Scottish block every year. By my calculations, with £800 million we could build a bridge over the Forth for buses, a bridge for bikes and a bridge for cars, with enough money left over to build an airport on either side. As long as Tavish Scott was not in charge of the project, we could also have free coffee and newspapers for every commuter.

Even if inadvertently, the Lib Dem amendment highlights the key issue, which of course is the anomalous position of the Scottish Government in terms of its inability to fund large-scale capital projects in the same way as individuals, businesses, local government and national Governments the world over—by borrowing to invest. That is the real issue here, not whether there should be a bridge—all parties, with one

honourable exception, believe that there should. Whether the bridge will be built is not an issue either, because the Scottish Government has confirmed its timetable and the fact that the money is available to build it. The issue is really about how the cost of the bridge should be funded. Thankfully, it appears that tolls have, if somewhat belatedly, been ruled out by new Labour. It would seem that iron man Iain Gray has overcome those such as David Whitton and Des McNulty who have refused to rule out tolls. Perhaps we can call that faction of the new Labour Party the tollies.

However, having adopted the love-child of the Tories and big business—PFI—and having showered it with gifts of hundreds of billions of pounds over a decade or more, the Labour Party, it seems, cannot let it go. Exactly how it could make PFI work on this project is not clear. Without tolls, there is no revenue bribe like that which made the Skye bridge, for example, such a lottery win for the Bank of America—and such a burden on taxpayers and toll payers. With the frozen credit markets, where would the private finance come from, and at what price? Most crucially, without the fig leaf of the off-balance-sheet con, what is the point of PFI?

On George Foulkes's "constructive" suggestions, I ask him to consider what funding a bridge project on such a scale would do to the capital projects of the local authorities that he mentions, particularly schools projects.

Having been on "Newsnight" with David Whitton, the deputy leader of the tollies, when he declared—solemnly and with an air of real menace—that he would ensure that the issues would come before the Parliament, I find it hard not to be a bit disappointed with the damp squib that is the new Labour amendment. I am also a bit disappointed by the unexplained absence of David Whitton. I do not know how significant that absence is.

Today's debate allows for three crucial points to be given prominence. First, the Scottish Government has ruled out tolls, and as a result has elicited a similar position from new Labour. Secondly, as the Tory amendment points out, it is now down to the two Governments "to work together" on the funding issue. Thirdly—and most important—borrowing powers have been brought into sharp relief.

Ironically, if we were talking about building a new Forth bridge, as opposed to a new Forth road bridge, borrowing would possibly be available through Network Rail's borrowing powers. That point seems to be lost on Jeremy Purvis.

Jeremy Purvis: Will the member give way?

Keith Brown: No, I will not.

Local authorities have to undertake prudential borrowing, and it is worrying to think that the person who placed that obligation on them—Gordon Brown—is currently touting debt of about £1 trillion around the international money markets. That is not prudential, and it seems a long time since we heard about dear old prudence. In fact, it seems that, like the phrase "no more boom and bust", we are unlikely to hear the phrase "borrowing only to invest" from the lips of Gordon Brown again.

Jeremy Purvis *rose*—

Des McNulty *rose*—

Keith Brown: I will take an intervention from Des McNulty.

Des McNulty: The member was active in local government, so he will be aware that one way to deal with large capital projects is to put money aside for a certain amount of time and to balance that with the borrowing. Why does the Government not use the put aside money that it inherited as a down payment on the Forth crossing?

Keith Brown: That is not the way that I remember local authority funding working. I remember the capital budgets being squeezed from the moment that Labour got into power and being kept at the same level, which produced pressures on revenue budgets as well.

Apparently, the only time that it is not right to borrow is when we need to invest in the Forth road bridge—it appears to be right in every other circumstance to give banks billions of pounds. I believe that it is necessary for all parties that are represented in the chamber to declare unequivocally that they support the establishment of borrowing powers for the Parliament as soon as possible. The absence of such powers is a fundamental and inexplicable fetter on the Parliament's ability properly to create and nurture the public infrastructure assets that the country needs. If this debate is to have any purpose, the Parliament must use it to make it clear to Gordon Brown that we are as united as we can be on the view that we should have the fundamental right to borrow to invest in Scotland's long-term future.

16:10

Helen Eadie (Dunfermline East) (Lab): All my political life in Scotland, I have consistently argued for a second bridge across the Forth, even when I have been ridiculed by the media and others in the Parliament. The Tories in Fife have not always supported an additional crossing. In addition, Mr Harvie is simply wrong: without a second Forth road bridge, economic development in the north-

east of Scotland will be at huge risk and the region will be at a disadvantage.

Patrick Harvie: Helen Eadie reminds us that she has been an advocate of a second road bridge all her political life, which is far longer than the few years that we have known about the corrosion. I presume that she is arguing for increased road capacity rather than merely a replacement bridge. Is that the case?

Helen Eadie: I have always argued for enhanced roads and public transport. As the roads and public transport spokesperson for Fife Council, I argued that we should have much greater investment in public transport. However, looking at the SNP manifesto, I see that the SNP has mismanaged that over the past year and a half that it has been in office.

I have the honour of having in my constituency the northern ends of both iconic bridges that cross the Forth, and the northern end of the third bridge will also be in Dunfermline East. I was, therefore, disappointed that I was unable to attend the recent briefing for MSPs, which was held in one of the hotels near the Parliament. Commitments in the Scottish Parliament made my attendance impossible. I very much hope that the minister will arrange for those MSPs who were in the chamber that day or who had other commitments to have a further briefing at a mutually convenient time for all parties.

We all agree that funding for the new crossing is vital. Trish Marwick was being disingenuous, or at best economical with the truth, in her diatribe. We were told not just by John Swinney but by Alex Salmond that the Scottish Futures Trust would provide a suitable form of funding and that the new crossing was in the SNP's manifesto. However, we have still not heard the outcome of the cabinet secretary's consideration of using European regional development funding to develop what is a trans-European network route. When did the minister seek a meeting with European Union commissioners to discuss the issue? When has he discussed the matter with the EU Commissioner for Transport and with the European Parliament? The absence of an application from the Scottish Government for funding for this critical route across the Forth, which has trans-European network status, is a glaring omission.

We need to consider a number of issues regarding the existing crossing. The Scottish Government has claimed that the existing bridge can carry light rail and guided buses. Having taken soundings on the matter, I have no doubt that a structurally sound bridge will, in the future, be able to carry various modes of public transport. However, that brings me to the nub of the issue—how structurally sound will the existing bridge be in the future? FETA is considering ways to examine

the condition of the concrete anchorages on either side of the Forth that connect to the two cables. Those are huge structures, and it will take some innovative and costly activity to assess their stability.

The whole premise for building a new bridge was the fact that the existing crossing was under threat. We were told that the cables were corroding at a rate that meant that, in the worst-case scenario, the bridge would have to close to HGVs by 2014. I had a briefing in the Scottish Parliament from the former bridgemaster, Alistair Andrews. I saw the internal state of the cables and heard his concerns about the unknown extent of the rust and corrosion, and it was absolutely clear to me that it was inevitable that we would need a replacement bridge, not just an additional bridge. We have recently had better news on that front. We have been told that the dehumidification process is working and that the closure date has been moved, as Marilyn Livingstone stated. However, importantly, we will not know how successful the dehumidification process has been until 2011.

Ruling out multimodal capacity on the new crossing before one can say for sure whether the cables on the existing bridge will be okay is, at best, a high-risk strategy. Replacing the existing cables would be a significant engineering project. Of course, it could be done, but because of potential costs and safety considerations the most likely scenario would be complete closure of the bridge so that the main cables could be replaced. That could not happen until the new crossing was fully operational—in other words, until 2016—and would mean that the public transport or high-occupancy vehicle routes that are planned for the current bridge would also have to be put on hold.

Few would dispute the claim that the bridge is the most important infrastructure project in Scotland for a generation. It is certainly the most expensive project that Scotland will see over the next decade or so, and I believe that some serious questions need to be asked about the projected costs.

We know that the existing bridge will no longer be fit for purpose much earlier than projected and that the number of journeys across the Forth will increase in the coming years. Both bridges should be multimodal, with one carrying traffic north and the other south. The legacy of this SNP Government will be its paucity of ambition. Its actions contrast sharply with those of the Danish and French Governments, which have provided their countries with hugely magnificent crossings. Alex Salmond will go down in history as a cut-price leader who did not recognise the value of going for the best that could be provided in order to future-proof Scotland.

16:16

Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green): In dissenting on this issue, I had expected to be a lone voice in the wilderness. However, given the determination of the advocates of an additional bridge to disagree violently with each other on every issue that they can find, I feel much more comfortable.

Murdo Fraser used the metaphor of a drug addict, continually looking for the next fix, to describe two Governments locked in an unhealthy relationship that is characterised by abusive falling-outs. In fact, I use the same metaphor for road builders: "Go on—just one more infrastructure project. I need it to support my economy." The situation is infuriating and all too familiar.

Let me be clear: a road crossing on the east of the Forth remains and will remain a vital part of our transport infrastructure. What I object to is this Government's decision, supported by all the other political parties bar my own, to press ahead with a proposal that will cost a vast sum of money before the reparability of the existing bridge has been fully examined.

At the moment, the arguments in favour of an extra bridge are supposedly justified by concerns about the integrity of the existing Forth road bridge. Apart from the notable exception of Helen Eadie, we have largely been asked to ignore the fact that the advocates of an extra bridge were making their case long before corrosion on the existing bridge was ever an issue. I have to say, though, that Helen Eadie dropped her guard a wee bit at the end of her speech when she said that any decision should be based on the viability of the existing bridge. That has never been her basis for supporting an extra bridge over the Forth.

Tricia Marwick: I assure the member that I never supported the building of a second bridge until the viability of the existing bridge was called into question. However, what do we do if we wait until the tests are conducted, find out that the bridge is unsustainable and cannot continue in its present form, and then have to close it? How do we fill the gap when the people of Fife and the north of Scotland are left with no alternative crossing?

Patrick Harvie: That was indeed a hard question to answer this time last year, or even six months ago when the issue of corrosion was still being addressed. However, the corrosion situation is looking better; the dehumidification appears to be working. Indeed, FETA has told us that the date at which the existing bridge might have to close to HGVs—not close altogether, as I believe the cabinet secretary might inadvertently have indicated—has slipped back. We should use the

additional time to gather the information that we need about the existing bridge.

Let us consider the problems and the solutions. The problem of the increasing damage to the existing bridge has not come from nowhere. There is no mysterious, magical force that is forcing bridges around the world to close. Additional damage is being done by additional traffic. I am not aware of any attempt that has been made to examine properly ideas about reducing traffic, traffic management, using existing alternative crossings or switching freight from road to rail. Marilyn Livingstone argued that a new bridge ought to be future proofed, but the existing road bridge was probably thought to be future proofed when it was built. The bridge's problems result from the increasing loads that we have put on it. I am not talking about a law of nature; I am talking about a set of choices that we have made about how we use our road infrastructure.

Marilyn Livingstone also argued that the new bridge would be full on the day on which it opened. We cannot have things both ways. We can say either that congestion and increasing damage to our roads and bridges are the result of too much traffic, or that they are the result of not enough roads and bridges.

Marilyn Livingstone: I think that I said that that was why I support the light rail and multimodal option and that there should be more public transport journeys across the Forth.

Patrick Harvie: I welcome Marilyn Livingstone's intervention.

I will support the Labour amendment, although it does not go as far as I would like it to. If we discover in the future that a new bridge is necessary, there should, of course, be a multimodal element. However, we must achieve fewer road crossings and more public transport crossings, not more of everything. The argument is exactly the same as that which we have about rail versus air transport. If we simply give in to the business lobby and the Confederation of British Industry, which has argued this week that the new bridge must have more capacity—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The member has one minute left. I tell him that because the clock is wrong.

