

MEETING OF THE PARLIAMENT

Thursday 12 March 2009

Session 3

£5.00

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Produced and published in Scotland on behalf of the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body by RR
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Scottish Parliament

Thursday 12 March 2009

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

Aberdeen Crossrail

The Presiding Officer (Alex Fergusson): I was so overtaken by the atmosphere of mirth in the chamber this morning that I missed my footing.

The first item of business is a debate on motion S3M-3674, in the name of Alison McInnes, on Aberdeen crossrail.

09:15

Alison McInnes (North East Scotland) (LD): I was going to say that it is nice to come to the chamber in anticipation of some cross-party backing for my motion, but that was before I saw Alex Johnstone's amendment, which attempts to misrepresent my views.

Aberdeen crossrail should be supported by all members and, if prior form is anything to go by, it will be. I know that the Labour Party supports the scheme, as do the Greens. Indeed, even the Conservatives previously professed their support, although I confess that I am puzzled by Alex Johnstone's amendment, which seems more concerned with attempting to falsely attribute to me the position of the north east of Scotland transport partnership, under the chairmanship of Scottish National Party councillor Kevin Stewart, than with securing a positive outcome for the crossrail project. Under my chairmanship, Nestrans was ambitious. Sadly, the new chairman has allowed himself to be browbeaten by his political masters into accepting a consolation prize.

In addition to the support of those parties, I cannot help but hope that I will get at least two votes from the SNP benches. After all, Brian Adam was on the record throughout the previous parliamentary session as supporting Aberdeen crossrail, and rightly so, given the huge benefits that it will bring his constituents. If Mr Adam has recognised those benefits, one can only suppose that the First Minister has as well. If that is the case, the people of Gordon can surely rest safe in the knowledge that their local MSP is fully behind the crossrail scheme—or is that, perhaps, an assumption too far?

Since the SNP took office, its attitude towards crossrail has been that ignorance is bliss, but however much the Minister for Transport, Infrastructure and Climate Change is hoping to

divert attention with bluster, I tell him that, although he might have fooled the Conservatives, we, at least, are not going to overlook his inaction.

I think that my favourite line on the topic from the minister so far—to be honest, it is difficult to pick just one—came during a committee meeting last year, when he said:

“We have not been asked to support Aberdeen crossrail, as yet.”—[*Official Report, Transport, Infrastructure and Climate Change Committee*, 6 May 2008; c 637.]

I must admit that I have struggled to find a context in which the Government—I assume that the minister is not using the royal we just yet—has not been asked to support crossrail. I have asked it to support it. Mike Rumbles has asked. Richard Baker has asked. Nanette Milne has asked. Nestrans has asked. The people of Aberdeen and Aberdeenshire have asked. I am not sure exactly who the minister is waiting to hear from.

To be honest, I fail to see why the Minister needs the question to be asked in the first place. Are we to believe that a Scottish Government minister is unable to act on his own initiative? Can the Government take action only when someone else—a very specific someone, apparently—asks it to do so?

Mike Rumbles (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (LD): Civil servants, for example.

Alison McInnes: The case for Aberdeen crossrail is well documented and well supported, yet it was still omitted from the much-heralded strategic transport projects review with barely an explanation. Fuzzy plans for national timetable improvements are no substitute for a properly implemented, dedicated local service, nor are vague statements about exploring the possibility of new stations an adequate alternative for a truly improved local service.

The recently finalised Aberdeen city and shire structure plan serves as a vivid demonstration of the short-sightedness of excluding crossrail from the STPR. The plan identifies the region's key strategic growth areas, on which it is anticipated that 75 to 80 per cent of growth will be focused over the next 20 years and which are centred on the region's main public transport routes, including the proposed crossrail corridor. That means that, on the one hand, we have a 20-year period of focused growth and, on the other hand, a 20-year plan that contains no major local rail improvements. Even current projected passenger numbers more than support the case for crossrail. If we act now, we can ensure that properly implemented sustainable transport options are integrated with the anticipated growth. If the Government continues to ignore the people of Aberdeen and Aberdeenshire, they will be left to deal with a mess of cars, congestion and an

outdated public transport network. I know which option I prefer.

I have almost lost track of the amount of my correspondence on crossrail with the minister and Transport Scotland. Getting an answer from Mr Stevenson in writing is no easier than getting one in the chamber. It seems, on occasion, that he has delegated so much of his portfolio to Transport Scotland that all that is left for him to do is to give us bad news and occasionally unveil new paint schemes for the trains.

Mike Rumbles: He has delegated everything. He just tells us what the civil servants want.

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

Alison McInnes: Pardon?

The Presiding Officer: Members should be careful about the language that they use in the chamber.

Alison McInnes: For several months last year, my letters on crossrail to the minister were redirected down the M8 to Transport Scotland's headquarters. From there, I received a number of substantive answers that discussed predicted passenger numbers and outlined feasibility studies. Although I did not agree with some of the figures or some of the reasoning, I could not argue that Transport Scotland did not uphold its part of the bargain. It did the work, but did the minister do his share? I think not.

For a regional project such as crossrail to progress, hard work, vision and political leadership are needed. The minister has given us none of those.

When, last summer, I finally managed to get a response from the minister, I was told:

"It is not appropriate for me to give an 'in principle' decision at this stage."

Again, I struggle to understand the minister. It is not appropriate to give an in-principle decision? Surely an in-principle decision is just that—either the minister thinks that crossrail is a good idea or he does not. At this point, I am not asking him whether he thinks that the specifics of any detailed plans are the best business option; I just want to know whether he thinks that crossrail is a good idea. Either the minister thinks that crossrail would have no discernible benefits for commuters in North East Scotland or he thinks that it could play an important role in promoting the use of public transport. Maybe the minister will enlighten us on that point this morning.

The view of Transport Scotland is clear. Unfortunately, it does not believe that there is a case for crossrail. I respectfully disagree with that view, and I suggest that the concerns that

Nestrans has raised about Transport Scotland's report on the project point to faults in Transport Scotland's position.

However, even with that in mind, I believe that strong leadership from the minister could still create the impetus to move crossrail forward. By declaring his support for crossrail, the minister would be asking Transport Scotland and Nestrans to ensure that the project was taken forward in the most effective manner possible and would be showing the people of North East Scotland that he is up to the challenge of delivering an ambitious, integrated public transport scheme. However, by hiding behind Transport Scotland's first report, he is showing that he is not up to that challenge. He is letting himself and the Government be dictated to, and he is letting down the people of North East Scotland.

I move,

That the Parliament affirms its support for the Aberdeen Crossrail project, a vital infrastructure link for the region, which would provide a frequent cross-city rail service with commuter trains leaving Inverurie and Stonehaven for Aberdeen every 15 minutes and the opening of new stations north and south of Aberdeen including at Kintore, Newtonhill and Altens; notes that the project previously enjoyed cross-party support and was hailed as a key transport priority for the north east with the potential to bring significant economic and environmental benefits; deeply regrets that the project has been omitted from the Strategic Transport Projects Review, and calls on the Scottish Government to make a firm commitment to work with Aberdeenshire and Aberdeen City councils through NESTRANS and its rail industry partners to restart the active development of the Aberdeen Crossrail project immediately.

09:21

The Minister for Transport, Infrastructure and Climate Change (Stewart Stevenson): I will start by apologising to Mr Rumbles for the intemperate word that I used when, in a sedentary comment, he grossly misrepresented the relationship between the minister and Transport Scotland.

Mike Rumbles: What an apology that is.

Stewart Stevenson: It was intemperate, and I apologise.

The Government rejects the motion in the name of Alison McInnes. The Aberdeen crossrail project has a long history. I am well aware of the support that has been shown for the project, and that, in part, is why we are progressing the development of cross-Aberdeen services. Our approach is incremental and involves building patronage to strengthen the case for later investment, delivering value for money and protecting other projects across Scotland. Indeed, our amendment does not seek to delete Aberdeen crossrail from any motion that might be passed at 5 o'clock.

The STPR supports the delivery of sustainable economic growth and concluded that interventions between Aberdeen and Inverness and from Aberdeen to the central belt would contribute to achieving our purpose. Our proposed enhancements will deliver reduced journey times north and south of Aberdeen of up to 20 minutes; create new journey opportunities; improve accessibility to the Dyce area and beyond, to Inverurie; increase frequency by providing express services between Aberdeen and the central belt; and provide two trains every hour between Nairn and Inverness. Those interventions will make rail a genuine and attractive alternative to the car. In addition to improving passenger services, the enhancements will improve freight services by improving infrastructure to allow the operation of longer freight trains.

Together, the delivery of those outcomes will help the Government to achieve its purpose of sustainable economic growth for the whole of Scotland. Indeed, at a meeting that I attended earlier this year, Nestrans expressed its support for the proposed interventions, particularly because the proposals will deliver early many of the benefits of the Aberdeen crossrail proposal and will do so at better value to the taxpayer.

I have said previously that the Aberdeen and Inverness intervention will include work to evaluate a new station at Kintore and support the development of a new station at Dalcross, with interchange facilities to link with Inverness airport. I will shortly meet Nanette Milne to discuss the Kintore issue, and I hope that other members will be able to attend.

We are working with Network Rail to develop those interventions as part of the periodic settlement. Transport Scotland, under my instructions, will ask Network Rail to carry out a feasibility study later this year on developing the Aberdeen and Inverness intervention. The study, which will also examine the case for Kintore, must balance the desire to attract new passengers against the impact on network capacity and the needs of existing passengers, while taking account of value for money and affordability.

We have explained clearly our national priorities and we will continue to engage with local authorities and regional transport partnerships on the delivery of those priorities, in addition to discussing how best to deliver regional priorities. For example, we are working in partnership with Strathclyde partnership for transport and Glasgow City Council to establish and deliver common objectives for the west of Scotland rail enhancements. Good government is about leadership, which is what we are demonstrating. The construction of a new station at Laurencekirk, which was started by the previous Administration

and will be delivered by the present one, will shortly link commuters to key economic centres.

Mike Rumbles: Will the minister give way?

Stewart Stevenson: I do not have time.