Patrick Harvie: If we argue that the new bridge should have more capacity, we will have more of everything. We will have a higher rather than a lower level of emissions. As I said, we need to have fewer road crossings and more public transport crossings.

I cannot support either of the other amendments.

The issue is timing. I ask members to consider their own homes. If a member had been told a few months ago that their roof might fall in, and they were mulling over the remortgaging options to repair it and someone came along and said, "Actually, I think that I can fix it," surely they would give them the chance to come back with a report on whether they could do so for a lower amount of money than would be needed to repair it. All that I ask members to do is consider that. Let us fix the bridge that we have, for goodness' sake.

16:23

Christopher Harvie (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP): No hurricane that might hit any future Forth bridge would appear to be anything like the weather conditions that surround not only the immediate business of its funding, but the situation in the finance markets of the world. We have seen the mysteries of high finance become hocus-pocus schemes that make 1920s American fraudsters seem mere amateurs. Therefore, I want to make a plea and argue for a return to barter from finance.

I say that for two reasons. First, the kingdom of Fife is nowadays one of the major industrial centres of Scotland. It is a heavily urbanised area, which really ought to be a city; if it were, it would, with a population of more than 300,000, be the third largest city in Scotland. In Rosyth, Burntisland and Methil, Fife also has a heavy to medium industrial base that is potentially the best sited and most efficient in Britain for the exploitation of new renewables. That it even has a firm—Burntisland Fabrications Ltd—that has set up a subsidiary in Germany is amazing. I have not heard of that sort of export from Scotland for a long time.

Members must remember that when the original or old Forth road bridge was built in the 1960s, it was constructed from steel from Motherwell and Cleveland, and its wire ropes came from Musselburgh—where the rope works have been transmogrified into yet another Tesco. The components of the new bridge will probably have to be almost wholly imported in a period in which peak oil and the \$200 barrel of oil—briefly away, for the moment—are likely to loom again and mean that carbon costs will be a major problem if we delay. On the other hand, I believe that the bridge can be packaged and prioritised with other of the Government's infrastructure, renewables, and reindustrialisation priorities to make it an efficient form of political and economic barter. So, may I suggest a wider funding horizon?

The Scottish Government is committed to a nuclear-free and industrially strong Scotland, and that coincides with something that people in Europe would not have imagined a decade ago—

reindustrialisation. The amount of investment in productive industry—metal bashing, as the City used to sneer—has gone up, notably in Germany. In Baden-Württemberg, industrial production is now 35 per cent whereas it was 30 per cent a decade ago. To a great extent, that growth stems from renewable energy.

Now, Scotland is the powerhouse for such industry. Along our Atlantic coast could come the sort of renewable energy for which Germany is in desperate need. Out of Norway, the wise virgin that conserved its oil power, a pensions fund is accumulating hundreds of millions of pounds. Germany has the technology, training, solar and wind power, but it remains desperate for wave and tidal energy. So, in addition to the borrowing powers that any sensible British Government will concede to a Scottish Government—as its fans in the Calman commission are pleading with it to do—should we not make a pitch to the people in Europe who need our power to give us the necessary infrastructural investment and technological assistance?

Over and above all that, we must plan to use the period when the bridge is under construction. We must use the bridge works. The most famous Scottish engineer, Thomas Telford, described every one of his great projects as a true "working academy" for the nation. The bridge could be our means of retechnologising the country and, from a narrow Fife perspective, it could mean the creation of a new Scottish city.

16:27

Alison McInnes (North East Scotland) (LD): It has been an interesting afternoon. We have heard a number of comments about Westminster's response and duty, but surely the Scottish Government is responsible for coming to Parliament with a properly worked-out scheme. Shirley-Anne Somerville said that the issue should transcend politics, but I am not sure how she squares that with her Government's approach to the Treasury. Like Murdo Fraser, I think it is likely that the SNP, spoiling for a fight as usual, cynically chose to use one of the most important projects for a generation to curdle relations between Westminster and Holyrood. People are fed up with that way of doing business. They expect and deserve their Government to put Scotland's needs ahead of the Scottish National Party's quest for independence.

The cabinet secretary usefully outlined the options that he had considered for funding the bridge, but surely he should have invested whatever time was necessary during the past 18 months in serious discussion with the Treasury about how to fund the project without jeopardising other key projects in Scotland. Sending a letter to

the Treasury at the end of November was not nearly sufficient for such an important project.

The Government has prematurely plumped for an approach that, by its own admission, means that

“a significant number of other very deserving capital projects will have to be displaced”.—[*Official Report, Written Answers*, 14 January 2008; S3W-19919.]

Given that answer, communities deserve to know what the Government has in mind. That is why the Scottish Liberal Democrats’ amendment calls for the Government to produce a prioritised list of capital projects. Without such prioritisation, how can the renewal and investment in infrastructure be taken forward smoothly?

We can guess why there is this creeping paralysis. The Government is not popular when it says no to people, as Richard Lochhead discovered during the past week. Even if saying no is not popular, that is the only honest way to go about it. Councils, communities and the business sector all have a right to know when, if ever, infrastructure projects will see the light of day.

Stewart Stevenson has said—rather astonishingly—that priority in the STPR is unimportant. In response to questions from the Transport, Infrastructure and Climate Change Committee on 16 December last year regarding the lack of prioritisation in the STPR, he said:

“The order is not important; what is important is that we proceed with the 29 priority projects that we wish to undertake at a strategic national level ... The order in which they will happen will be influenced by what happens in the future. Comprehensive spending reviews, the ability of civil engineering to respond to our needs and the preparatory work that is required will determine, as we understand more detail of each project, when and how we can proceed with them and implement them.”

Murdo Fraser: I do not wish to fall out with Alison McInnes, but how does the current transport minister’s approach to a priority list differ from that of Mr Scott when he was transport minister?

Alison McInnes: A major infrastructure project is about to swallow all the capital spend that is available, so we really need prioritisation.

When pressed on developing the detail that he said that he needed, Mr Stevenson said:

“We have to engage with the regional transport partnerships and councils to develop the details of our interventions. On the road network, we have already said that our future programme is dominated by the Forth crossing, which will take a large proportion of our work to 2016. In the next few years, we will engage to determine what we have to do on the other projects.”—[*Official Report, Transport, Infrastructure and Climate Change Committee*, 16 December 2008; c 1167, 1169.]

I look forward to the minister’s explanation of why he is not engaging now on those important

projects. Does the lack of prioritisation mean that the Government does not intend to progress anything else before 2016—not even at the drawing board?

We have had no public explanation of what will be displaced. Surely we should know what criteria will be applied in making such decisions. I know that the matter is being considered. For example, the transport minister suggested to the north east of Scotland transport partnership recently that improvements to the Inveramsay bridge and the Haudagain roundabout in Aberdeen were prime targets for such deferral. Do Alex Salmond and his constituents know about that? The First Minister pledged to them that sorting out the Inveramsay bridge would be a priority project.

Other concerns about the new proposals have been expressed this afternoon. Margaret Smith talked about road connections and multimodality. Des McNulty and Marilyn Livingstone, among others, are concerned about the move away from having a multimodal bridge. I share the concerns about the new bargain-basement treatment of public transport. As Jeremy Purvis said, John Swinney was adamant on 9 September 2008 that the new bridge would be multimodal.

Shirley-Anne Somerville: Will the member take an intervention?

Alison McInnes: No—I want to move on.

Only 13 weeks after 9 September, Parliament was told that the new slimline bridge was the best answer. Does anyone else worry that the only driver for that change of heart was the urgent need to reduce the tab? The phrase, “For the want o’ a ha’p’orth of tar, the ship was lost,” comes to mind.

Many members have pointed out the contradictions. On the one hand, we are told that the new bridge must proceed because of the state of the existing bridge and, on the other hand, we are told that it is okay to put public transport on the existing bridge. I appreciate that issues relate to loading, but it is not good enough to invest vast sums of public money in a new bridge that will operate beyond 2050—when we hope to be well into our new low-carbon future—and which has no public transport capacity.

One effect of the funding decision is that it has highlighted how worthless the STPR is. No one really knows what is going ahead and we do not know what will be worked up first. We need more clarity. The wish list needs to become a proper working document. For that to happen, the Government needs to prioritise projects. That is what being in government used to be about—taking difficult decisions.

I urge ministers to enter meetings with the Treasury with an open mind and to be prepared to find a solution that is best for Scotland as a whole.

16:34

Alex Johnstone (North East Scotland) (Con):

When the minority Government arrived in office, it had immediately to set about the process of building bridges. It is ironic that it has interpreted that literally.

The Conservatives have worked to support elements of Government policy on the Forth bridge from an early stage. We worked with the Government to remove tolls from the Forth bridge and we have been perhaps the most enthusiastic supporters of building a second Forth road bridge, fundamentally to replace the existing bridge.

There are those who believe that additional capacity is extremely important. In fact, the Conservatives have a long track record in that regard. While in government in the early 1990s, we made major land purchase decisions that indicated our intention to move ahead with additional capacity over the Forth.

Patrick Harvie: Will the member give way?

Alex Johnstone: Not at this point.

We then went through a series of policy changes and changes of Government that resulted in other priorities being brought forward. However, the discovery of engineering problems in the Forth bridge focused the minds of members of the Scottish Parliament, other politicians and engineers alike on how to deal with the matter should the problems become insurmountable.

Members have presented those engineering issues in a number of different ways. I was glad to hear Helen Eadie mention Alastair Andrew, the former bridgemaister who has now retired. In the past, I was lucky enough to meet him on more than one occasion. He is one of the greatest sources of information on the bridge and on the dangers that lie ahead.

We have heard much about the biggest single problem that faces us: corrosion in the bridge cables. We are told that the dehumidification process appears to be working. However, unlike some who believe that that process may reverse corrosion in the cables, the Conservatives believe that that will not happen. If we can slow down the rate of corrosion, we will extend the lifespan of the bridge, but dehumidification will neither reverse the corrosion nor repair it.

As a consequence, the current problems with the bridge will not go away. There is also the on-going problem with wires in the cables snapping not as a result of corrosion but because the

process of rolling the wires to form the cables over 40 years ago may have been flawed. In addition, there is the potential problem of the anchorage points. The problem is not yet fully understood, but there are engineering risks in that regard that may yet cause us to consider bridge replacement.

The bridge is flawed and will continue to suffer from on-going damage, not only because of its construction method but because of increased traffic volumes. There is a choice that we have to make. Des McNulty described it as a paradox, and I agree with his interpretation. The paradox is this: do we go ahead and build a bridge in the knowledge that it may be required, or do we wait until we know that a new bridge is required and then begin to build a new one? The members who contributed to the debate fall into two distinct groups: those who believe that we should wait and see and those who believe that we should go ahead now and plan for a new bridge. In that respect, the Government has our full support.

Deciding on the option of building a lower-priced bridge and making extensive multimodal use of the existing bridge has resulted in a significant cost reduction, which makes it a worthwhile option to pursue. However, given what members have said in the chamber today, we must look further at the multimodal option. Some individuals take the extraordinary line of saying, "We do not need another bridge but, if we are to have one, can we have the expensive option?"—I know that because I have spoken to them. The argument is not only extraordinary but irrational. When I come across it, I dismiss it.

However, in many of the profound speeches in the debate, members said that, if we are to build the bridge, the multimodal option should be involved. I have this to say to those who believe in a new multimodal bridge: before going down that road, we must consider the cost and the impact of the cost. The Conservatives are not prepared to commit to the much higher level of expenditure that a multimodal bridge would require when the option of reusing the existing bridge to provide that multimodal option is ahead of us.

We know that challenges lie ahead of us. As the new bridge is completed and traffic is moved off the existing bridge, the challenge will be to refurbish and rebuild elements of the existing bridge. That challenge lies in the future—indeed, it will lie further in the future if we agree now on replacing the existing bridge. If we build the replacement, the old bridge's lifespan will be considerably increased, which gives us options for the future.