Mike Rumbles: Will the minister take an intervention on Laurencekirk station?

Stewart Stevenson: Very briefly.

Mike Rumbles: The minister really must not mislead Parliament. Laurencekirk station is 14 miles south of Stonehaven. It has never been part of the Aberdeen crossrail project, so the minister must not pretend that it is.

Stewart Stevenson: That was not appropriate. I congratulated the previous Administration on progressing the project and said that we are delivering it.

The 2008 timetable takes account of a package of improvements that were announced last year on the Edinburgh-Fife-Aberdeen line, which has provided hourly services between Aberdeen and Inverurie, with more frequent services at commuting times; half-hourly services between Dundee and Aberdeen; a reduction of about 10 minutes in journey times between Edinburgh and Aberdeen; and an additional 1,200 seats throughout the Scottish network.

On our roads, we are committed to getting the best return for investment. We are considering infrastructure improvements on nationally significant routes, including the A96. Again, we are working with RTPs on that.

As I have said before, the STPR is not the only way in which to deliver transport infrastructure. We will work with local government and RTPs on local and regional benefits. Of course, we will continue to engage with members and the Parliament on transport issues. I say once again that the Forth crossing remains our strategic priority on roads and it will dominate our spending until it is opened. It is an economic link that must be maintained, therefore it is right that the immediate focus should be on it. I am pleased that we will make significant rail interventions in parallel and that Aberdeen and the north will benefit. The Government has identified an investment hierarchy that prioritises interventions. Crossrail services in Aberdeen are important for the north-east and wider Scotland, which is why we are making investments in the north and will continue to do so. I will take pleasure in moving the amendment in my name.

I move amendment S3M-3674.3, to leave out from "which would" to end and insert:

"which is being tackled incrementally by the introduction of new services from Inverurie, the opening of Laurencekirk station, the re-timetabling of other services and the bringing forward of work on Kintore station; believes that this

incremental approach delivers early and cost-effective benefits to rail services across Aberdeen; recognises that the introduction of additional stops increases journey times and can, in certain circumstances, reduce the viability of services overall; welcomes the real progress being made by the Scottish Government after years of inaction, and looks forward to further rail investment in the north as announced in the Strategic Transport Projects Review."

The Presiding Officer: The remaining speeches should be of about four minutes' duration, but I have enough flexibility to allow members to take interventions—I will be able to add on a little time should they choose to do so.

09:28

Des McNulty (Clydebank and Milngavie) (Lab): Labour will support the Liberal Democrat motion, but I confess to a wee bit of irritation with how it is framed. It is very tight and specific, which makes it difficult to talk about crossrail in general and the Aberdeen transport network in broader terms. Given the motion's formulation, it might have been more appropriate for a members' business debate. I hope that, in future, motions are framed slightly more widely. Our amendment is intended to open out the motion, because there are general issues that need to be discussed. My colleagues Lewis Macdonald and Richard Baker will speak in detail about specific stations in the Aberdeen area and other issues.

One problem with the STPR is that it treats projects that are outside the cities as national ones, but treats projects that are in or near the cities as local or regional ones. The crossrail projects in Aberdeen and Glasgow are excluded from the list of national projects, whereas projects that are cheaper or to do with trunk roads are national projects. That is really because of where they are. In Scotland's transport policy, a strategy for conurbations is essential. There is no point in talking about one project in Aberdeen, Glasgow or Edinburgh in isolation from other projects. That approach has bedevilled the consideration of transport in Scotland.

I remember raising that point in relation to Edinburgh with the then transport minister, Nicol Stephen. At one time, we had four major transport projects in Edinburgh—the Edinburgh airport rail link, the trams, the Waverley station upgrade and the Borders rail project—all of which were considered entirely separately, with no interfacing or integration between them, despite the fact that, inevitably, each of the projects would have an impact on the others. In practical terms, it was inappropriate to treat them as entirely separate projects, bearing in mind the central interconnection between them.

In future, I hope that the minister will consider Aberdeen and Aberdeenshire as a single transport area and that he will consider how schemes can

be brought together to maximise benefit. For example, I am convinced that we will not get the full benefit from the Aberdeen western peripheral route without the crossrail project, because there are interfaces between the two schemes. The projects should be seen from the perspective of the individuals who will make transport choices. We must focus on the projects not as construction engineering approaches to transport, but from the point of view of the individual transport user and the economy of the area. In that sense, the exclusion of Aberdeen crossrail from the STPR is unreasonable.

The Government might be making choices about which bits of crossrail or which other schemes could be introduced, but that should emerge through dialogue with Nestrans and the local authorities about the priorities in the Aberdeen conurbation. From what the minister said, and from what he has said previously in response to my colleague Richard Baker, it does not seem as though that approach is being taken. Each project is a discrete element, whereas we need an integrated and interfaced approach.

I move amendment S3M-3674.1, to insert after "region":

"and for the wider national transport network in Scotland".

09:32

Alex Johnstone (North East Scotland) (Con): I make it clear that, regardless of what the Liberal Democrats say about the Conservatives, we remain wholly committed to developing the elements that will move towards the creation of the Aberdeen crossrail project. In fact, the Conservatives have long had a reputation for supporting the project. In particular, my colleague Nanette Milne, who will speak about the issue in detail later, has a good reputation for being an active member at the centre of the campaign.

My amendment is clear that I will not tolerate the year-zero approach. We have had two Liberal Democrat transport ministers in Nicol Stephen and Tavish Scott; one Liberal Democrat chair of Nestrans, who is now a member of the Parliament; and Liberal Democrats in government for eight years. During that time, the Liberal Democrats saw the campaign for the Aberdeen crossrail project as a cross-party one. However, now that they have a more Opposition-based perspective, if people do not agree with them, the campaign is obviously no longer cross-party.

Mike Rumbles: Will the member take an intervention?

Alex Johnstone: No. Unfortunately, I have only four minutes.

My attitude towards Liberal Democrat cross-party campaigns wears a bit thin when I participate in many of them for various transport projects, or to save local hospitals or ambulance services, only to discover in the latest edition of the Lib Dems' *Focus* newsletter that it was entirely the Liberal Democrats who achieved the aims.

I will move on from the situation in which I have unfortunately put us to one in which we talk positively about the development of transport projects in Aberdeen. We must look forward and ensure that we develop the projects. Work still needs to be done to develop the case for some of the proposed stations that would form part of the crossrail project, which are mentioned in my extensive amendment. However, we must realise that there is an understanding, even within Nestrans, that an incremental approach will deliver some elements of the crossrail project.

Alison McInnes: Will the member take an intervention?

Alex Johnstone: No.

We must take an incremental approach and take opportunities when they arise. However, there are things that can be done in the short term to provide some of the services that the crossrail project would deliver. In particular, I draw the minister's attention to issues relating to the new timetable for the area that the project would cover. There has been much praise for the additional trains and stops north of Aberdeen, but there has been a problem in the area south of Aberdeen. This afternoon, First ScotRail will conduct a consultation exercise at Stonehaven station, where it will hear from local people about the problems that have arisen for commuters in the area as a result of timetable changes. The new timetable seems to have caused fewer problems for commuters going north in the morning, but there seems to be a serious problem for those going south in the evening. By and large, the Glasgow trains do not stop at Stonehaven; consequently, only half of the trains that leave Aberdeen provide the necessary service.

We are working hard, especially through my colleague Nanette Milne, to seek development of a station at Kintore. We must ensure that services are improved and that the viability of further station developments along the line between Stonehaven and Inverurie is considered. We have opportunities to move the crossrail project forward and we must retain cross-party support for it. The Conservatives remain committed to the principles behind the project.

I move amendment S3M-3674.2, to leave out from "with commuter" to end and insert:

“; notes the comments of NESTRANS, previously chaired by Alison McInnes MSP, in its regional transport strategy,

that 'it is clear that improved rail services can only realistically be delivered on an incremental basis and in a way that capitalises on existing planned investment'; welcomes the recent improvements to the timetable, meaning that there is now a significantly better service north of Aberdeen than was the case when Nicol Stephen MSP and Tavish Scott MSP were ministers for transport; considers that proposals contained in the Strategic Transport Projects Review to improve services north and south of Aberdeen must be progressed as a priority as a key means of securing better crossrail services; welcomes the forthcoming opening of Laurencekirk station and considers that plans to open Kintore station should now be taken forward; further considers that local agencies should work together to build strong cases for the opening of stations at Newtonhill and Altens; notes with regret the very poor stewardship of rail projects under successive Liberal Democrat transport ministers, notably the significant cost overruns and delays that blighted the Stirling-Alloa-Kincardine line and the managerial paralysis at the heart of the Edinburgh Airport Rail Link, and regrets the additional investment for projects such as Aberdeen Crossrail that has been lost as a result of this mismanagement.”

09:37

Nigel Don (North East Scotland) (SNP): It seems that war has broken out where peace should reign. I will try to draw together what I understand the crossrail project to be about. We are arguing about trains that carry passengers from the north-west of Aberdeen, through Aberdeen, to the south of Aberdeen and back again. The only issue is how many stations they should stop at and how frequently they should run.

Mike Rumbles: Hear, hear.

Nigel Don: I thank the member—I am delighted that there is some consensus on the issue.

We could go down to the toy shop, take out a new railway, put it down where we want it to go, clear all the furniture out of the way and say that we have done it. The trouble is that the furniture is buildings, hills, valleys and rivers, so we cannot do that. What should we do? As you and other members are aware, Presiding Officer, we must start where we are and see where we can get to. We cannot get a new railway from the toy shop. We cannot even get one from the train shop—we must start with what we have.

As I understand it, the Government's policy is to start with what we have and to add a station every time that seems to make sense. Laurencekirk has already been mentioned, but I recognise that it is probably beyond the area that members want to talk about today. A station at Kintore is certainly a possibility: I understand that there is a large amount of political momentum behind that. A station at Newtonhill might be viable, but I doubt it. The same applies to the proposal for a station in Altens, as I do not think that it would ever be viable. However, if it can be proved to be viable, why not build it? Alex Johnstone has already answered that question. He made the point that

the more stations trains stop at, the longer journey times will be. If we insist on putting in more stops, journeys will take longer and the service will become less attractive.

I point members to Transport Scotland's detailed appraisal of the crossrail project, which suggests that there would be some modal shift from car to rail but that the majority of the additional passengers would come from buses rather than cars. There would be no benefit to road safety, and journey times would be slower as a result of additional stops. I suggest to members that Transport Scotland's findings are entirely consistent with what we would expect for this kind of transport project. It is therefore no surprise that the best way forward is an incremental approach. There is no point in our spending significant amounts of money on putting in more stations and changing the timetable until there is some evidence that people will use the service and make it cost effective. That is why I support the Government's line on crossrail. Change must be incremental and must take place as fast as we can sensibly make it work. It does not matter what we call it the point is that we should make progress. Surely we can agree on that.

09:40

Lewis Macdonald (Aberdeen Central) (Lab):

As Des McNulty said when opening for Labour, we want rail links to be strengthened within as well as between Scotland's city regions. Aberdeen crossrail is firmly part of that approach.

The SNP's approach is less clear. On the one hand, the minister wants us to welcome

"the opening of Laurencekirk station ... and the bringing forward of work on Kintore station".

On the other hand, he wants us to agree that

"the introduction of additional stops increases journey times and can, in certain circumstances, reduce the viability of services overall".

That seems to be a confused way of setting out a direction of travel. However, when ministers talk of the Aberdeen crossrail project being tackled incrementally, the inference must be that the increments will not be additional stops and that there will be no new stations besides those that have been mentioned. That would certainly explain why Aberdeen crossrail, like the Haudagain roundabout, failed to win ministerial support for inclusion in the strategic transport projects review. From the minister's description of his plans this morning, it seems that he sees Aberdeen simply as the junction of two main railway lines, rather than the centre of a city-focused crossrail project to serve the needs of people who live and work in Aberdeen.

Recently, Stewart Stevenson received the finalised Aberdeen city and shire structure plan, which I am sure he will already have cast his eye over. Paragraph 3.9 on page 10 of the plan explicitly promotes the crossrail proposals

"to provide more regular journeys and extra stations".

SNP councillors voted for the plan, which makes no mention of an incremental approach. I hope that that aspect of the plan will attract the minister's approval and that he will rethink his approach to the proposals.

Instead of cutting back our ambitions for crossrail, we should be looking at what more can be done. In my constituency of Aberdeen Central, a new station at Kittybrewster could help to cut back on car commuting, congestion and parking problems at key locations. In recent months, Aberdeen royal infirmary has been overwhelmed by a parking crisis, since SNP ministers decreed an end to hospital parking charges without first working out how to manage parking demand. The University of Aberdeen is developing an iconic new library in Old Aberdeen, which will attract users from across the region and beyond. Parking zones are already being planned for neighbouring areas as a result.

Both Foresterhill and Old Aberdeen would benefit from new access by rail via a new Kittybrewster station. Because Aberdeen crossrail, as originally conceived, is designed as an integral scheme for the whole city and region, it has the potential to deliver that, although there is no guarantee that it would do so. However, a Government that has set its face against additional stops and insists on taking what it describes as an incremental approach that does not recognise the wholeness of the city will not deliver that.

The parts of the city that I represent do not need a new road and bridge increasing traffic by way of the proposed third Don crossing. I hope that the minister will reject that part of the finalised structure plan when he forms a view on it and that he will support more rail, not more roads, into the city. It is to the credit of Alison McInnes that, when she was chair of Nestrans, she did not endorse the enthusiasm of her party colleagues on Aberdeen City Council for directing thousands of car commuters every day through Tillydrone and Old Aberdeen. Sadly, those councillors have now done Aberdeen city and shire a major disservice by including that contentious local project in strategic transport and structure plans for the region.

The minister could put the matter right by refusing to endorse the third Don crossing proposal in the structure plan. Instead, he should encourage local partners to work with the Scottish Government on sorting out the Haudagain

roundabout and exploring how Aberdeen crossrail can be delivered. Those projects, along with the completion of the western peripheral route, are the city's real transport priorities, and ministers should support them.

09:45

Maureen Watt (North East Scotland) (SNP): I find it astonishing that, in the face of the deepening economic crisis, the Liberal Democrats have chosen such a subject for their allotted debating time. That is the kind of cry that we have heard from the Liberal Democrats in recent weeks when they have complained about Government business but, as usual, there is one rule for the Liberal Democrats and another for everyone else.

Jeremy Purvis (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD): Will the member give way?

Maureen Watt: No, thank you.

I read somewhere over the past few days that the Liberal Democrat leader, Tavish Scott, thinks that a coalition deal with the SNP is likely after the next election. Of course, we are delighted that the Liberal Democrats recognise that the SNP is likely to be the largest party and that they will need to do business with us, but we will not have a coalition on the basis that we park an independence referendum for two parliamentary sessions.

Meanwhile, the Liberal Democrats claim that the SNP Government has failed to deliver on transport projects in the north-east. Let us look at the facts. As Alex Johnstone pointed out, despite the Liberal Democrats having had two transport ministers during their eight years in government and despite the fact that their current transport spokesman, Alison McInnes, was chair of Nestrans, there was no tangible progress on crossrail. Their legacy was review upon review, plenty of hot air and nae action. In her new role, perhaps Alison McInnes is trying to purge her previous inaction by trying to shift attention away from her party's failures.

Alison McInnes: Will the member give way?

Maureen Watt: No, thank you.

Members, who is in charge of another suburban transport project? Oh dear, it is the Liberal Democrats. They are in charge of the Edinburgh trams project, which has ground to a halt before a rail has been laid or a tram is in sight. In contrast, we will open Laurencekirk station in the spring and timetabling changes—

Mike Rumbles: The point about crossrail—

The Presiding Officer: Order.

Maureen Watt: Yes, Mike Rumbles, a station in the north-east is being opened under the SNP.

The timetable changes that were introduced in December mean that there are now more trains than ever between Inverurie and Aberdeen. For peak morning services, where there were two trains under the Liberal Democrat-Labour coalition, there are now five under the SNP, as well as an additional evening service. Under the SNP, those services are up and running.

Phase 2 of the improvements on the Inverness to Aberdeen line will include consideration of a station at Kintore, on which the minister has said he is in discussion with other members. The STPR contains those improvements among its 29 national priorities, including an at least hourly service and a 20-minute reduction in journey times on the line. Such a service will greatly assist those who commute from Inverurie and Dyce.

The STPR also includes improvements between Aberdeen and the central belt. The increased number of express services and stopping services will benefit commuters from Stonehaven, Laurencekirk and Portlethen as well as those who travel longer distances between Aberdeen and Glasgow or Edinburgh. Such benefits for commuters and longer-journey passengers, which were talked about by the Liberals, are happening under an SNP Government.

The Liberal Democrats know that their reputation and credibility on transport in the north-east is dire. I can sum it up in four words: Aberdeen western peripheral route. The AWPR shambles has unnecessarily cost millions of pounds because of the Liberal Democrats' lack of decision taking. Trying to turn the spotlight on the SNP and crossrail winna wash with the sensible folk of the north-east.

I support the amendment in the name of Stewart Stevenson.

09:49

Richard Baker (North East Scotland) (Lab): I am pleased that we have this opportunity to debate Aberdeen crossrail, which is a vital transport project for the north-east. We have suffered many disappointments under an SNP Government that promised our area so much, but the failure to give Aberdeen crossrail the necessary backing—it is omitted entirely from the strategic transport projects review—is a particular blow to hopes for the public transport options that our area needs. I say to Maureen Watt that that "winna wash" with people in the north-east.

In my members' business debate on crossrail in 2006, members from all parties supported my call to move from the feasibility study that the previous Executive had funded to a firm commitment to construction with a clear timetable for delivery. I very much regret that that consensus has not

survived into the current parliamentary session. Frankly, I think that the minister's uncharacteristically intemperate comment to Mike Rumbles would have been rather better applied to his own strategy.

I note that both the SNP and Tory amendments refer to "incremental" improvements. That is all very well; of course I welcome the additional services from Aberdeen to the south and the modest improvements in journey times, but a step change from that is required if we are to realise the Aberdeen crossrail project. Given the Conservatives' previous support for crossrail, it is regrettable that we could not get a consensus, at least among the Opposition parties, by agreeing to the much clearer statement of support for the project that Alison McInnes's motion represents. The Aberdeen crossrail project needs that kind of clear support if we are to create the necessary political momentum.

Like Mike Rumbles, I am surprised that both amendments refer to Laurencekirk station. The new station is a welcome development indeed, but no one has ever understood Laurencekirk station to be part of the crossrail project. As Lewis Macdonald said in his excellent speech, the reference in the Government amendment to the impact that additional stops will have on journey times misses the point in what strikes me as a worrying way. With full realisation of crossrail, that would not be relevant.

Congestion in Aberdeen is a very real problem. The eventual completion—the project has been delayed by the minister—of the Aberdeen western peripheral route and the improvements at Haudagain that will now only follow the AWPR's construction will also require the development of Aberdeen crossrail if we really want to tackle congestion.

People travelling into the city from the shire need to have a realistic alternative to the car. For too many people, no such alternative exists at the moment. A frequent through service every 15 minutes from Inverurie to Stonehaven—with the potential for new city destinations and even for the eventual extension of the line north into the minister's constituency—would give commuters a real alternative. The increments should involve starting with a half-hourly service and moving to a service every 15 minutes. The Scottish Government's approach seems to be far more "incremental" than that.

The crossrail plans were put in place to address the fact that Aberdeen as a city, and the north-east as a region, are not as well served by rail links as other parts of the country are. Both the First Minister and the Minister for Transport, Infrastructure and Climate Change know that well, so it is very surprising that the crossrail project has

not been given greater priority. We know that there is no shortage of demand for increased rail services. When a similar facility was put in place in Edinburgh, there was a 72 per cent increase in passengers. I am sure that the Aberdeen crossrail project would be equally successful.