We have had an extensive debate today on funding and funding mechanisms. I believe that, on balance, the cabinet secretary has clearly stated how the bridge will be funded, and that the

funding for the bridge will be in place. However, the cabinet secretary has not accounted for how the massive gap in capital will be filled once the huge elephant in the room, the new Forth bridge, has taken up its place. Time has gone by, and we know how the bridge will be funded, but we do not know how the funding will be replaced within capital budgets.

There are calls for various things in the amendments. It is ironic that two of them, those from Labour and the Liberal Democrats, seem to take out the commitment not to toll the new bridge. That is why the Conservatives cannot support those amendments.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I am afraid that the member's time is up.

16:41

Andy Kerr (East Kilbride) (Lab): Over the past few months and years, we have watched the unravelling of the Scottish Futures Trust, and today's debate marks the end of it as a meaningful Government policy. I will explain why in a minute.

Many members have already dealt with some key aspects of the Scottish Futures Trust. It is the mark of this debate that I am left convinced that the Government is not sure what to build and why it is building it. It has clearly lost its mechanism for funding the project—the Scottish Futures Trust. I share Murdo Fraser's view that the Government is seeking to blame someone else for its own fiscal incompetence. Ministers must be prepared to admit that it is their actions that are causing pressure on capital budgets across Scotland and which will lead to other projects being cancelled. Unless the Government reinvents the financial strategy called the Scottish Futures Trust and makes it work, its argument about its so-called rational approach to the Treasury will not stack up. That goes back to Murdo Fraser's point—that the Government's argument seeks to disguise the fact that it could not get its proposal to work.

The First Minister said at question time today:

"when a minister gives a commitment, that commitment is met. That is how the process works."

Those words will come back to haunt him in many different ways, particularly in relation to the Scottish Futures Trust. It is not other ministers but the First Minister himself who is on record as saying:

"If we have a new bridge, a bond issue is definitely the way to do it."

Even though he said today that

"when a minister gives a commitment, that commitment is met",

we know that, on this occasion, that is not the case.

Fergus Ewing said:

"Financing the scheme through a bond issue under the SNP's proposed Scottish Futures Trust is seen by experts"—

I say that laughingly; I do not know who they were—

"as significantly cheaper"

and the

"preferred option ... a replacement crossing is vital, we must ensure that we use"

that method. Again, even though the First Minister said today that

"when a minister gives a commitment, that commitment is met",

that is not the case here.

Mr Swinney, too, is guilty. *The Herald* reported:

"Mr Swinney said the government intended to use the planned Scottish Futures Trust to pay for the bridge as an alternative to the Public Private Partnership."

Of course, we all know that the Government cannot get the Scottish Futures Trust to work, and that it has shrivelled away to a minor quango, which will merely draw together some projects, doing a job that our civil service used to do—without the £23 million that will be necessary to fund the SFT. From that great idea of Scots all buying their patriotic bonds and the Scottish Futures Trust crowding out all other funding methods, the SFT is now reduced to being something whose purpose is, as Mr Swinney said on "Good Morning Scotland",

"to essentially bring about collaboration between different projects of a smaller scale."

Gone is the mighty idea that was the Scottish Futures Trust.

As we have progressed through the debate, members have pointed those matters out. On the exchange between Jeremy Purvis and Stewart Stevenson about the details of various websites that they had sought to use in evidence, I never knew that accounting could be so exciting. However, everyone in the street, and indeed everyone in the financial industries in Scotland, including contractors and consultants, knows that the Scottish Futures Trust is doomed to failure.

Many other members rightly pointed to the need for a multimodal shift.

John Swinney: Would Mr Kerr share with us his prognosis on PFI once the international financial reporting standards come into effect?

Andy Kerr: The cabinet secretary fails to recognise that we have not advocated the use of

PPP for the Forth road crossing. If he is willing to open the books, I would be happy to come to a conclusion on the matter. We have said that the crowding-out mechanism of the Scottish Futures Trust has not worked. It is the cabinet secretary and his Government that are endangering our hospitals, schools and roads.

On the viability of PPP, I point out that the Limehouse link, the docklands light railway and the Jubilee line used traditional funding mechanisms but were massively over budget and hugely late. Why does the cabinet secretary think that the traditional model that he describes will somehow work perfectly? If we read the National Audit Office's report comparing PPP projects with traditional models, we find that 70 per cent of the traditional models unfortunately came in over budget and not within the required timescale.

There are many benefits to the use of PPP, such as risk transfer and certainty of delivery. I state again—for the record and so that the cabinet secretary understands it clearly—that I am not advocating its use for the Forth replacement crossing. However, he and his Government have ruled out that mechanism of finance, which leads them to try to blame Westminster for the lack of delivery that will result on other infrastructure projects.

Many other members also asked what happened to the £900 million of end-year flexibility that should have been put into the project—perhaps the cabinet secretary can deal with that point when he intervenes. We all knew that the bridge was the biggest project set to hit the capital budget in Scotland and that it had to be funded. However, £900 million came up the road to Scotland and is now gone; £650 million was saved in the budget from the Edinburgh airport rail link and is now gone. What exactly has the cabinet secretary done with the money and why was he not planning for the biggest ever project that the Government would have to deal with?

John Swinney: The £900 million of EYF was invested in the public infrastructure and services of Scotland to compensate for the worst increase in spending in Scotland since devolution took place: 0.5 per cent above inflation in 2008-09. If Mr Kerr cares to check the facts, he will find that that is absolutely correct. Will he answer my question: what is his prognosis for PFI in the light of the IFRS?

Andy Kerr: I apologise, but I will need to wait for what the Treasury has to say about that. However it chooses to deal with the rules on PPP/PFI, the fact that it is off balance sheet is not the only reason why one would entertain the use of that financial mechanism. Whatever the Treasury says on the matter, it does not matter for the bridge because there are other methods of funding

projects that deliver for the taxpayer far more safely.

On the cabinet secretary's first point, the SNP has the biggest ever Scottish budget, the additional EYF money and money saved in budgets all over the place but, when it wrote its manifesto and said that the bridge would be funded by the Scottish Futures Trust, it knew that this was the biggest project that it would have to deal with. Of course, it now knows that it cannot deliver and has sought to blame Westminster for its own incompetence.

We have talked about childish games—I think that Tricia Marwick brought that up. The Labour Party is not being childish about this important project. For two years, the SNP said that it had a funding mechanism and then, two weeks before it made the announcement, sent a letter to the Treasury. I have asked before what engagement Scottish Government finance officials had with Treasury officials prior to that letter being sent, because I am sure that they knew the answer in advance.

Tricia Marwick: Will Andy Kerr give way?

Andy Kerr: I would like to move on.

On rewriting history, I found it ironic when some members criticised PPP. They should have attended some of the previous debates in the Parliament. Unison, the Cuthberts and Allyson Pollock all have equal criticism and condemnation of the original Scottish Futures Trust model. Indeed, the cabinet secretary was forced to admit that it was simply a member of the PFI/PPP family.

Murdo Fraser asked whether the Government was incompetent, attempting to bounce the Treasury into saying yes or even hoping that it would say no. I share his view that it is some, if not all, of the above. The Government sought to have a fight with Westminster to get a scapegoat. As we all understand, sending a letter to the Treasury 14 days in advance of the debate was simply unacceptable.

I would have liked to reflect on many other speeches, but I have run out of time.

The mighty Scottish Futures Trust and the patriotic bonds have shrivelled away to an expensive quango, doing a job that civil servants used to do. In no way is anyone other than the cabinet secretary and his colleagues responsible for any impact on the budgets for schools, hospitals and roads, which have been put at risk. They are responsible—it is their incompetence.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Stewart Stevenson will wind up the debate—until 5 o'clock, minister.

16:50

The Minister for Transport, Infrastructure and Climate Change (Stewart Stevenson): Let me treat this somewhat didactically for the hard of hearing and the hard of heeding. I will talk about policy, finance and the capability of the new crossing. I hope that I will have time to respond to as many members as I can.

The policy has not changed: it is to have multimodal capability between Edinburgh and Fife. What has changed is the implementation of the policy in the light of the innovative and exciting work that is being done by the professional engineers in Transport Scotland. It is an implementation that will deliver a huge financial benefit and simultaneously open up for future Administrations further capacity options, if they so choose. This Administration's option is to deliver a replacement for the capacity of the bridge that was opened in 1964, but the design gives us the opportunity—in particular in relation to public transport—to increase capacity and reliability and to deliver the kind of public transport intervention, particularly for buses, that we have not seen for a generation.

Patrick Harvie: The minister has implied—I think that I am right in saying that it is on the record for the first time—that under his scheme future Administrations will have the choice of increasing road capacity between the two Forth crossings by using the existing crossing. If his climate change targets mean anything at all, surely he needs a system in place to prevent that from happening. Will he guarantee that the SNP would never support such a scheme? How will he prevent future Administrations from doing so?

Stewart Stevenson: I am sure that the member will have read the Climate Change (Scotland) Bill, so he will know that it provides for predictions as to how much carbon we must eliminate from our economy. That is precisely the handcuff on future policy making in a range of areas that the member might care to look at.

On the subject of finance, I say to everyone: the bridge is safe, the finance is safe and the finance is known. For those who are hard of hearing, I say more loudly: the bridge is safe, the finance is safe and we know where we are going. Finally, for the hard of heeding: the bridge is safe, the funding is safe and we know where it is coming from. It is coming from the Government.

Jeremy Purvis: Will the minister take an intervention?

Murdo Fraser *rose*—

Stewart Stevenson: Mr Purvis first.

Jeremy Purvis: I am grateful to the minister for giving way. On the reduction in the cost estimates

for the current Government's solution, what proportion of that reduction is owing to the funding mechanism that it has now opted for?

Stewart Stevenson: Choosing a funding mechanism that comes from our own resources is clearly the best value for money. That is a significant change from using mechanisms such as a lease and a shadow toll, or PPP. The funding mechanism that we have selected means that there is a significant change in the price. Now, does Mr Fraser wish to—

Jeremy Purvis: On a point of order, Presiding Officer. My point of order is relevant to the Presiding Officer's statement earlier today. In this debate, not only the cabinet secretary—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: No, sorry. I will not take a point of debate dressed up as a point of order. Can you sit down, please?

Jeremy Purvis: May you hear the point of order first, Presiding Officer, before you rule on it?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You can make the point of order at the end of the debate, or you can write to me and we will adjudicate on it. I am not taking the point of order just now. We will conclude the debate.

Mike Rumbles (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (LD): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. Standing orders say—there is no question about it—that, if a point of order is raised, it must be heard and proceedings must stop.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Mr Rumbles, if you look at standing orders, you will see that points of order should not be on the subject under debate and that they must be points of order and not points of debate. I call Murdo Fraser.

Murdo Fraser: Thank you, Presiding Officer. Perhaps we could return to the subject of the debate. I want to put to the minister an important point that has not yet been addressed by a minister during the debate. Why was there such a delay in ministers seeking Treasury approval? Why was approval sought only 14 days before the announcement that was made in December? Was that due to incompetence or was there another, more sinister reason for it?

Stewart Stevenson: Within a very short time of Cabinet concluding the shape of this project, we approached the Treasury. That was the right time to do it and the right way to do it.

I very much welcome the open approach that I think is being taken by the Treasury. We expect to have fruitful and useful discussions when Mr Swinney and I meet the Treasury team in the next few weeks.

I turn to the capability of the bridge. First, the bridge provides replacement capacity for freight

vehicles and the private car—two lanes in each direction. However, we will enhance the weather proofing compared to the existing bridge. On the Severn, the modern bridge hardly ever closes—it probably never closes—in comparison with the old bridge. We will see the same on the Forth.