Congestion takes a heavy toll on business in Aberdeen. Even with the necessary road improvements—which are now further away than was originally envisioned—only progress on crossrail can provide us with the hope that we can tackle the increased congestion that is being predicted. It is self-evident that crossrail is crucial if we are to aspire to a sustainable transport policy for our part of Scotland, but it is also vital to the economy of the city and the shire. I was surprised by Maureen Watt's comments on the economic impact of the project, given that it would increase tourism in the area. Given the Administration's emphasis on the importance of oil and gas, surely it should agree that the oil and gas capital of Europe should have the necessary transport infrastructure.

I hope that Parliament will support the motion in the name of Alison McInnes. The Scottish Government should reconsider its approach by pledging its full support to the Aberdeen crossrail project, which it knows the north-east needs.

The Presiding Officer: We come now to closing speeches.

09:53

Nanette Milne (North East Scotland) (Con): I am not sure whether to regard the Liberal Democrats as brave or foolhardy in their choice of subject matter for this morning's debate, given their record on transport in recent years. From the first major transport announcement of the Lib Dem-Labour Administration—in which Nicol Stephen was a minister—which cancelled the previous Conservative Government's north-east transport infrastructure programme, which had included a bypass for Keith and improvements to the rail network, to Tavish Scott's handling of the Aberdeen western peripheral route, the Liberal Democrats have not exactly won the acclaim of the resident north-east population for their approach to infrastructure provision.

However, I welcome the opportunity to debate the future of Aberdeen crossrail in what has been a useful discussion this morning. I absolutely agree with Alison McInnes that crossrail services are a key transport priority for the north-east, with the potential to bring significant economic and environmental benefits. I was concerned that the project did not appear as such in the STPR when that review was finally published in December last year.

Realistically, as Nestrans has made clear in its regional transport strategy, improved rail services can be delivered only incrementally and in a manner that capitalises on existing planned investment, so we have highlighted that fact in our amendment. In my opinion, the Lib Dem motion fails to acknowledge that point and it fails to refer to the recent timetable improvements that are already providing better services to people who live to the north of the city.

Alison McInnes: Will the member give way?

Nanette Milne: No. I do not have time to take an intervention.

The motion also fails to acknowledge the proposals in the STPR to improve services north and south of the city, which are a key part of securing better crossrail services—improvements that include the reopening of the station at Laurencekirk.

Like the Lib-Dems, we too would like to see new train stops at Altens and Newtonhill—and perhaps also at Kittybrewster, although it is quite some way from Foresterhill—but, to be realistic, the case for those new stops has not yet been made. Local people need to work together to build a strong case for opening stations at those locations. I hope that that will happen. On the other hand, a convincing case has already been made for reopening the station at Kintore. Its rapidly growing commuting population is increasingly looking to use the train to avoid congestion at peak times on the A96. Indeed, for a number of years, there has been cross-party support for reopening the station at Kintore. The actions that the Nestrans board approved in December, which could help to move forward rail matters, included on-going feasibility work on reopening the station at Kintore, which we welcome.

We also welcome actions such as the commitment to maximise any opportunities that arise from the December 2008 timetable changes, the launch of a shuttle bus between Dyce and the airport, and a line-speed enhancement study on the Aberdeen to Inverness line. Things are moving forward locally, despite the omission of Aberdeen crossrail from the STPR.

Let there be no doubt that the Scottish Conservatives support the Aberdeen crossrail project. However, we also accept that it is a project of components, each of which is deliverable in stages that have their own benefits. I believe that the reopening of Kintore station can—and should—be the next component in the development of the Aberdeen crossrail. The Scottish Conservatives have been at the forefront of the campaign for that improvement, which has significant support from the local community.

I welcome the minister's words this morning and I acknowledge the Government's commitment to progress improvements to rail services in the north and north-east. I am pleased that the minister has agreed to my request for a meeting with cross-party and community representatives. Although some of my MSP colleagues from the north-east, including the Liberal Democrats, have been a little slow in responding to my invitation to attend the meeting, I hope that it will be helpful in moving things forward and in getting Aberdeen crossrail back on track.

09:57

John Park (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): Back in December, I predicted that the Minister for Transport, Infrastructure and Climate Change, Mr Stevenson, would be in the chamber regularly to debate the developments that are in the strategic transport projects review, and those that are not. The review is broad in scope but lacks the detail that members wanted. Parliamentarians expect to see greater detail emerging in the coming months and years.

I understand the feelings of those whose projects were not included in the review. They feel left out, and still believe that their projects should have been included. Across the country, the people whom we represent in our constituencies have been left feeling disappointed. It is therefore completely understandable that Parliament should debate issues such as Aberdeen crossrail over the coming period. It is 10 years since the Scottish Parliament was established—10 years since members of the Scottish Parliament were given the opportunity to debate issues of this nature. I am happy therefore to speak in the debate this morning.

I turn to Alex Johnstone's speech. I was surprised to hear him talk of his support for Aberdeen crossrail. When I first read the amendment in his name, I thought that he had done a good job of hiding support for the project.

Alex Johnstone: We demonstrated our obvious support for the Aberdeen crossrail project by framing our amendment within the Liberal Democrat motion. Our amendment follows on from the opening line of the motion, which declares support for the project.

John Park: I am sure that the member agrees that his language in wording the amendment could have been much more consensual. Had he done so, he could have achieved wider support. Anyone reading the amendment would think that the Conservatives are not supportive of the project. As Alison McInnes said, she hoped for a consensual debate, but her hopes were shattered on reading the Conservative amendment. It is not the first

time that Mr Johnstone has done that to Ms McInnes: I know and share her pain.

Stewart Stevenson took time to explain the rail enhancements north and south of Aberdeen. I have no doubt that those interventions will improve services to a degree. However, my colleague Lewis Macdonald was absolutely spot on when he said that the Government should not be cutting back on its ambitions for crossrail, but looking at what more it could do. He gave examples of how crossrail could be used to improve the situation in Aberdeen in terms of hospital and university car parking, in addition to providing direct services into the city centre for workers who live in the surrounding area. Richard Baker touched on the subject when he spoke about the important role that crossrail would play in ensuring that people travel safely and quickly into the city centre and across the city to outlying areas.

I turn to Maureen Watt's speech. In terms of the economic crisis, it is the parties in opposition that are setting the agenda. We have brought Government ministers to the chamber and put serious questions to them on the action that the Government is taking. Of course, some of the focus has been on short-term measures, but I am sure that Maureen Watt agrees that Parliament needs also to debate longer-term measures. A number of infrastructure projects, including Aberdeen crossrail, would benefit not only the north-east but the rest of Scotland and other parts of the United Kingdom, too.

The number 1 priority for the strategic transport projects review is the new Forth crossing, over which doubts still remain. Concern continues to be expressed on costs, how future-proofed the new crossing will be, and where sections of the bridge will be manufactured. On 11 February, I wrote to the minister on that and asked whether some sections of the bridge will be manufactured in China. I look forward to his reply.

Given the current economic crisis, we have to be careful in what we say about infrastructure projects such as Aberdeen crossrail. In looking ahead to where we want to be in the future, issues such as procurement methods, job opportunities for the people of Scotland and skills must be at the front of our minds. We should be doing everything as a Parliament and Government to ensure that that is the case.

As my colleague Des McNulty said, the Labour Party will support the Liberal Democrat motion at decision time, but he was also right to highlight some of our concerns on the wording of the motion, which has constrained its support across the chamber. If the Opposition wants to bring Mr Stevenson to Parliament regularly, perhaps the motions that we lodge should be framed in the widest possible terms.

As Mr McNulty rightly said, the Labour Party's focus is on raising the importance of the need to integrate our transport network not only in our cities but across the country. That is the basis on which we will seek to hold the Scottish Government to account over the coming period. I am pleased to support the amendment in the name of my colleague, Des McNulty.

10:02

Stewart Stevenson: I welcome John Park's concluding remarks, in which he looked forward to my continuing to come to the chamber. I intend to do that.

The strategic transport projects review is the thread that has run through the debate. Indeed, it is the first objective-led, nationwide, multimodal and evidence-based appraisal process to be undertaken in Scotland. Other jurisdictions are now looking into it—we are at the leading edge of international approaches to transport planning.

The STPR sets out the next 20 years of investment priorities. It will help ministers and Administrations to make informed decisions on future transport spending, subject to the current programme.

Brian Adam (Aberdeen North) (SNP): Can the minister confirm that capital for rail is rather more possible because Network Rail has borrowing powers, and that there is therefore less potential financial impact on rail than there is on road from the Forth road bridge project?

Stewart Stevenson: That is absolutely correct. Indeed, the proposed rail interventions for the north-east are budgeted at some £1.1 billion. If that does not highlight the Government's commitment to improving the rail infrastructure in Aberdeen city and Aberdeenshire, I do not know what will.

Jeremy Purvis: I am interested in what the minister said in response to Brian Adam. If Network Rail's regulated asset base is the most effective way of delivering rail infrastructure in Scotland, why has he ruled out using that method for the Borders railway? Why does he prefer to borrow £300 million from the private sector for that project?

Stewart Stevenson: We invited Network Rail to compete, which would be the most effective way of reaching a cost-effective solution. In fact, a substantial number of people are interested in building the Borders rail link. It is important that we support the Office of Rail Regulation, which says that we can achieve 30 per cent savings by using different models and approaches, compared with how Network Rail does things. The Office of Rail Regulation has managed to get 19 per cent

efficiency savings for the next control period. It is proper that we always consider the most effective ways of doing things on the rail network.

I will now turn to a few of the remarks that members have made. I will deal with as many as I can in the time that is available. Des McNulty criticised the Liberal Democrat motion—I accept that he did so in a mild way—for its parochialism. I am not sure that I agree with him on that. It is proper that the Parliament should debate that in plenary session, if it is asserted that such matters in Aberdeen are important for the whole country.

Des McNulty says that we need a strategy for conurbations. Should local stations be national or local? That is a perfectly good and proper question for him to ask. We need to consider the cross-cut across a range of projects in different transport modes and we must seek to integrate them, which is precisely what we have sought to do in the strategic transport projects review. Will strategic transport projects review 2, when it comes along, do things better than STPR 1? Yes, of course it will, because one can always learn lessons.