Similarly, the provision of a hard shoulder means that breakdowns and accidents will interfere less with the operation of the bridge.

Helen Eadie: I asked about European funding, but the minister did not respond to that in his remarks on funding.

Stewart Stevenson: We explored that without success.

I return to capability. The old bridge was built with a 120-year life. That lifespan was predicated on a number of things: first, that we would not have corrosion in the cables; and secondly, that we would have a much lower utilisation than we have currently. It is interesting that those responsible for the Severn crossing responded early to the design capacity point being reached; they have similar utilisation on two bridges across the Severn.

Today, we are faced with a bridge that is approaching the safety point and which is continuing to deteriorate simply through use. The kind of vehicles that are carried on the bridge are very different from the vehicles that were carried on it when it first opened.

In the limited time available, I will try to respond to members' points. I very much welcomed Derek Brownlee's acceptance of the funding model that we have adopted. That is useful and sensible.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Order. There are far too many conversations going on.

Stewart Stevenson: Marilyn Livingstone got to the nub of it when she said that the case is made for a new crossing. The multimodal capability is there.

George Foulkes conflated funding and project management. The problem with the Parliament was not the funding mechanism but the project management. He raised the issue of local authority borrowing. The difficulty is that, under the adoption of international financial reporting standards, that would have to be on the balance sheet of local authorities at the outset—exactly the same problem as PFI and exactly the same problem with borrowing.

Murdo Fraser quoted Churchill, who, I think, also said:

"Prediction is difficult, especially for the future."

That is certainly true of the deterioration of the bridge, but we cannot take a gamble that things will magically come right.

I say to Margaret Smith that we have been advertising this week in *The Scotsman*, the *Metro* and other papers the substantial engagement that there will be with communities.

Even Patrick Harvie said that a road crossing remains an important part of our transport infrastructure. I thought that that was important and interesting.

Chris Harvie suggested that a barter approach might be of value. That is very interesting, but perhaps we will not look at that immediately.

In 1935, my great-uncle was the chairman of the campaign committee for the Forth road bridge. He anticipated that 6,000 vehicles a day would cross the bridge. Today, we have 11 times that number crossing the bridge. The world has changed since 1935—and since 1964. I commend the motion in my colleague's name to the Parliament.

The Presiding Officer (Alex Fergusson): That concludes the debate. Jeremy Purvis has a point of order.

Jeremy Purvis: I am grateful to you, Presiding Officer. The Deputy Presiding Officer refused to hear my point of order. I simply seek clarification of whether, in your ruling at lunch time, you were referring to answers to written parliamentary questions as well as to answers to oral questions in the chamber.

The Presiding Officer: I will not deny that, but it will be for the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee—I reiterate, in its procedural role—to determine what it wants to consider. However, I do not rule that out. It will be up to the committee.

Decision Time

17:00

The Presiding Officer (Alex Fergusson):

There are seven questions to be put as a result of today's business. Members should be aware that if amendment S3M-3214.3, in the name of Des McNulty, on the Forth crossing, is agreed to, amendment S3M-3214.4, in the name of Jeremy Purvis, will fall.

The first question is, that amendment S3M-3162.1, in the name of Ross Finnie, which seeks to amend motion S3M-3162, in the name of Nicola Sturgeon, on the Health Boards (Membership and Elections) (Scotland) Bill, be agreed to.

Amendment agreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that motion S3M-3162, in the name of Nicola Sturgeon, on the Health Boards (Membership and Elections) (Scotland) Bill, as amended, be agreed to.

Motion, as amended, agreed to.

Resolved,

That the Parliament agrees to the general principles of the Health Boards (Membership and Elections) (Scotland) Bill but, in so doing, noting the terms of the Health and Sport Committee's Stage 1 report, calls on the Scottish Government to bring forward, ahead of Stage 3, firm proposals for the piloting of a variety of alternative schemes to improve public participation and shares the committee's view that such agreement to the general principles should not be taken to pre-empt any decision that the Parliament may later be asked to take on the rolling out of direct elections to health boards nationwide.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that motion S3M-2937, in the name of John Swinney, on the financial resolution to the Health Boards (Membership and Elections) (Scotland) Bill, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to.

That the Parliament, for the purposes of any Act of the Scottish Parliament resulting from the Health Boards (Membership and Elections) (Scotland) Bill, agrees to any expenditure of a kind referred to in paragraph 3(b)(iii) of Rule 9.12 of the Parliament's Standing Orders arising in consequence of the Act.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that amendment S3M-3214.3, in the name of Des McNulty, which seeks to amend motion S3M-3214, in the name of John Swinney, on the Forth crossing, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

For

Alexander, Ms Wendy (Paisley North) (Lab)
 Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Baker, Richard (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Edinburgh Central) (Lab)
 Brankin, Rhona (Midlothian) (Lab)
 Butler, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (Lab)
 Chisholm, Malcolm (Edinburgh North and Leith) (Lab)
 Curran, Margaret (Glasgow Baillieston) (Lab)
 Eadie, Helen (Dunfermline East) (Lab)
 Ferguson, Patricia (Glasgow Maryhill) (Lab)
 Foulkes, George (Lothians) (Lab)
 Glen, Marlyn (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Godman, Trish (West Renfrewshire) (Lab)
 Gordon, Charlie (Glasgow Cathcart) (Lab)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Gray, Iain (East Lothian) (Lab)
 Harper, Robin (Lothians) (Green)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Henry, Hugh (Paisley South) (Lab)
 Jamieson, Cathy (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (Lab)
 Kelly, James (Glasgow Rutherglen) (Lab)
 Kerr, Andy (East Kilbride) (Lab)
 Lamont, Johann (Glasgow Pollok) (Lab)
 Livingstone, Marilyn (Kirkcaldy) (Lab)
 Macdonald, Lewis (Aberdeen Central) (Lab)
 Macintosh, Ken (Eastwood) (Lab)
 Martin, Paul (Glasgow Springburn) (Lab)
 McAveety, Mr Frank (Glasgow Shettleston) (Lab)
 McCabe, Tom (Hamilton South) (Lab)
 McConnell, Jack (Motherwell and Wishaw) (Lab)
 McMahon, Michael (Hamilton North and Bellshill) (Lab)
 McNeil, Duncan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (Lab)
 McNulty, Des (Clydebank and Milngavie) (Lab)
 Murray, Elaine (Dumfries) (Lab)
 Oldfather, Irene (Cunninghame South) (Lab)
 Park, John (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Peacock, Peter (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Peattie, Cathy (Falkirk East) (Lab)
 Simpson, Dr Richard (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Stewart, David (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Whitefield, Karen (Airdrie and Shotts) (Lab)
 Whitton, David (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (Lab)

AGAINST

Adam, Brian (Aberdeen North) (SNP)
 Ahmad, Bashir (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Aitken, Bill (Glasgow) (Con)
 Allan, Alasdair (Western Isles) (SNP)
 Brocklebank, Ted (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Brown, Gavin (Lothians) (Con)
 Brown, Keith (Ochil) (SNP)
 Brownlee, Derek (South of Scotland) (Con)
 Campbell, Aileen (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Carlaw, Jackson (West of Scotland) (Con)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP)
 Constance, Angela (Livingston) (SNP)
 Crawford, Bruce (Stirling) (SNP)
 Cunningham, Roseanna (Perth) (SNP)
 Don, Nigel (North East Scotland) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness East, Nairn and Lochaber) (SNP)
 Fabiani, Linda (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee West) (SNP)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Gibson, Rob (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Goldie, Annabel (West of Scotland) (Con)
 Grahame, Christine (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Harvie, Christopher (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP)

Hepburn, Jamie (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Lothians) (SNP)
 Ingram, Adam (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Johnstone, Alex (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Lamont, John (Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 MacAskill, Kenny (Edinburgh East and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 MacDonald, Margo (Lothians) (Ind)
 Marwick, Tricia (Central Fife) (SNP)
 Mather, Jim (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 Maxwell, Stewart (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 McGrigor, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 McKee, Ian (Lothians) (SNP)
 McKelvie, Christina (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 McLetchie, David (Edinburgh Pentlands) (Con)
 McMillan, Stuart (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 Milne, Nanette (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Mitchell, Margaret (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Morgan, Alasdair (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Neil, Alex (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Paterson, Gil (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee East) (SNP)
 Russell, Michael (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Salmond, Alex (Gordon) (SNP)
 Scanlon, Mary (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Scott, John (Ayr) (Con)
 Smith, Elizabeth (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Lothians) (SNP)
 Stevenson, Stewart (Banff and Buchan) (SNP)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Govan) (SNP)
 Swinney, John (North Tayside) (SNP)
 Thompson, Dave (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Watt, Maureen (North East Scotland) (SNP)
 Welsh, Andrew (Angus) (SNP)
 White, Sandra (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Wilson, Bill (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 Wilson, John (Central Scotland) (SNP)

ABSTENTIONS

Brown, Robert (Glasgow) (LD)
 Finnie, Ross (West of Scotland) (LD)
 Hume, Jim (South of Scotland) (LD)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney) (LD)
 McInnes, Alison (North East Scotland) (LD)
 Munro, John Farquhar (Ross, Skye and Inverness West) (LD)
 O'Donnell, Hugh (Central Scotland) (LD)
 Pringle, Mike (Edinburgh South) (LD)
 Purvis, Jeremy (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD)
 Rumbles, Mike (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (LD)
 Scott, Tavish (Shetland) (LD)
 Smith, Iain (North East Fife) (LD)
 Smith, Margaret (Edinburgh West) (LD)
 Stephen, Nicol (Aberdeen South) (LD)
 Stone, Jamie (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD)
 Tolson, Jim (Dunfermline West) (LD)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 43, Against 64, Abstentions 16.

Amendment disagreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that amendment S3M-3214.1, in the name of Derek Brownlee, which seeks to amend motion S3M-3214, in the name of John Swinney, on the Forth crossing, be agreed to.

Amendment agreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that amendment S3M-3214.4, in the name of Jeremy Purvis, which seeks to amend motion S3M-3214, in the name of John Swinney, on the Forth crossing, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

FOR

Alexander, Ms Wendy (Paisley North) (Lab)
 Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Baker, Richard (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Edinburgh Central) (Lab)
 Brankin, Rhona (Midlothian) (Lab)
 Brown, Robert (Glasgow) (LD)
 Butler, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (Lab)
 Chisholm, Malcolm (Edinburgh North and Leith) (Lab)
 Curran, Margaret (Glasgow Baillieston) (Lab)
 Eadie, Helen (Dunfermline East) (Lab)
 Ferguson, Patricia (Glasgow Maryhill) (Lab)
 Finnie, Ross (West of Scotland) (LD)
 Foulkes, George (Lothians) (Lab)
 Glen, Marlyn (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Godman, Trish (West Renfrewshire) (Lab)
 Gordon, Charlie (Glasgow Cathcart) (Lab)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Gray, Iain (East Lothian) (Lab)
 Henry, Hugh (Paisley South) (Lab)
 Hume, Jim (South of Scotland) (LD)
 Jamieson, Cathy (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (Lab)
 Kelly, James (Glasgow Rutherglen) (Lab)
 Kerr, Andy (East Kilbride) (Lab)
 Lamont, Johann (Glasgow Pollok) (Lab)
 Livingstone, Marilyn (Kirkcaldy) (Lab)
 Macdonald, Lewis (Aberdeen Central) (Lab)
 Macintosh, Ken (Eastwood) (Lab)
 Martin, Paul (Glasgow Springburn) (Lab)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney) (LD)
 McAveety, Mr Frank (Glasgow Shettleston) (Lab)
 McCabe, Tom (Hamilton South) (Lab)
 McConnell, Jack (Motherwell and Wishaw) (Lab)
 McInnes, Alison (North East Scotland) (LD)
 McMahon, Michael (Hamilton North and Bellshill) (Lab)
 McNeil, Duncan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (Lab)
 McNulty, Des (Clydebank and Milngavie) (Lab)
 Munro, John Farquhar (Ross, Skye and Inverness West) (LD)
 Murray, Elaine (Dumfries) (Lab)
 O'Donnell, Hugh (Central Scotland) (LD)
 Oldfather, Irene (Cunninghame South) (Lab)
 Park, John (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Peacock, Peter (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Peattie, Cathy (Falkirk East) (Lab)
 Pringle, Mike (Edinburgh South) (LD)
 Purvis, Jeremy (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD)
 Rumbles, Mike (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (LD)
 Scott, Tavish (Shetland) (LD)
 Simpson, Dr Richard (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Smith, Iain (North East Fife) (LD)
 Smith, Margaret (Edinburgh West) (LD)
 Stephen, Nicol (Aberdeen South) (LD)
 Stewart, David (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Stone, Jamie (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD)
 Tolson, Jim (Dunfermline West) (LD)
 Whitefield, Karen (Airdrie and Shotts) (Lab)
 Whitton, David (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (Lab)