On the proposal to consider Aberdeen and Aberdeenshire as a single transport area, that is largely happening already through increased collaboration between the councils. Des McNulty emphasised the need for dialogue. Basically, I agreed with a great deal of what Des McNulty had to say. I do not always do so, but I think that he spoke a great deal of sense today.

Alex Johnstone spoke about timetable issues south of Aberdeen. Of course, we do not control the timetables on the network in Great Britain. We can control what we ask of First ScotRail, but the timetables depend on Network Rail's willingness to co-operate, and indeed that of the other operators that have to access the track, which are controlled by Westminster. We are making good progress; we will try to do more.

Nigel Don pointed out that it is north-east to south-west trains that are important. We are not ruling out more stations. One of the benefits of the incremental approach is that we will build up the case for further stations. Various locations have been mentioned.

Lewis Macdonald once again introduced the issue of the Haudagain roundabout. The work will be done by this Government and people will welcome it, as I have said before. That is not a national project; it is about fixing the local road. The traffic has been transferred off what is currently a trunk road; it is being made a local road. However, we are supporting that project, as we believe we should.

Richard Baker welcomed incremental improvements. I think that he is absolutely right.

I hope that I can borrow John Park's crystal ball, which has clearly been working for him. I would make a little point about the new Forth bridge. We are seeking to ensure that local civil engineering contractors are fully engaged at an early stage so that they understand what opportunities are available for them. Under international law, we cannot mandate who, internationally, is involved, but we are going to give our local people the best possible shot.

This has been a good debate, although not entirely free from rancour. We will see how we vote at 5 o'clock. The commitment by this minister and this Government to improving rail services in the north-east is absolute. No minister before me has used the railway as much as I have. I look forward to continuing to do so, and I support the amendment in my name.

10:09

Mike Rumbles (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (LD): We had hoped that the debate would move the Aberdeen crossrail project on, but thanks to the SNP and the Conservatives, it is clear that the project will be dead in the water if they have their way. I am continually astonished by the excuses for inaction from the Minister for Transport, Infrastructure and Climate Change. His amendment, if it is passed, will reaffirm support for Aberdeen crossrail. The problem, however, is that his definition of the Aberdeen crossrail project is flawed—he is redefining crossrail. No longer are we to have, even as a vision—vision from the transport minister?—a 15-minute commuter service running between Inverurie, Aberdeen and Stonehaven.

As for Alex Johnstone, he pretends to support Aberdeen's crossrail project just like the SNP, but he has no vision, either. He is attempting to remove from Alison McInnes's motion any reference to a 15-minute commuter service. The people of the north-east will not forgive Alex Johnstone for failing to support the vision that is necessary to deliver that 15-minute commuter service that we so need.

When the then Minister for Transport, Nicol Stephen, originally allocated £400,000 to a detailed feasibility study for Aberdeen, Nestrans was unequivocal in its desire to deliver a project at the earliest opportunity. Councillor Kate Dean, leader of Aberdeen City Council and then chair of Nestrans, said:

"I am delighted that the Minister has today announced two of the steps which progress towards the delivery of an Aberdeen crossrail",

which, she said,

"remains one of our key objectives in our Modern Transport Strategy ... we will be looking to deliver at the earliest opportunity."

However, at a briefing for MSPs in November, which Alex Johnstone certainly did not bother to attend, Derick Murray, the director of Nestrans, revealed that the Scottish Government's transport wing, Transport Scotland, had indicated that it was not interested in developing local rail services for the north-east, but was instead focusing on improving services between Aberdeen and Glasgow. Nestrans now seems not to be supporting the original concept of the Aberdeen crossrail. Indeed, it is supporting the SNP Government's so-called incremental approach. It is forgetting all about a commuter service every 15 minutes. Perhaps it is not too much of a surprise to find that the new chair of Nestrans is Councillor Kevin Stewart of the SNP. To quote the Conservative amendment:

"improved rail services can only realistically be delivered on an incremental basis".

So, Alex Johnstone has joined the SNP, flying the white flag early. How pathetic.

Last week, or near enough, the transport minister admitted that he did not take anything out of the strategic transport projects review. That is great, isn't it? He did not put anything into it either.

Stewart Stevenson: I never said that.

Mike Rumbles: He said that to me in this Parliament very recently.

Stewart Stevenson: Would the member please quote my words? I said no such thing.

Mike Rumbles: You did say such a thing. Please check the *Official Report*. I am getting a little bit fed up with ministers coming to the Parliament and redefining what they have been saying. The minister certainly failed to include Aberdeen's crossrail. He needs to re-examine his whole approach to the job and he needs, for goodness' sake, to take charge of his department, rather than simply take what is put in front of him by his civil servants.

Whatever happens at the vote tonight, I and the Liberal Democrats are concerned that SNP and Conservative MSPs will be conning the people of the north-east. Yes—conning them. Their amendments certainly pretend to confirm support for Aberdeen's crossrail, but Stewart Stevenson and, more inexplicably, Alex Johnstone—I cannot understand the Conservative position—redefine what they mean by Aberdeen's crossrail project.

I am personally disappointed that we did not hear from Brian Adam in a speech. He had the courage to make an intervention on his own minister, but not the courage to actually participate in the debate.

Brian Adam: What nonsense.

Mike Rumbles: I hope that Brian Adam at least asked to speak; perhaps he was prevented from doing so through the choice of SNP speakers. Let us be generous to him.

The SNP and the Tories can fool some of the people some of the time, but I am convinced that they are now both being found out for their inaction and, more important, for their lack of vision.

Student Minimum Income Guarantee

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Trish Godman): The next item of business is a debate on motion S3M-3675, in the name of Margaret Smith, on a minimum income guarantee for students.

10:14

Margaret Smith (Edinburgh West) (LD): The recession is hitting everyone: it is hitting pensioners, families and many of Scotland's students, who already live on tight budgets. Some of them are losing part-time jobs or are suffering as a result of a downturn in their families' incomes, and others are struggling against rising costs.

This debate gives us the chance to focus on the financial hardship that many students feel, and to argue for a fair living income for students. It is also a chance to remember the importance of the higher and further education sectors to Scotland's economy and, therefore, the importance of retaining students in their courses.

In the teeth of the worst economic recession in living memory, we must ensure not only that we are able to weather the economic storm but that we come out the other side of it equipped, skilled and ready to meet the challenges of a different world. If we do not invest in and plan for higher and further education, we will not be able to compete in an increasingly competitive world economy, so Universities Scotland is right to challenge the Government to

"progress towards Scotland being in the top quartile of OECD countries for the percentage of GDP invested in its universities and for national investment in research, development and innovation".

I am proud of the Liberal Democrats' record in government on tertiary education funding. We reversed the pattern of most of the 1980s and 1990s, when increases in student numbers meant that funding per head was being reduced. In our eight years in government, universities and colleges received an average increase of more than 5 per cent every year and funding reached a record £1 billion a year.

However, funding student support is just as important as proper funding for education institutions, which is why we abolished tuition fees. Because of that, nearly 200,000 Scottish students entering Scottish institutions have not paid fees, which represents a total of £4 billion less debt for Scottish graduates. We also helped the Scottish National Party Government to scrap the graduate endowment. That has also reduced the amount of debt for Scotland's students. I give the SNP credit for that but, in other ways, it has let down

students. Many students voted for the SNP because it promised to drop student debt, but no sooner was it in government than that undeliverable pledge was dumped. The SNP did not even try to bring plans to Parliament, claiming that it knew that they had no support. It is a pity that it does not feel the same way about many other things, including the referendum on independence.

Getting student support right is crucial not only so that potential students are not put off higher education because of the cost, but so that students are not forced to suffer financial hardship or to jeopardise their educational performance by working excessive hours to support themselves. That is why we have supported the National Union of Students Scotland's call for a minimum income guarantee for Scottish students for the past few years. Such a guarantee would make a real difference to students who suffer hardship during their studies.

Thanks to the Liberal Democrat amendment on the motion to pass the Graduate Endowment Abolition (Scotland) Bill, the SNP has included a proposal for a minimum income guarantee in its student support consultation. However, we know that it is not the Government's preferred option. Instead of dumping all Scotland's student debt, which could cost around £2 billion, the SNP has allocated £30 million to assist with the transition from student loans to grants. Given the total cost of a move from loans to grants, it would clearly be many years before the shift was complete.

The SNP Government is resistant to any suggestion that includes increased access to student loans. The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning will say that it is wrong to encourage students to get into more debt, but it is also morally wrong to leave students living in poverty—and members should make no mistake that that is where many of them are. Currently, the maximum support that a student in Scotland can get is £4,510 per year. That is £2,000 less than their English counterparts get for maintenance but, more important, it is also nearly £2,500 below the United Kingdom poverty line. Students are the only group of people that Government policy leaves in that position.

NUS research shows that more than half of students have considered dropping out due to hardship and that those who are from poorer backgrounds are twice as likely to drop out due to poverty. That is why, along with Scottish students, the Liberal Democrats call for a minimum income guarantee of £7,000 per year to bring students up to the income levels that reflect their cost of living.

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning (Fiona Hyslop): Will the member give way?

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

Margaret Smith: I am spoilt for choice. I will give way to the minister.

Fiona Hyslop: What would be the Liberal Democrats' policy for the minimum income guarantee? How much could be loans? Could it be £6,000 out of £7,000? More important, how much would it cost and how would they pay for it?

Margaret Smith: The cost would depend on the ratio. We do not rule out the possibility of an increase in loans. That must be part of the minimum income guarantee because we cannot afford to pay for £7,000 in grants. Neither we nor NUS Scotland says that we can afford that. Widening access is not only about getting more people into education; it is also about supporting them to stay there. The guarantee would be fulfilled through varying combinations of bursaries, loans and parental contributions. It would also mean that fewer students were compelled to take out expensive commercial, credit-card type loans. There is no such thing as "good debt", but the student loan—which is payable when the individual starts earning £15,000—is probably preferable to commercial loans.