AGAINST

Adam, Brian (Aberdeen North) (SNP)
 Ahmad, Bashir (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Aitken, Bill (Glasgow) (Con)
 Allan, Alasdair (Western Isles) (SNP)
 Brocklebank, Ted (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Brown, Gavin (Lothians) (Con)
 Brown, Keith (Ochil) (SNP)
 Brownlee, Derek (South of Scotland) (Con)
 Campbell, Aileen (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Carlaw, Jackson (West of Scotland) (Con)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP)
 Constance, Angela (Livingston) (SNP)
 Crawford, Bruce (Stirling) (SNP)
 Cunningham, Roseanna (Perth) (SNP)
 Don, Nigel (North East Scotland) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness East, Nairn and Lochaber) (SNP)
 Fabiani, Linda (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee West) (SNP)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Gibson, Rob (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Goldie, Annabel (West of Scotland) (Con)
 Grahame, Christine (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Harper, Robin (Lothians) (Green)
 Harvie, Christopher (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Lothians) (SNP)
 Ingram, Adam (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Johnstone, Alex (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Lamont, John (Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 MacAskill, Kenny (Edinburgh East and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 MacDonald, Margo (Lothians) (Ind)
 Marwick, Tricia (Central Fife) (SNP)
 Mather, Jim (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 Maxwell, Stewart (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 McGrigor, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 McKee, Ian (Lothians) (SNP)
 McKelvie, Christina (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 McLetchie, David (Edinburgh Pentlands) (Con)
 McMillan, Stuart (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 Milne, Nanette (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Mitchell, Margaret (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Morgan, Alasdair (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Neil, Alex (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Paterson, Gil (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee East) (SNP)
 Russell, Michael (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Salmond, Alex (Gordon) (SNP)
 Scanlon, Mary (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Scott, John (Ayr) (Con)
 Smith, Elizabeth (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Lothians) (SNP)
 Stevenson, Stewart (Banff and Buchan) (SNP)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Govan) (SNP)
 Swinney, John (North Tayside) (SNP)
 Thompson, Dave (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Watt, Maureen (North East Scotland) (SNP)
 Welsh, Andrew (Angus) (SNP)
 White, Sandra (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Wilson, Bill (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 Wilson, John (Central Scotland) (SNP)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 57, Against 66, Abstentions 0.

Amendment disagreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The final question is, that motion S3M-3214, in the name of John Swinney, on the Forth crossing, as amended, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

FOR

Adam, Brian (Aberdeen North) (SNP)
 Ahmad, Bashir (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Aitken, Bill (Glasgow) (Con)
 Alexander, Ms Wendy (Paisley North) (Lab)
 Allan, Alasdair (Western Isles) (SNP)
 Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Baker, Richard (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Edinburgh Central) (Lab)
 Brankin, Rhona (Midlothian) (Lab)
 Brocklebank, Ted (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Brown, Gavin (Lothians) (Con)
 Brown, Keith (Ochil) (SNP)
 Brown, Robert (Glasgow) (LD)
 Brownlee, Derek (South of Scotland) (Con)
 Butler, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (Lab)
 Campbell, Aileen (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Carlaw, Jackson (West of Scotland) (Con)
 Chisholm, Malcolm (Edinburgh North and Leith) (Lab)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP)
 Constance, Angela (Livingston) (SNP)
 Crawford, Bruce (Stirling) (SNP)
 Cunningham, Roseanna (Perth) (SNP)
 Curran, Margaret (Glasgow Baillieston) (Lab)
 Don, Nigel (North East Scotland) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Eadie, Helen (Dunfermline East) (Lab)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness East, Nairn and Lochaber) (SNP)
 Fabiani, Linda (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Ferguson, Patricia (Glasgow Maryhill) (Lab)
 Finnie, Ross (West of Scotland) (LD)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee West) (SNP)
 Foulkes, George (Lothians) (Lab)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Gibson, Rob (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Glen, Marlyn (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Godman, Trish (West Renfrewshire) (Lab)
 Goldie, Annabel (West of Scotland) (Con)
 Gordon, Charlie (Glasgow Cathcart) (Lab)
 Grahame, Christine (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Gray, Iain (East Lothian) (Lab)
 Harvie, Christopher (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP)
 Henry, Hugh (Paisley South) (Lab)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Hume, Jim (South of Scotland) (LD)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Lothians) (SNP)
 Ingram, Adam (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Jamieson, Cathy (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (Lab)
 Johnstone, Alex (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Kelly, James (Glasgow Rutherglen) (Lab)
 Kerr, Andy (East Kilbride) (Lab)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Lamont, Johann (Glasgow Pollok) (Lab)
 Lamont, John (Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 Livingstone, Marilyn (Kirkcaldy) (Lab)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 MacAskill, Kenny (Edinburgh East and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Macdonald, Lewis (Aberdeen Central) (Lab)
 MacDonald, Margo (Lothians) (Ind)

Macintosh, Ken (Eastwood) (Lab)
 Martin, Paul (Glasgow Springburn) (Lab)
 Marwick, Tricia (Central Fife) (SNP)
 Mather, Jim (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 Maxwell, Stewart (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney) (LD)
 McAveety, Mr Frank (Glasgow Shettleston) (Lab)
 McCabe, Tom (Hamilton South) (Lab)
 McConnell, Jack (Motherwell and Wishaw) (Lab)
 McGrigor, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 McInnes, Alison (North East Scotland) (LD)
 McKee, Ian (Lothians) (SNP)
 McKelvie, Christina (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 McLetchie, David (Edinburgh Pentlands) (Con)
 McMahon, Michael (Hamilton North and Bellshill) (Lab)
 McMillan, Stuart (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 McNeil, Duncan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (Lab)
 McNulty, Des (Clydebank and Milngavie) (Lab)
 Milne, Nanette (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Mitchell, Margaret (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Morgan, Alasdair (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Munro, John Farquhar (Ross, Skye and Inverness West) (LD)
 Murray, Elaine (Dumfries) (Lab)
 Neil, Alex (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 O'Donnell, Hugh (Central Scotland) (LD)
 Oldfather, Irene (Cunninghame South) (Lab)
 Park, John (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Paterson, Gil (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 Peacock, Peter (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Peattie, Cathy (Falkirk East) (Lab)
 Pringle, Mike (Edinburgh South) (LD)
 Purvis, Jeremy (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee East) (SNP)
 Rumbles, Mike (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (LD)
 Russell, Michael (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Salmond, Alex (Gordon) (SNP)
 Scanlon, Mary (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Scott, John (Ayr) (Con)
 Scott, Tavish (Shetland) (LD)
 Simpson, Dr Richard (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Smith, Elizabeth (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Smith, Iain (North East Fife) (LD)
 Smith, Margaret (Edinburgh West) (LD)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Lothians) (SNP)
 Stephen, Nicol (Aberdeen South) (LD)
 Stevenson, Stewart (Banff and Buchan) (SNP)
 Stewart, David (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Stone, Jamie (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Govan) (SNP)
 Swinney, John (North Tayside) (SNP)
 Thompson, Dave (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Tolson, Jim (Dunfermline West) (LD)
 Watt, Maureen (North East Scotland) (SNP)
 Welsh, Andrew (Angus) (SNP)
 White, Sandra (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Whitefield, Karen (Airdrie and Shotts) (Lab)
 Whitton, David (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (Lab)
 Wilson, Bill (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 Wilson, John (Central Scotland) (SNP)

AGAINST

Harper, Robin (Lothians) (Green)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 121, Against 2, Abstentions 0.

Motion, as amended, agreed to.

Resolved,

That the Parliament notes the Scottish Government's choice of conventional capital funding for construction of the Forth Replacement Crossing and welcomes the fact that Scotland's biggest infrastructure project for a generation will be delivered without the need for tolls, and calls on the Scottish and UK governments to work together to ensure that the new crossing is delivered at the earliest possible opportunity.

Bull Hire Scheme

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Trish Godman): The final item of business is a members' business debate on motion S3M-2932, in the name of Jamie McGrigor, on the future of the bull hire scheme. The debate will be concluded without any question being put.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament notes the proposals to abolish the current Bull Hire Scheme for crofters; is aware of genuinely felt concerns among crofters over this proposal and the potentially more costly and inconvenient options that might replace the scheme; believes that the current Bull Hire Scheme has widespread support within the crofting sector and has played an extremely important part in maintaining the quality of cattle stock in the crofting counties, and further believes that some form of bull hire scheme is in the best interests of crofters and stock quality in the crofting counties.

17:06

Jamie McGrigor (Highlands and Islands) (Con): Little did I think, in 2004, when I secured a debate on a similar motion, that I would be required to seek another debate on the subject less than five years later. I thank members of all parties for supporting my motion on a scheme that virtually all of us still know as the bull hire scheme, which has been around since 1897. Peter Peacock has lodged a similar, useful motion on the issue, which I have supported.

As I am a Highlands and Islands MSP, it is my job to speak out about the concerns of my constituents, so I make no apology for seeking a debate on an issue that is legitimately of great concern to many hundreds of my crofting constituents. A crucial point that I want to emphasise to the minister is that the current bull hire scheme has helped greatly to maintain stock quality and health in the Highlands and Islands.

The debate is not just about animals; it is about helping people to stay in remote areas. The former chairman of the Scottish Crofting Foundation, Norman Leask, who comes from Shetland, impressed that point on me, and Jim Lugton from the Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations said that a lack of quality improvement would lead to a fall in numbers, which would result in a smaller gene pool and a drop in future quality.

The future of crofting depends on having the best possible produce for the marketplace. Rather than diminish that aim, the Government should do all in its power to support it. Many crofters say that sheep quality has suffered since the tup hire scheme came to an end. We cannot allow that experience to be repeated in the beef sector, especially when the reports of the Scottish Agricultural College and the Royal Society of

Edinburgh both highlight the worrying decline in stock numbers. Why does the Government want to withdraw a proven and successful scheme?

The scheme does not benefit crofters alone. Many of the female calves of well-bred bulls in crofting communities go on to supplement the breeding herds of farmers across Scotland, thus ensuring quality from a clean, disease-free source. Many arable farmers fatten the crofters' bullock calves. Cattle enhance the rural habitat and environment and enable crofters to enter environmental schemes to maximise income; under the less favoured areas scheme, mixed livestock units are favoured.

Ministers seem to think that some sort of private hire scheme will replace the current scheme, but my crofting constituents are certainly not convinced and have legitimate fears about the future, which I share. As the Lewis and Harris cattle producers group has pointed out, there is no feasible private hire provision for Lewis and Harris. The alternative, which would result in crofters having to buy bulls and to provide winter housing facilities for them, is cost prohibitive for most crofters, even with the grants that may or may not be forthcoming through the highly competitive Scottish rural development programme.

The Lewis and Harris group suggests that a typical 30ft by 40ft shed would cost about £25,000 without pens. The cost of buying bedding and feed to winter bulls on Lewis and Harris is at least 25 per cent higher than it is in Inverness. Does the minister know how much bales of straw and hay cost on Lewis and Harris? A bale of straw costs £25 and a bale of hay costs £35.

Ministers seem to use two reasons—jointly or singly, depending on the spokesman—for justifying their plan to abolish the scheme: its cost and its legality under European Union rules. I would like briefly to deal with those two points, and I hope that other members will expand on them.

The 2007-08 annual report of the Crofters Commission shows an overall loss for the scheme of £140,000. That is £100,000 less than the loss in 2006-07, and it was achieved through increased receipts and lower running costs. Many crofters have suggested to me that receipts could have been even greater if more flexibility had been allowed in relation to the timescale for crofters applying to the scheme.

The scheme makes a small loss each year, but I ask the minister to tell us what percentage of overall support to the crofting sector it amounts to. Would not most sensible people think that it is a small price worth paying to ensure that healthy and quality cattle thrive throughout the Highlands and Islands? I would be amazed if the minister can guarantee that his alternatives will not

inconvenience crofters, and that they will cost the taxpayer less.

The Crofters Commission's website makes it clear that the scheme is permissible under de minimus state aid. What has changed? Has the legal advice that was given to the previous Scottish Executive, which specifically said that the scheme could continue perfectly well under those rules, suddenly altered? If so, will the minister publish it? I asked my colleague Struan Stevenson MEP about it. He was very clear: in that regard, nothing has changed since 2004.

I ask the minister whether he agrees with this quotation from a previous debate on the matter:

"In similar situations, other Governments, such as those in Ireland or France, would fight tooth and nail for their producers, especially when the case is there to be made."—[*Official Report*, 19 May 2004; c 8572.]

Those are not my words, but the words of Mr Russell's now fellow minister, Argyll and Bute MSP Jim Mather, in the 2004 debate. Mr Mather also argued that the treaty of Rome allowed the scheme to continue, as it promoted the economic development of the Highlands and Islands.

Surely what was good enough for the Lib-Lab goose in 2004 is just as good for the Scottish National Party gander now. Speaking of geese, it is considered worth while—rightly—to spend many hundreds of thousands of pounds on a goose project, so surely £140,000 on improving bulls is money well spent.

Mr Mather made a key point in 2004: the issue is about fighting for our producers, as every other country in Europe does. There is a strong case to be made for that. The minister has a reputation for being clever, which I agree with, and politics is the art of the possible. It cannot be beyond his and his officials' abilities to come up with some form of continued centrally run bull hire scheme that meets any EU objections—assuming any exist—maintains stock quality and retains the support of the vast majority of crofters, the Scottish Crofting Foundation and environmental organisations such as the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds. If the minister is not able to do that, many of my constituents will, I fear, continue to suspect that some ulterior motive is involved, perhaps to do with how much money might be released from the sale of the two remaining stud farms.

I look forward to the minister's response to this important debate. I am sure that he will know that this is the Chinese year of the ox; it should also be the Scottish year of the bull. The eyes of crofters from Argyll to Wester Ross and from the Western Isles to Shetland are on him now, and I ask him not to let them down.

17:13

Alasdair Allan (Western Isles) (SNP): I congratulate Jamie McGrigor on lodging his motion. As members know, crofting is the most marginal of all marginal agricultural activities, to the point where I have seen puzzled looks when it is explained to people from outside the crofting counties what crofting actually involves and how little financial return can be expected from it. The future of livestock in the crofting counties is, as Jamie McGrigor said, crucial to those communities. Lamb prices are often prone to collapse, so the future of cattle is particularly vital if we are to attract new entrants to crofting.

I have made representations to ministers, asking them to consider the retention of the bull hire scheme in its present form, but I recognise that we should start from our current position. The challenge now is different: it is to ensure that whatever replaces the old scheme meets crofters' needs.

I welcome the reassurances that the Government has already been able to give: that there will be Government assistance to meet the needs of communities that require to keep a bull; that the Government will be sympathetic to providing the buildings and overwintering costs for that to be achieved; and that the existing stock in Inverness might be disposed of at minimal cost. The question is how we can ensure that all those positive ends are met. This evening's debate provides a useful opportunity to consider that. Crofters who used the old scheme are keen to engage constructively.

One thing is certain: it is beyond the powers of most crofting townships to keep a bull. In addition to the scale of the financial undertaking, there is the risk. People face the prospect of going all the way to a mart in Perth and, on the basis of a few seconds' inspection, making a judgment that will determine the stock quality of future generations of cattle. There are also practical questions. Where would the bull be overwintered? Who would maintain the buildings? In these days when crofters have other jobs, who would tend to the animal during the day?

We must also consider—shall I put it this way?—the importance of maintaining harmony within crofting communities. I know that the minister understands what is involved in a crofting dispute. I have examples in my live constituency files that have their origins in the 1920s. For that reason, we should, if possible, avoid any situation that leads to debates within townships about which croft should have the bull when.

There is little to be gained if we do not turn our attention to positive solutions. There is no doubt in my mind that those solutions, albeit that they might

not involve a centralised stud in Inverness, will have to involve units bigger than individual townships. That means that we will need a continuing Government involvement in some shape or form, if only to allow bigger local units to build up the infrastructure that is needed to find such solutions. In the islands, because of the lack of any viable commercial alternative, there must be continuing Government involvement in the provision of advice on and assistance with the keeping of bulls.

When I met local crofters to discuss the matter, they raised various questions, including how we can ensure that the state aid rules do not hinder Government assistance and how we can ensure that the resources that the Government allocates to the provision of bulls through the SRDP are, to use an appropriate phrase, ring fenced. If the minister addresses those questions tonight, he will bring us much closer to the solution that we all seek. He will also go a long way to reassure the crofting community and ensure that it remains viable to keep cattle in our most fragile communities.

17:17

Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab): I, too, congratulate Jamie McGrigor on securing this important debate.

The bull hire scheme ensures that there is cattle production in the crofting counties, but one of its other main benefits is that it improves herd quality and health. The Crofters Commission buys good-quality bulls and ensures that they are of HI Health status. To maintain that status, the animals need regular health checks. The standards ensure that a premium is achieved when the calves are sold. Crofters who buy their own bulls cannot afford the checks that are required to maintain HI Health status, so those who remain in cattle production will not achieve the same price for their stock and will have a much greater financial outlay.

The Minister for Environment has said that crofters will receive bulls free at the end of the scheme, but it is unlikely that HI Health status will be maintained from that point on, due to the cost. That will lead to an immediate economic impact, and in addition the cost of buying a replacement bull will have to be met in three years' time. Based on this year's prices for bulls, the cost could be £3,000 to £4,000.

The Crofters Commission guarantees a replacement bull if there is a problem with the original one. If the crofter owns their own bull, there is no back-up and their whole breeding system could be lost. By the time they realise that there is a problem, it will be impossible to buy or rent a replacement.

The Crofters Commission changes the bull that is provided to each crofter every three years, thereby avoiding genetic problems. Crofters who own their bull but cannot afford to replace it every three years will encounter genetic problems due to interbreeding. That will be detrimental to the entire cattle breeding industry in the crofting counties because inconsistent quality reflects not just on the individual crofter but on the whole industry.

There are also health and safety issues and concerns about the cost of safe transportation. There are problems throughout the crofting counties with the initial transportation of new bulls, but they are magnified hugely in the case of the islands. Sometimes, several ferry journeys are required in vehicles that are not suitable for the purpose. There are also overwintering costs to consider where the land and facilities are not suitable for the keeping of a bull. When a crofter wants to keep a bull locally, they will need to build new facilities and pay for winter feed, as Jamie McGrigor pointed out.

Bulls are dangerous animals and need to be housed and handled properly. Failure to do that raises animal welfare concerns. Those are real issues that are pertinent to the debate. Unfortunately, I do not have time to go into them in detail, but I hope that the minister examined them carefully before he made his decision.

The bull hire scheme is an example of good practical help that can sustain farm enterprises in our most remote and rural areas. The cost of the scheme is the same everywhere—in Shetland or in the inner Moray Firth. It breaks down geographical barriers and provides a level playing field. I fear that without it we will see a rapid decline in cattle numbers and further economic and environmental damage. The affected communities are interdependent, and the policy has the potential to have a serious knock-on effect on their sustainability. I make a plea to the minister to listen to the real concerns that have been expressed and to reconsider his decision.

17:21

Rob Gibson (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): I, too, am a veteran of the previous debate on the issue in 2004. I am sorry that in 2009 we have not solved the problem; indeed, the costs of the bull hire scheme have dropped since 2004, because the scheme has been used by fewer people. The uncertainty that has been created in the past four and half years is unfortunate. As a member of the Scottish Crofting Foundation—I refer the chamber to my entry in the register of members' interests—I believe in the value of sustainable communities. As I said in 2004, Government can achieve such communities if it manages to find a way through

the maze that is thrown up by the way in which state aids kick in.

In 2004, Allan Wilson, the Deputy Minister for Environment and Rural Development, stated:

"The trading accounts are available for everyone to see and for the EC state-aid units to inspect. It is what they think that matters. DEFRA's legal advice in this respect is categorical—as is our own. As a result, we will move forward in the way that we said we would."—[*Official Report*, 19 May 2004; c 8580.]

The legal advice to the Scottish Executive at that time was that state aid rules kicked in, so the scheme had to be changed.

The Scottish Government has inherited a tighter financial situation and a drop in the number of people who are keeping cattle. According to Allan Wilson, the scheme cost about £600,000 a year, but Mike Russell estimates that, in its present form, it costs between £300,000 and £400,000 a year.

The order of the day is that we must find means within the law of continuing and developing the scheme. I am interested in hearing how the Minister for Environment thinks that he can integrate such means into the package. I understand that it is possible to provide money for overwintering under the SRDP. I believe that the Government is considering providing further help on transport in the next spending round. That would be useful in respect of hired bulls, although obviously not those that have been bought.

The cost of modernised stud farms is an area of contention about which there have been various rumours. In 2004, there were rumours that ministers wanted to sell off the farms. Today, the minister should make a definitive statement on the issue in his response. The Cook report suggests that there are major problems with all the options that were considered in September last year. The report states:

"Among the stud options renovating and simplifying the existing site, or a new Greenfield stud farm, are the most financially attractive, but they rely on development land sales to become truly attractive."

That is okay if the money is available but, at a time when property sales are declining, it is a double bind to have to sell one bit of land to buy another. The report concludes:

"They have potentially serious market distorting effects which could threaten their State Aids position and close them down in future."

John Scott (Ayr) (Con): Does the member accept that the logic of his argument is that the existing site should be redeveloped if its development land value is non-existent?

Rob Gibson: I will finish on this point and let others take it on from there. If stud farm facilities

are renovated on the existing site and brought up to modern standards, the scheme could cost in the region of £290,000 a year to run after capital expenditure. That is why we need a new way of making progress.

17:25

Liam McArthur (Orkney) (LD): Like others, I too congratulate Jamie McGrigor on securing the debate. His motion, on which he sought views from across the parties, reflects a measured and sensible response to the Government's insistence that the bull hire scheme be scrapped.

Of course, Mr McGrigor has previous in lodging motions on the bull hire scheme; members have referred to the similar debate in 2004. The issues with which the minister is now wrestling are not new, and I am sure that in his closing remarks he will remind us of that with his customary delicacy and diplomacy.

The 2004 debate is also a reminder of the voyage undertaken by the SNP from Opposition to Government. In that debate, SNP speakers showed little of Mr Russell's trademark diplomacy. I am aware of the dangers of attempting to quote the current Minister for Enterprise, Energy and Tourism, but Mr Mather opined in 2004:

"Given the popularity of the scheme and its undoubted effectiveness, it is hard to understand how downgrading a livestock quality improvement scheme conforms with common agricultural policy reform, which emphasises the need to improve farm product quality."—[*Official Report*, 19 May 2004; c 8571.]