Students should be given the choice about what they need to get them through their studies. We know, and the NUS knows, that no Government or Parliament would be able to deliver the minimum income guarantee at a single bound. We will not be able to bring all Scotland's full-time HE students up to a minimum income of £7,000 with the £30 million that the Government has set aside, but we should set that minimum income as our target. We could make a start with a hybrid of increased grants for poorer students and access to greater loans. That would be a step in the right direction towards a fair minimum income for Scottish students.

By contrast, the SNP's plans to shift from loans to grants would need Treasury approval to work and would not put a single penny more into the pockets of hard-pressed students when they need it most.

No one can be in any doubt that students are struggling. The costs of the sorts of things on which they spend their money—rent, food and heating—have all risen faster than general inflation. I will resist the obvious comment about minimum pricing for alcohol, and I speak as the mother of two students. Many students have turned to their institutions' hardship funds for help. Although we welcome the fact that universities and colleges were able to get access to emergency in-year redistribution funds in November, it remains the case that only six of the 32 colleges that asked for more FE funding at that point got the funds that

they needed to help students. We also know of students who do not even bother to ask for help because they think that the answer will be no, and we have already highlighted our concerns about problems with discretionary child care funding that mean that student parents can be discouraged from starting courses because institutions have run out of discretionary funds.

We call on the Government to conduct more research into hardship so that we can get a better understanding about the widening access picture and, crucially, a clearer national measurement of drop-out rates, which would help to drive a new approach to student retention.

It is impossible to solve all the student support issues right away, but we must do what we can to simplify the support system and we must take the first step towards providing a £7,000 minimum income guarantee by helping Scotland's poorest young students as soon as we can.

I move,

That the Parliament recognises the importance of the higher and further education sector; notes the outcome of the *New Horizons: responding to the challenges of the 21st century* report and the need to involve key stakeholders in discussions about the funding of the university sector; believes that Scotland's students have been let down by the SNP government's failure to deliver on its manifesto pledge to dump student debt; notes the *Supporting a Smarter Scotland* consultation on student support and rejects its proposals for not adequately addressing student hardship, and calls on the Scottish Government to deliver a simplified support system, which includes a minimum income guarantee of £7,000 per annum for full-time higher education students made up from a combination of grants, loans and parental contributions.

10:22

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning (Fiona Hyslop): The Government believes that access to higher education should be based on the ability to learn, not the ability to pay. During the parliamentary process to abolish the unfair graduate endowment fee, we agreed that we would consult on the minimum income guarantee. We are doing that through our consultation on supporting learners in higher education, which runs until 30 April 2009.

The consultation paper "Supporting a Smarter Scotland: A consultation on supporting learners in higher education" focuses on the mainstream support that is available for students who undertake full-time undergraduate study in higher education at college or university. It seeks views on replacing the current system of student loans with a fair and affordable system of means-tested grants and other means of student support.

I feel very strongly that it is disrespectful to ignore the views of the many people who have already responded, or who are still to respond, to

the consultation. The Liberal Democrats asked for a consultation in the first place in an amendment to the motion to pass the Graduate Endowment Abolition (Scotland) Bill. They got one, but now they want to ignore and bypass it.

Jeremy Purvis (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD): Will the cabinet secretary give way?

Fiona Hyslop: No.

I warn the Liberal Democrats that, if the Labour amendment is agreed to, they will have made a tactical blunder that would allow the Parliament to reject the minimum income guarantee, because targeted support for the poorest students is contradictory to a guaranteed minimum income for all.

Claire Baker (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): Does the cabinet secretary acknowledge that the consultation proposes a minimum income guarantee of only £5,500—an increase of a mere £500—and does nothing to address the serious issue of student hardship?

Fiona Hyslop: The Labour Party has confirmed in its amendment that it does not support the minimum income guarantee but wants targeted support for the poorest students. I know what is in the consultation paper, which makes the minimum income guarantee clear. If Claire Baker had listened to Margaret Smith, she would know that she said that the initial increase would not be to the full minimum income guarantee of £7,000.

The paper sets out a number of options to improve student support by using the £30 million that has been made available with a view to either increasing the amount of support or reducing levels of debt on graduation. We believe that the suggestion from the Association of Scotland's Colleges is worth further consideration, so we have included it in the consultation paper. It could be argued that that option may become increasingly attractive as the recession gathers pace.

The Liberal Democrats' motion has the effect of dismissing the college option completely out of hand. The Liberal Democrats are not giving college students a fair hearing, which flies in the face of Hugh O'Donnell's previous statements in which he asserted that his party supports college students who face hardship. Is it the case that the Liberal Democrats do not really want to hear college students' views?

Margaret Smith: What we are suggesting is help for full-time higher education students, many thousands of whom are learning in Scotland's colleges.

Fiona Hyslop: On the basis that the Liberal Democrats have yet to outline the content and

costing of their policy, I do not think that Margaret Smith's answer gives college students any confidence whatsoever.

The financial restrictions facing us are real. We have had the tightest spending settlement since devolution. We had to meet the unpaid bills of £60 million a year for the previous Government's promises on public-private partnership school buildings and—yes—we had to make hard choices. Despite all those real and difficult pressures, we have still managed to find £30 million that will make a real difference for students in the future.

In comparison with the lack of action in the previous eight years, in less than two years in this session of Parliament, we have already made a number of real improvements for students. We abolished the graduate endowment fee, which is benefiting up to 50,000 students and graduates, saving them £2,300 each. We have removed the burden of debt: two thirds of students who were due to pay £2,300 for the fee did not pay it back directly but simply added it to their student loan. Student debt doubled in Scotland between 1999 and 2005, but under the SNP Government, it fell in 2007, for the first time since devolution. We have replaced loans with grants, with a £38 million package for part-time learners in higher education, benefiting up to 20,000 students a year. We have increased the threshold for students with disabilities and are providing institutions with £16 million a year to alleviate student hardship, which is a rise of 14.6 per cent on 2006-07 levels.

Although demand for hardship support is increasing, so have the resources to fund it, and requests for top-up funds for hardship went down this year, in comparison with last year. Only three out of the 11 universities that Labour surveyed have asked for more funds, and only one out of the four universities that *The Scotsman* quoted this week has asked for funds.

The Labour Party amendment does not support a minimum income guarantee. It notes the NUS position, but rejects it in favour of a policy request: that the Government look at supporting the poorest students. Has Claire Baker read the consultation? Options 1a, 1b and 3 all set out the case for supporting the poorest students. She should do her homework, but that is not Labour's strong point.

Claire Baker: Will the cabinet secretary take an intervention?

Fiona Hyslop: No, thank you.

The Westminster Government miscalculated its grant policy by £200 million and now has to claw back £100 million from students and universities, threatening courses and student numbers.

I return to the Liberal Democrats. They asked for a consultation and they got one. They should have the patience to listen to the consultation.

Rhona Brankin (Midlothian) (Lab): Will the cabinet secretary take an intervention?

Fiona Hyslop: I am closing.

The debate is premature. I respect the Liberal Democrats' right to argue the case for a minimum income guarantee of £7,000. However, in moving the Government's amendment, I ask the Parliament to respect the many people, from students in colleges and universities to parents and others, who have the right to respond to the consultation on student support and to be heard, without being pre-judged by the vote at decision time.

I move amendment S3M-3675.3, to leave out from "believes" to end and insert:

"notes the Scottish Government's consultation on student support, Supporting a Smarter Scotland, which closes on 30 April 2009, and the proposals it outlines, including a minimum income guarantee; further notes that under the previous administration student debt doubled between 1999 and 2006; welcomes the falls in average student debt achieved as a result of the enhanced support on offer from the Scottish Government; further welcomes the restoration of the principle of free education with the abolition of the graduate endowment fee; commends the Scottish Government on the introduction of a £38 million package of grants for part-time learners, replacing loans with grants for up to 20,000 students per year; congratulates the Scottish Government on the 14.6% increase in student hardships funds over the last two years; further welcomes the additional support that has been made available for students with disabilities, and calls on the Scottish Government to respond positively to the outcome of the consultation."

10:28

Claire Baker (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): I am pleased to open the debate for Labour. It is fair to say that the SNP has avoided holding debates on students, and it is not difficult to see why. The SNP has a list of overpromised and underdelivered policies on students. The Scottish Government was elected on several headline-grabbing promises to students that it never intended to keep. It promised full grants for every student and no more loans; it also promised, on seemingly every leaflet that it produced, to dump the debt. However, instead of writing off the debt, it has written off Scotland's poorest students.

The SNP amendment trumpets the £38 million for part-time students, but the fact is that the SNP's efforts to replace loans with grants fall incredibly far short of its manifesto commitment. The £30 million that it has made available for student support next year is wholly inadequate to address the hardships that students face.

Without apology and without shame, the SNP has reneged on almost every promise that it made to Scottish students and graduates at the most recent election. It made a series of multibillion-pound pledges that, in a typically cynical and short-term move, was simply designed to get the student vote. Not content with breaking promises, the SNP in government has made changes that contribute to student hardship.

The Minister for Schools and Skills (Keith Brown): On breaking manifesto promises, can Claire Baker outline how Labour fulfilled its manifesto promise not to introduce loans and top-up fees?

Claire Baker: That was obviously in a different election. The point is irrelevant to this debate. Labour's record shows that we abolished top-up fees and reduced student hardship by introducing the young person's bursary. Labour's commitment is to address student hardship issues.

We now get to the SNP's record. It has made a £12.5 million cut in the student support budget that will result in fewer students receiving any support and, crucially, fewer students receiving full support. It has made a change to the means test, which has cut funding for some of our most vulnerable students midway through their course. That change will affect up to 33,000 students—thousands of mature students, and students from single-parent families who until now were exempt from means testing.

Fiona Hyslop: On means testing, is Claire Baker aware of the letter that I wrote to the Education, Lifelong Learning and Culture Committee in which I outlined the fact that only 45 students had applied for hardship funds because of the change to means testing, and that their requests had been met?

Claire Baker: I am aware of that letter, but I think that the cabinet secretary will share my disappointment that only five universities responded to her request for information. Current pressure on hardship funds does not mean that there are no issues with the changes to the means test.