What Mr Mather lacks in pith, he makes up for in sincerity. His point was well made.

In the same debate in 2004, Fergus Ewing, who is now Mr Mather's ministerial colleague, quoted the then president of NFU Scotland, John Kinnaird, as saying that the changes to the bull hire scheme were "a draconian step". Mr Ewing went on to note, with obvious disdain:

"Mr Kinnaird is not a man given to hyperbole."—[*Official Report*, 19 May 2004; c 8564.]

That is not an accusation that could be levelled against the minister for first ministerial apologies and getting things resolved.

The Government's dilemma with the current bull hire scheme appears to be based on both cost and state aid rules. However, both the Scottish Crofting Foundation and NFUS have sought advice on state aid rules that would appear to call into question the assertions that the minister and his officials have made. NFUS has been in direct contact with European Commission officials. A detailed response is awaited, but Commission officials have made it clear that they see no inherent difficulty with a bull hire scheme.

In relation to cost, there appears to be scope for efficiencies. However, abandoning the scheme altogether would result in a reduction in livestock numbers, quality and health. The implications of that for those living in crofting counties are extremely serious. As both the SCF and NFUS make clear, smaller producers cannot afford the cost of quality bulls. Overwintering proves especially problematic, and the risk to smaller herds is acute. As most members and the mover of the motion would accept, some change from the status quo may be inevitable—and possibly even desirable—but complete abandonment should not be an option.

This morning, I spoke to a constituent of mine—Michael Cursiter of HI Health Ltd, which has offered to run a successor scheme. HI Health is a not-for-profit, farmer-led and health-accredited operation. That is encouraging, as it suggests that HI Health has the requisite expertise in managing stock and the requisite credibility within the agricultural community to make a success of a scheme.

Mr Cursiter says that, although subsidy would still be required, costs could be reduced. Purpose-built sheds—accessible by tractor and with bedded pens and bull-handling facilities—would obviously be required. That could allow the sale of the current prime site, but would require an alternative, relatively central site. I am told that Dingwall, whose mart is enjoying some success at present, might be a sensible option worth considering.

Retention of the bull hire scheme is not the sole answer to retaining livestock in our remote areas. However, its removal will certainly exacerbate the already serious decline. I hope that the proposals submitted on behalf of HI Health will be given full, urgent and constructive consideration by the minister and his officials.

The message from the chamber this evening has been clear. What the Government is proposing is wrong-headed and will be opposed strongly. However, there are options that the minister can take forward, and I urge him to do so.

17:29

Sarah Boyack (Edinburgh Central) (Lab): I, too, welcome the debate and congratulate Jamie McGrigor on his success in securing it. As he observed, he and Peter Peacock had complementary motions that we wanted to sign. We wanted a proper discussion in the chamber, and we wanted to show crofters that we were listening to their concerns and wanted to support them.

We have debated before the economic benefits of crofting and the need to consider crofting as a

way of life that is important to Scotland because it sustains the population in some of our most fragile rural communities. We have also discussed the importance of crofters' cattle in sustaining the quality of our environment, our unique wildlife and our landscapes. Powerful arguments for a bull hire scheme have been made by crofters, by RSPB Scotland and by NFUS—and they do not always argue the same position. For both those organisations to brief us in advance of tonight's debate and to come up with broadly the same proposals says a lot. I hope that the minister listens to them as they urge us to ensure that the scheme is saved.

Does the Government have a legitimate role in running a bull hire scheme? I believe absolutely that the answer is yes. It is a pragmatic and sensible solution to the genuine problems that crofters have of operating in marginal areas. As other members have said, the scheme has lasted for more than 100 years. Every Government since the turn of the previous century has concluded that it is a worthwhile role for it to take on. If government is about anything, it is about achieving collectively what we cannot achieve individually, and there could be no better example of that. I would be interested to hear, in the minister's concluding remarks, whether he agrees that it is a legitimate role for the Government.

Even if the minister argues that that is not a legitimate role for the Government, he cannot simply wash his hands and walk away from the current arrangements. It is up to him to find an alternative collective arrangement. For the Scottish Government to abandon the scheme would be for it to say that market forces should prevail, although the evidence shows that they simply cannot for our most remote crofters and those in rural areas where there are no economies of scale.

The minister's stated objective is to see cattle numbers maintained in hill and island areas. We agree completely with that objective. Sadly, we are currently seeing a decline in those numbers, and ending the scheme could only speed up that decline. It may even mean the end of cattle breeding on some of our islands. I listened carefully to the comments of Alasdair Allan, who had some important points to make in the debate.

There would be negative wider economic effects, but ending the scheme would also have environmental effects. That is why RSPB Scotland gave us such a strong briefing before the debate. We often take the landscape of our crofting communities for granted, but it is the result of many years of stewardship and extensively based farming and crofting in areas that are hard to farm. There are difficult weather and soil conditions to deal with and none of the economies of scale that

many of our other farming communities are able to deliver. Let us not make things harder for our rural and crofting communities.

The minister has previously cited the Shucksmith report and its recommendation as his reason for acting. However, Shucksmith made his recommendations before the Cook report revealed that the alternative of a decentralised scheme would be more expensive and that private hire would be unlikely to work because there is no private market. That is particularly an issue in our island communities. If anything, the evidence is that the number of private hires is declining for health reasons. The minister did not accept other Shucksmith recommendations; he does not have to accept that one.

I hope that the minister will listen to the good arguments that have been put in the chamber and outside it, as the previous minister did when we debated the issue four years ago. I urge the minister not to proceed with his plans and to acknowledge the importance of retaining cattle numbers to the protection of some of our most important rural landscapes and wildlife. I urge a rethink. He should look at the current scheme, survey cattle numbers and consider the potential environmental impact before acting. He should listen to the suggestions of crofters, RSPB Scotland and NFUS. Our crofting communities need certainty, confidence and our support—they do not need to be fobbed off to the SRDP, in which we know that they have no confidence.

17:33

John Scott (Ayr) (Con): I declare an interest as a farmer and member of NFUS, although I have not benefited from the bull hire scheme. I, too, congratulate Jamie McGrigor on securing his second debate on the retention of the bull hire scheme.

In our previous debate on the bull hire scheme, almost every member who spoke noted that the scheme played an important role in improving the quality of livestock and in supporting the viability of crofting in the Highlands and Islands. Fergus Ewing hoped that there would be cross-party support for Mr McGrigor's message, which he endorsed. In support of Mr McGrigor's motion, Roseanna Cunningham urged the minister to

"listen to the people whose livelihoods and very way of life will be seriously and negatively affected by the proposed changes."—[*Official Report*, 19 May 2004; c 8567.]

Rob Gibson and Jim Mather both offered their support. Jamie McGrigor and Liam McArthur have already alluded to Mr Mather's previous enthusiasm for the scheme. They were right then, and if they were offering the same support tonight they would be right now. Sadly, only Rob Gibson

is in the chamber, and I have to say that I was disappointed by his remarks and change of tone.

The bull hire scheme is vital for a number of reasons. First, as Rhoda Grant noted, it aids the improvement of store and breeding cattle in the Highlands and Islands. Store and breeding cattle off the superior sires that are available under the scheme fetch higher prices for producers, and the price differential between good and poor-quality stock might mean the difference between profit and loss for and the viability and non-viability of small farming and crofting enterprises.

In environmental terms, keeping cattle on the hills and uplands significantly supports biodiversity in general and upland bird life in particular. In that respect, I note the RSPB's well founded concern about the loss of the bull hire scheme and the danger that it will lead to further destocking in those areas.

However, the concerns that have been expressed by the RSPB and me relate to more than the bull hire scheme. Not for nothing are these remote areas of Scotland designated by Europe as fragile areas. Peripherality, high rainfall levels, distance from markets and cost of production make it harder to produce food there than elsewhere in Scotland, the rest of the United Kingdom and Europe. At stake is the viability of communities that produce food and support the environment and biodiversity.

For me, the food production aspect of farming and crofting in the Highlands and Islands is most important. As far as food production, food security and self-sufficiency are concerned, we must stop the exodus of farmers and crofters, their families and their animals from large parts of rural Scotland. In the past year alone, we have lost thousands of cattle and tens of thousands of sheep from Scotland's fragile food-producing areas. We have all seen the Royal Society of Edinburgh's report on the future of Scotland's hills and islands and the Scottish Agricultural College's report "Farming's Retreat from the Hills", and we in the Parliament must take action now to stop this dangerous loss of food-producing capability.

That is why the scheme is, in a way, iconic. Keeping it would send out the message that our Government cares about people, food production and food security. Although the alternative of allowing the scheme to end will not stop beef production in these remote and fragile areas, it will be another nail in the coffin of quality food production in them.

Today, the minister must either reverse his decision to scrap the bull hire scheme or at least put something similar in its place. Although delivering the scheme costs buttons in terms of the overall Scottish Government budget, it is a

symbol of the Government's commitment to the continuation of food production and environmental enhancement in the north and west of Scotland and elsewhere.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Given the number of members who wish to speak, I am minded to accept a motion under rule 8.14.3 that the debate be extended by up to 30 minutes.

Motion moved,

That, under Rule 8.14.3, the debate be extended by up to 30 minutes.—[*Jamie McGrigor.*]

Motion agreed to.

17:38

Dave Thompson (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): I, too, congratulate Jamie McGrigor on securing this important debate.

There is no doubt that the bull hire scheme has had a positive effect on the maintenance of cattle quality and numbers, provided environmental and agricultural benefits, and, over the past 100 years, encouraged local economic activity. Those points are not contested. The scheme's demise has caused serious concern, which I am sure the minister will address. However, the fact is that the scheme is neither economically viable nor allowable under state aid rules. The important point is to implement its replacement as soon as possible. The Shucksmith report said that there was no justification for the scheme's continued existence, and the SAC found it poor value for money, even in terms of genetic improvements to crofters' cattle. Moreover, to comply with state aid rules, the charge for hiring a single bull would have to be increased 150 per cent, from £500 to £1,250.

Jamie McGrigor: The member said that the scheme was no longer viable, but it has always been subsidised and has always been part of the subsidy to crofters. Why should things be so different now?

Dave Thompson: The scheme is not viable. I am going to talk about that.

As I said, to comply with state aid rules, the charge for hiring a single bull would have to be increased by 150 per cent, from £500 to £1,250, which is beyond the means of crofters and would make the scheme financially unviable for them and the Government. Indeed, the Cook report suggested that

"only unsubsidised private hire, AI and/or away-wintering are fully State Aid compliant."

Some people say, incorrectly, that the Scottish Government has totally underestimated the importance of the bull hire scheme, and claim that it is determined to undermine it. Coincidentally,

they are the same people who began the review of the scheme under the previous Administration and oversaw its rundown while in power. The SNP Government is producing a viable alternative that will meet crofters' needs while being economically justifiable. I look forward to hearing the minister's comments on that.

Of course the crofting community is right: cattle numbers must be maintained in the Highlands and Islands. It is true that agriculture in the Highlands and Islands needs access to good bulls. I back the NFUS vice-president Stewart Wood, who stated to the committee of inquiry on crofting on 3 April 2008:

"It is essential that crofting remains a vibrant and viable sector as it plays a very important part in Scottish agriculture and makes a large contribution in providing good quality breeding stock to the wider industry."

To that end, I am sure that the Scottish Government is determined to replace the old scheme with a modern solution that maintains the quality, health and sourcing of stock at a reasonable cost to the crofter and the Government. I am sure that the new scheme will bring benefits to the crofting community at large through overwintering and sourcing bulls as well as through mitigating the transport costs in remote areas to ensure that those areas are not disadvantaged.