The Government's 16-plus proposals include cuts in education maintenance allowances for our college students and cuts in the income threshold, which would reduce further the number of college students who would qualify. Those are all policies that take money from poor students to give to even poorer students. In addition, the SNP was set to introduce a local income tax that would have hit more than 50,000 of our poorest students who work long hours.

We are now starting to see the consequences of the SNP's actions. In just two years, the SNP has managed, through its actions and inaction, to

create intolerable pressure on student hardship funds. Government support for students is inadequate. In prioritising graduate debt, it has ignored student hardship. Too many students on limited budgets have to make choices between heating, food, books and bus fares. That will do nothing to address Scotland's drop-out rate, which is the highest in the UK. All of that is taking place in the context of difficult economic times, which puts additional pressures on students' budgets.

If the SNP Government was a responsible and responsive Government, it would take action. It would drop its inadequate student support proposals. It would help students through the current economic difficulties and prevent them from falling into hardship and having to rely on a dwindling supply of hardship funds. It would help students who lose their part-time job. It would help students to meet their child care needs. It would help students who see contributions drying up from parents who can no longer afford to help. However, the SNP has not taken those actions.

The situation that the Government has created has stretched hardship funds to breaking point. The University of Abertay Dundee, for example, has exhausted its supplies of hardship funds twice, which means that it can no longer help students with serious money worries. Student support here is now so far behind that in the rest of the UK that a Scottish student studying at the University of Stirling, which is in my region, will get more than a third less money to live on than their English, Welsh or Northern Irish counterparts studying at the same university.

The fact is that there is almost £2,000 less for the poorest Scottish student. An English student with a family income of £50,000 gets more support from their Government than the very poorest Scottish student gets. The poorest student studying in England receives more in grant support from their Government than the poorest student in Scotland receives from their Government.

The student support system in Scotland is no longer fit for purpose. The overriding priority for students in Scotland is student hardship, because they need money in their pockets to help them complete their studies. NUS Scotland president Gurjit Singh said this morning that abolishing the graduate endowment had

"little impact on the day to day life of students and does nothing to tackle the issue of financial hardship students face while studying."

The SNP has failed on student hardship.

Margaret Smith: Will the member take an intervention?

Claire Baker: Sorry, but I need to finish.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You can take the intervention, if you wish.

Margaret Smith: It will probably be quite short. Does the member accept that Gurjit Singh also said that we should support a minimum income guarantee for students?

Claire Baker: Yes, but does Margaret Smith accept that Gurjit Singh said that that should be achieved through grants and loans, not grants, loans and parental contributions?

The SNP has failed on student hardship. It has spent £18 million on abolishing the graduate endowment and is moving £38 million from loans for part-time students to grants for tuition, but students get not one penny in their pockets while they are studying. Further, at a time of increasing student hardship levels, the SNP has flatlined general discretionary funds.

Scottish universities have the highest drop-out rates, the lowest participation of students from low-income backgrounds and the most underfunded students in the UK. That is unacceptable, and it is why Labour will work for a £7,000 minimum income for our poorest students, which represents the Joseph Rowntree Foundation poverty line and is the level called for by student representatives across Scotland.

That proposal is deliverable within available resources, and it would tackle student hardship for our most vulnerable students and support those whose financial position might discourage them from pursuing higher education. It is fair, affordable and achievable.

We have sought to amend Margaret Smith's motion, as we believe that students in Scotland have had enough of false hope and hollow promises. Although we agree with the direction taken in the Lib Dems' motion, students have had enough broken promises without more being added to the list. Margaret Smith's press comments this morning and her comments in the debate suggest that she agrees with the proposal that to start by providing £7,000 for the poorest students is the way to go. In light of that, I hope that the Lib Dems can support our amendment.

Rather than promise the unachievable, I urge Parliament to support our amendment, which calls on the Government to focus the resources that are available in the present spending review period on the poorest students, to tackle student hardship, to invest in the long term and to help students through economic difficulties in the short term.

I move amendment S3M-3675.1, to leave out from "its proposals" to end and insert:

"all of its proposals for not adequately addressing student hardship; expresses serious concern at reports of childcare and hardship funds being stretched to breaking point

across colleges and universities in Scotland; recognises the calls of the NUS and other student representatives for a £7,000 minimum income guarantee but believes that a £7,000 minimum income for all students in Scotland is unachievable with the funds allocated for student support by the Scottish Government in this spending review period, and calls on the Scottish Government to come forward with new proposals that focus the available resources at the poorest students to genuinely address student hardship in Scotland."

10:35

Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I draw members' attention to my entry in the register of members' interests and, specifically, to my membership of the board of Dundee University Students Association.

I am sure that all of us can remember the energetic dump the debt campaign that the Scottish National Party ran on campuses across Scotland before the most recent election. Students were told that an SNP Government would write off their student debts and replace loans with grants. I know of many students and, for that matter, parents who voted SNP as a result. What a cruel delusion that pledge turned out to be. Like so many SNP promises, it has been broken. It is not the debt that has been dumped, but the SNP's manifesto pledge.

We are dealing with a serious situation for Scottish students. As we have heard, many students are reporting real hardship. Across Scotland, universities are reporting that their hardship funds are running out of money. As Claire Baker said, the University of Abertay Dundee's hardship fund has run out of money twice in the current academic year, with the result that support has had to be rationed to better-performing students.

Although student debt is a real issue, student hardship is a greater one. Many students are having to borrow over and above their student loans, from banks and other commercial lenders. Worse still, some are having to borrow on credit cards. We believe that we should be looking to expand the current student loan scheme, which at least provides a way of borrowing money that is secure and has a low interest rate, rather than leaving students to pay punitive rates of interest for bank overdrafts and credit card debt.

Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): When I was at university, we did not have loans—we had grants. What happened to those grants? Who brought in the loans?

Murdo Fraser: Like Mr Gibson, I went to university at the time of a Conservative Government, which provided grants. We must accept that given the massive expansion in the number of young people who go to university, it is

right that students make a contribution to their upkeep during their time there. I make no apology for the introduction of student loans. What most students today want is greater access to student loans, which is far better than having to borrow money on a commercial basis.

The Liberal Democrat motion refers to the minimum income guarantee of £7,000 per student. I am aware of the campaign by student representatives for a guaranteed minimum income of that amount, made up of a mixture of grants, loans and parental contributions, and it is difficult to fault the logic of that.

However, we must deal with the significant issue of the affordability of any proposal in the current spending review period. I note that the Liberal Democrats have provided us with no information about how much their policy will cost, despite the cabinet secretary's intervention on Margaret Smith, or how it might be afforded. For the past few months, we have heard from the Liberal Democrats only about their new policy priority of a 2p income tax cut, which could be afforded only by finding £800 million-worth of savings from the Scottish budget. We read in yesterday's papers that that policy has now been ditched. Overnight, the Liberal Democrats have reverted to type. What a relief it must be for all Liberal Democrat members finally to shrug off the unaccustomed financial rigour that their now abandoned tax-cutting policy imposed on them. They can now return to their traditional and much more comfortable position of throwing around spending commitments like confetti.

The Conservatives have compiled a dossier of spending commitments that the Liberal Democrats have made in opposition. By the time of the budget, they had made a grand total of £8.5 billion-worth of commitments. In the few weeks since then, the figure has grown to £10.5 billion—at least, that was the figure as of 9 o'clock this morning. Even as I speak, I am sure that my colleague Derek Brownlee is sitting down with his calculator to add to that total the sums that the Liberal Democrats have pledged in this morning's two debates. We cannot agree to an uncosted pledge from the Liberal Democrats when they have given us no indication of where the money will come from.

We think that the Scottish Government has got its approach on student support entirely wrong. It has failed to acknowledge that student loans have a vital part to play and that they are infinitely preferable to students having to borrow at commercial rates from the banks and on credit cards.

Margaret Smith: I hear what Murdo Fraser says about the cost of our proposal. I hope that he heard me say that there has to be a balance in

how we go about implementing it, which means that it is difficult to come up with a definitive figure. Does he accept that the number of students who fail to complete their courses because they experience financial hardship represents an opportunity loss?

Murdo Fraser: I have already said that I recognise that student hardship is a genuine issue, but I have to say to Margaret Smith and her colleagues in the Liberal Democrats that if they are to ask for other parties' support for a motion that includes a specific policy commitment, it is incumbent on them to tell us how much the policy will cost and from where in the Scottish budget, which is a finite sum, they will find the cash in question. It is not good enough for the Liberal Democrats to ask us to sign a blank cheque, which, in effect, is what they are asking us to do in the motion.

The Conservatives feel that the Labour amendment strikes the right balance, and we will support it. Scotland's students have been badly let down by the SNP Government, and they will not forget it when next they have the chance to vote.

10:41

Jeremy Purvis (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD): It is always a pleasure to follow a member of the SNP's unpaid research department. The Conservatives spend more time studying the Liberal Democrats' work for their dodgy dossier than they do in holding the Government of Scotland to account.

With regard to the direction of travel, the Liberal Democrats know that the budget that the SNP has established means that there is a window in the spending review period. We also know that we are going through a budget review process, of which Mr Fraser's colleague is a part. Students in higher and further education in Scotland will not look favourably on parties that take the view that we should pack our bags and not engage fully in the upcoming budget process and the discussions on the spending review in an effort to offset student hardship and move in the direction of travel of a minimum income guarantee.

Murdo Fraser: Will the member give way?

Jeremy Purvis: I will in a moment, if I have time.

In the cabinet secretary's speech, I detected a tone that was as intemperate as the Minister for Transport, Infrastructure and Climate Change's choice of language in the previous debate. The cabinet secretary said that it was disrespectful for Parliament to debate the issue while the Government was holding a consultation on it. She said that it was disrespectful for the Liberal

Democrats not to take part in the consultation but instead to hold a parliamentary debate on the issue.

Elizabeth Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): Will the member give way?

Jeremy Purvis: I will if I have time; I want to finish my point.