It is obvious that the current scheme has become financially and economically impossible to maintain. Recently, only 430 crofters have utilised it. However, with those 430 crofters in mind, I urge the minister to ensure that the replacement scheme has the same health and quality standards and accessibility as the old scheme, and that, most important of all, it is operational by the time that the current scheme closes.

17:42

John Farquhar Munro (Ross, Skye and Inverness West) (LD): Like other members, I congratulate Jamie McGrigor on securing this debate. Like me, he is a poor crofter from the west of Scotland.

As many members have said, the Crofters Commission's bull hire scheme has made a tremendous contribution over many years to the improvement of crofting cattle quality throughout the Highlands and Islands. There is evidence of that.

I pay tribute to the late Alistair Coutts, who was the manager of the bull stud farm at Inverness. Sadly, he passed away last year. The current chief executive of the Crofters Commission, Nick Reiter, described his death as a great blow to crofting in light of his tremendous contribution over 20 years to improving cattle quality and crofters' knowledge

of and skills in professional animal husbandry. He did indeed make a great contribution. Nick Reiter said:

"Wherever you travel in the crofting counties, if you see a herd of fine quality cattle, I would wager that Alistair and his team would have played a major hand in making it so: that is as fine a legacy as anyone could wish for."

I thank Alistair for all his efforts.

The effort that has been made over many years to improve the quality of crofting cattle goes to the heart of the reason why the bull hire scheme is so important. As everybody knows, we live in a competitive market. Crofting counties cattle can remain competitive in the marketplace only by continuous efforts to improve them. If the bull hire scheme goes, it is likely that we will lose the improvements in cattle that have been worked for and gained over the past few years. We will lose the quality and health of the animals and we will lose our place in the market, which the crofting community has been very proud of, because it has been able to compete with the best of them over the years.

I understand the economic case for selling the 669 acres on the edge of Inverness where the bull stud was established. Despite the economic downturn, it must still be worth a great deal of money. I understand that one of the farms is earmarked to be the site of the new university of the Highlands and Islands campus. If the sell-off is inevitable, the proceeds must be kept in trust for future crofting projects, particularly the bull hire scheme.

The state aid rules were mentioned. In our previous debates, it was always suggested that the scheme was illegal under the current state aid rules. I do not think that that is correct: I understand that it has been determined that it is quite legal to run such a scheme. Perhaps the department wants to get rid of the responsibility. If so, any money gained from the sale of the properties should be directed towards establishing a private stud bull hire scheme, which might be better value for money.

17:46

Peter Peacock (Highlands and Islands) (Lab):

Like others, I welcome the fact that Jamie McGrigor has secured tonight's debate and I was happy to sign his motion. I was also happy to see that he signed my complementary motion.

There is widespread concern among crofters about the decision that the Government has taken. However, concern is widespread not just among crofters. As Sarah Boyack mentioned, RSPB Scotland has expressed real concern, as has the North West Cattle Producers Association. Buyers in the south are expressing concern about the

impact on them and the stock that they will be able to purchase. The NFUS briefing for tonight's debate is an excellent summary of all the scheme's benefits and makes an excellent case for keeping the scheme in some form.

The office in Inverness that Rhoda Grant, David Stewart and I use has received more than 400 contacts from crofters about the matter. They express genuine, not contrived, anxiety about the future. They are concerned about the potential end to cattle production on some of our islands and in some of our most remote communities. They are also concerned about the threat to the quality of stock, and to the health of cattle; that brings a threat to the reputation of Highland stock, and with that comes a threat to the price. That is all hugely important to crofters. There is also a threat to habitats in which cattle have a helping role. In that regard, closing the scheme goes against the Government's objectives on the matters that I have mentioned. As others have said, the scheme is pragmatic and practical, which is why it has lasted for more than 100 years.

I note that state aids have crept into the argument in recent times, although the minister did not mention state aid rules as a reason for ending the scheme when he made his announcement last October. I have been exploring this matter, using the Scottish Parliament information centre to help, and I can find no reason not to continue under the current de minimis limits. Recent currency fluctuations support that argument and make it more certain that the scheme would meet the de minimis limits. That conclusion is supported by the views of NFUS, which has researched the matter, and those of the Scottish Crofting Foundation. If the minister has reasons for arguing that the scheme does not qualify under the de minimis limits, will he please set them out in great detail so that we can scrutinise them adequately?

Even if there are challenges in the future, or if the scheme were ever to get above de minimis under EU rules, surely it would be worth negotiating with the EU in an attempt to find an accommodation that would allow the scheme to continue. I have no doubt that the EU is not out to get the west Highlands of Scotland, which will be affected most, although many other parts of the Highlands and Islands will be affected too. The EU is not made up of unreasonable people, despite what the popular press write about it, and there is a case to be made to keep this excellent scheme. Jim Mather and Fergus Ewing made those points only a few years ago.

Dave Thompson referred to the costs of the scheme, as did the minister in his October statement and subsequent press comments. The costs that Dave Thompson quoted include assumptions about investments, but we should be

clear that those investments have not been made. There is therefore no major cost difference between the year that we have just entered and the previous year, or indeed next year, if current projections are carried forward. Possible changes to capital charges covering accounting rules for Government might make the scheme even more secure as a proposition.

Since the costs were published, the Cook report has shown that, whatever the costs of the current bull hire scheme, the alternatives are either more expensive or problematic. The decentralised scheme that Shucksmith wanted would be much more expensive. Private hire arrangements, which are part of the minister's solution, are not a runner because there is no real private market. Private hire people are getting out of the market because of health concerns. In a private market, there would be no guarantee that people could get a bull and there would be no guarantee of its health or quality. That is not a viable alternative.

As others have said, the bull hire scheme is a good scheme. Crofters are reasonable people who are very concerned about the decision. Their simple request to the Government is to reconsider and reverse the decision that it has taken.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Michael Russell. Minister, you have seven minutes.

17:50

The Minister for Environment (Michael Russell): I, too, congratulate Jamie McGrigor on securing tonight's debate. I was not present at the previous debate—I was detained elsewhere for a number of years so was unable to attend—but I am sure that that debate also exposed strongly held views and was thoughtful, as tonight's debate has been. Having read that debate, I do not think that it was quite as free of political invective as tonight's debate will be, because I will make a single political point—Liam McArthur anticipated it, so I shall make it—before addressing the substance of the debate.

The important political point that I will make at the beginning is this: whatever Government was in office at this time—whether it was this Government or that of our predecessors, who might have limped on—it would have reached this point. This point has perhaps been exacerbated and come a little sooner by the failure of our predecessors to invest in the scheme. Indeed, our predecessors negotiated the sale of one of the main farms. However, any Government would have got here for a range of reasons. I am glad to say that this Government is producing a range of new possibilities. Having shown the reasons why we have got here, I will go on to talk about the new possibilities that exist.

Not only one but two independent reports have questioned the benefits of the bull hire scheme. I am surprised that no one has mentioned the 2003 report—undertaken for a previous Government—in which the Scottish Agricultural College concluded that the scheme did not represent value for money in terms of genetic improvement of crofters' cattle.

Liam McArthur: Will the minister give way?

Michael Russell: No, I want to make a little progress. I know that the member will dispute the report.

That report was unequivocal in suggesting that the scheme did not do what members have claimed for it. That is not to say that the scheme did not do that in the past—John Farquhar Munro was absolutely right to pay tribute to the work of Alistair Coutts—but, by this decade, the scheme was not delivering those advantages.

Secondly, I specifically asked members of the Shucksmith inquiry to consider how the bull hire scheme should go forward. Without demur, they said that the scheme needs to be replaced. Therefore, the decision has not been a whim of this Government or of this minister but has been subject to consideration over a period of time. I believe that that consideration would have been reported in the same way to any other Government, which would have found itself in the same position.

I will take Liam McArthur's intervention.

Liam McArthur: Will the minister confirm that the SAC report was the same report that his ministerial colleague, Fergus Ewing, denounced as having an ulterior motive behind it?

Michael Russell: I cannot deny the truth, but I am not Fergus Ewing. I was not present at that debate. I regard that report as being part of the mosaic of evidence. Who knows what individuals will say in the heat of debate that might later be quoted against them? I am sure that even Mr McArthur will find himself in that position in future.

There are strong reasons why independent advisers have said that the scheme has come to the end of its useful life. Those assessments include problems that exist with state aid. I have not said—and do not say—that the scheme could not continue to run under state aid de minimis arrangements but, as I shall show in a moment, the risk that is run is becoming commensurately greater the more that the scheme costs in terms of individuals. That is a problem. However, the central problem is that a lot of money is being spent on very few people. Only 433 of the 13,000 crofters benefit from the scheme. That is low by anyone's reckoning.

We have not only independent advice that the scheme is not producing the right genetic results, but the Shucksmith committee's consideration of the scheme in the widest context. There is also the basic issue of affordability.

Jamie McGrigor *rose*—

Michael Russell: Let me first finish the point, Mr McGrigor.

In those circumstances, it is absolutely right for us to ask whether the scheme is the best way in which to spend public money. In September 2007, I raised the issue with the Scottish Crofting Foundation at its annual general meeting and asked it to consider the point. As a Government and a people, we spend something close to £43 million on crofting. It is entirely legitimate for us to do that—the spend is about £1,300 per man, woman and child—but we must constantly ask whether the money is targeted in the right way and whether it is producing the right result. Regrettably, in this case, it is not. However, there are alternatives.

Jamie McGrigor: The minister made the point that only 433 crofters benefited from the scheme. Does he accept that several thousand cows benefited?

Michael Russell: I am afraid that the productivity of individual bulls is a matter on which I am not nearly as well briefed as Mr McGrigor is. I take his word for it.

In 2004, when the cost per hire rose to £500, there was a decline in take-up. If the scheme were to continue into the future, the cost would have to rise to £1,250. That near 150 per cent increase in charges would result in yet lower take-up. There is no doubt that take-up is cost sensitive. In those circumstances, the economics and benefits of the scheme would no longer stack up. It does no service to either crofting or crofting interests in Scotland to deny that. The important thing is to find alternatives.

Rhoda Grant: Will the minister take an intervention?

Michael Russell: No. I want to make progress. Indeed, I need to; I have only two minutes remaining and I want to lay out some alternatives.

First, as we have said, stud farm bulls will be offered to ex-hire groups at a set cost. That will allow appropriate groups the opportunity to adjust to the ending of the hire scheme and to set up their own hire operations, should they wish to do so. Alasdair Allan pointed to the difficulties in doing that, but there are circumstances in which it will be appropriate.

We have made it clear that the crofting counties agricultural grant scheme can provide assistance

with building overwintering facilities and for the transportation costs that are involved in overwintering on the mainland. SRDP money will be made available for alternatives. Of course, there is always the alternative of artificial insemination.

I am pleased to say that I can add to the package. I want to ensure that crofters get independent advice. People fear that they do not know enough to be in this market. That is a problem. I encourage any organisation that has experience to come forward and make a proposal to offer targeted, individual advice to crofters on bull hire, the use of artificial insemination and other methods. I am certain that that could be assisted under the SRDP and in other ways. Indeed, I imagine that bodies such as the Scottish Agricultural College and possibly even the Scottish Crofting Foundation would find it useful to offer such services. Liam McArthur spoke of emerging alternatives. If people have a scheme that they want to bring about, I am happy to sit down with them and discuss the matter. All that I am saying is that the current scheme does not, cannot and will not work.

I have overrun my time, Presiding Officer, and I am aware that you are keen to conclude the debate. My final point is this: I want the resources that are tied up in the scheme to be liberated for the benefit of crofting. I have said a number of times that I want the benefit that will accrue from the sale of stud farms to be applied to crofting. I want to ensure that we take no money out of crofting.

I am repeating myself, but I say again: it does no benefit to crofting to carry on with things that do not work. We have to find things that work. That is what I am devoted to doing.

Meeting closed at 17:58.

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