The cabinet secretary also said that we were being disrespectful to students, but I suspect that it is more disrespectful to students to issue a consultation that said that funding was available to convert student loans to grants when there was no agreement with the Treasury to make such funding available. As became evident at a recent meeting of the Finance Committee, the money for servicing student loans in Scotland comes from annually managed expenditure rather than departmental expenditure limits money, so it is not necessarily at her disposal. Perhaps this is another Forth bridge situation, in that the Government has made a statement without knowing that the funding is secure.

Elizabeth Smith: Is it respectful to put before Parliament a policy that is not costed, and for which the Liberal Democrats cannot identify the source of the money?

Jeremy Purvis: Elizabeth Smith must not have heard me say that we have a funding window in the spending review period. As the Government has stated, we are seeking a realignment. We are now engaged in the budget process for 2010-11. That is the direction of travel in which the Liberal Democrats wish to go.

I turn to the situation that part-time higher education students face. Their difficulties are not being addressed. In my constituency, Borders College has had to ask for an increase of nearly 30 per cent over its original allocations for crisis funds for 2008-09.

On the further education student support fund, the Government says that, because colleges reported unusual pressure on their bursary funds in 2008-09, the Scottish Further and Higher Education Funding Council held an additional, early in-year reallocation process in November. With the emergency November reallocation and the January requests this year, colleges have asked for an additional emergency allocation of £11.2 million, plus £9.12 million for student support.

The insultingly complacent letter that the Education, Lifelong Learning and Culture Committee received from the Scottish Government will infuriate constituents of mine, to whom I shall send it. Over the past year, those constituents have come to me in real financial difficulty. It is not just the changes to the eligibility criteria that were

made last year—a “big bang” approach, as the Government said—but the way in which things were carried out. Only as a result of a freedom of information request from the Liberal Democrats did we learn that the Government was advised that three cohorts of students would be likely to be adversely affected: students in single-parent families; students who cohabit; and lone-parent students. The Government saying in its letter that there was no problem, because only a small number of universities and institutions had responded, is akin to the Conservatives saying in the 1980s, after an election with a low turnout, that everybody was happy with the Government of the day. We have seen the same type of academic rigour in other Government promises to students.

With a gap of £10 million between what colleges asked for and what they received, and with a catalogue of broken promises from the SNP, students will look to this debate to signal a minimum income guarantee. Students are hoping that the Parliament will speak with a single voice at 5 o'clock this afternoon.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I remind members that they are limited to four minutes. We do not have much extra time to allocate.

10:47

Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): It is desperate stuff from the Liberal Democrats this morning. They morph daily into the Scottish Socialist Party, demanding funds without any inkling of how much money would be required or where it would come from.

I well recall that when the now ermine-clad Jim Wallace, a former leader of the Lib Dems, was questioned as to why his party broke its 1999 election pledge to abolish tuition fees, he replied that it was “just election rhetoric”. The same party is now sanctimoniously lecturing us on student hardship, barely a month after abandoning its barking-mad plans to cut £800 million annually from the Scottish budget. That is frankly shameful.

Margaret Smith: Will the member take an intervention?

Kenneth Gibson: On that point, why not?

Margaret Smith: Back at you!

When is Kenneth Gibson's party actually going to dump the debt? All around Scotland, in campus after campus, he and his colleagues said that they would dump student debt. They have not done so. Have they no intention of doing so?

Kenneth Gibson: We are already making progress. We have abolished the graduate endowment tax, which Margaret Smith voted to bring in. I dare say that she has had a conversion

on the road to Damascus in this session of Parliament, but it was her party, along with the Labour Party, that helped to bring in that tax.

It is somewhat rich for the Tories to talk about hardship; they were the ones who brought in the loans that have caused so much hardship among many students. As we recall, the Tories fought three Scottish Parliament elections pledging to abolish tuition fees, before abandoning that pledge as soon as they had the opportunity.

Labour, as so often, also has a brass neck. We have heard no apology whatsoever for the fact that Labour brought in the graduate endowment tax and tuition fees in the first place.

I should focus my attention on Labour and the Conservatives, because I understand that the Liberals are going to offer us the possibility of a coalition in a couple of years. Perhaps we should be a lot nicer to them.

Bob Doris (Glasgow) (SNP): No.

Kenneth Gibson: No, I do not think so either.

The Lib Dems surrendered to Labour on the graduate endowment tax in exchange for a measly four of the 22 ministerial portfolios on offer at the time. They obviously forgot that it is normal for the smaller party in coalitions to have disproportionate weight, not the larger party.

We have heard a lot about whether there is a shortage of discretionary funds, but the point that members must accept is that the SNP substantially increased the funding—to £16.1 million, which is an increase of 14.6 per cent, over two years.

Claire Baker rose—

Kenneth Gibson: I will be happy to take an intervention from Claire Baker in a second, but she and her colleagues should accept that one of the reasons for increased hardship in society is the mind-numbing incompetence of the United Kingdom Labour Government. It has caused many problems through its mismanagement of the economy and through the abolition of the 10p tax rate, which benefited students who worked part time.

Claire Baker: On the issue of hardship funds, does the member accept that, once the £1 million ring fenced for part-time students is removed, the general discretionary funds are increased only to £15 million? That increase is no higher than inflation.

Kenneth Gibson: Per capita, it is three times more than south of the border. In England, where the Labour Party has an overall majority, up-front student funding for new students is being cut in 2010, because of £200 million overspends. If Claire Baker's party had a majority in this

Parliament, I do not doubt for a single second that we would see exactly the same policies being enacted in Scotland. Of course, her party will never get an overall majority here. A headline on the front of *Holyrood* magazine says “Growing in Opposition”—shrinking, I would say.

The Scottish Government has already abolished the graduate endowment tax, replaced loans for part-time students with grants, increased helper support for disabled students by 60 per cent, and trebled career development loans—

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Alasdair Morgan): The member should conclude.

Kenneth Gibson:—from £1,200 to £3,600 per year.

Presiding Officer, the previous speaker got five full minutes. I took two interventions, and got four minutes and two seconds.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The member should sit down.

Kenneth Gibson: Aye, thanks. With friends like you—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I did not quite catch that remark, but the member was verging on being disrespectful to the chair.

I say to members that we are oversubscribed for this debate, and there is already one member whom I will not be able to call.

I call Frank McAveety, to be followed by Christina McKelvie, and it is four minutes dead.

10:51

Mr Frank McAveety (Glasgow Shettleston) (Lab): Yesterday afternoon, I had the great benefit of receiving a telephone call from that august journal, *The Scotsman*. The caller asked me for a comment on what inscription would be best for the Canongate wall of the Parliament. I think, understandably, that we need a bit more humour here, so I suggested Bud Neill’s wonderful poem “Winter”. If members have a chance to read it, they will find its four or five lines among the most effective in Scottish poetry.

I mention the poem because we really do have to laugh at the contributions of the SNP minister and back benchers to this debate. The fundamental issue is how best we can deal with student hardship. Labour and Conservative spokespersons have tried to address that issue. I do not agree with the Liberal Democrat proposal; it is uncosted, so it will have great difficulty in attracting broad support from around the chamber. I acknowledge the honourable intentions behind the Liberal Democrat proposal, but I am not convinced that it would be effective. I laughed,

however, when I heard the cabinet secretary criticising the Liberal Democrats for a proposal that was not fully thought through or properly costed. I thought that she was talking about the SNP proposal in 2007, when the party made commitments to students throughout Scotland.

The SNP manifesto started with a general comment:

“We will remove the burden of debt repayments”.

On the campuses—where we understand that Fiona Hyslop stomped around occasionally—it became:

“We will dump the debt.”

And then it became Mr Swinney’s actuarial words:

“I am therefore not allocating funding for student debt servicing”.—[*Official Report*, 14 November 2007; c 3325.]

That reminded me of another piece of poetry. In his poem “Open the doors!”, written for the opening of this Parliament building, Edwin Muir said that, above all, what the people do not want is “the droopy mantra of ‘it wizny me’”.

That is the problem that we have with the cabinet secretary and many of the other ministers: they wish to blame other people for the fact that they are not bringing forward proposals that they argued for on campuses throughout Scotland.

I accept that there is a legitimate debate to be had on how we fund students, for their courses now, and for the benefits that they can have in future. Honourable differences of opinion exist. I acknowledge Kenny Gibson’s view—although it was perhaps not put as eloquently as I would have hoped. We are all in favour of further and higher education, but the fundamental issue is that we must acknowledge the benefits of education and accept that some people should be making a contribution towards their education. The poorest students should not be, however, which is why the Labour amendment is the most appropriate.

We acknowledge that hardship has been a feature of students’ experiences in recent years.

Fiona Hyslop: Has the member had a chance to read the consultation document? Which of the options for expanding the young students bursary—1a or 1b—would he support if he wanted to support the poorest students?

Mr McAveety: I welcome the consultation. I do not think that the debate is exclusive, and the consultation will enable party spokespersons and back benchers to make their submissions. I want to stress, however, the fundamental issue of student hardship.

We are short of time, and the Presiding Officer is guiding me in that respect.

I have a major college in my constituency—John Wheatley College—which has energised the east end of Glasgow with two new campuses. We can ensure that it continues to do that by supporting students who are starting on the very bottom rung in terms of income. That is why I support the Labour amendment, and I hope that other members will support it later today.

10:55

Christina McKelvie (Central Scotland) (SNP):

It is interesting to hear that Margaret Smith feels that Scotland's students have been let down by the SNP Government. What breathtaking duplicity from the party that imposed the graduate endowment tuition fee on Scotland's students. It took an SNP Government to get rid of that Lib Dem tax on learning and I welcome Margaret Smith's congratulations on that. Then again, what did Margaret Smith say during the debates on the introduction and the abolition of that Lib Dem learning tax? Absolutely nothing. She is obviously a long-standing champion of our students.

Picking up Jeremy Purvis's point, I find it shameful that the Treasury refused to allow the resources that are currently processed as student loans to come within the departmental expenditure limit and be paid as grants. It is incredible that the chancellor should treat his own constituents in such a manner. That decision has deprived the Scottish Government and the Scottish Parliament of the ability to deliver what would have been a massive improvement in the lives and life chances of Scotland's students. That opportunity has been lost for the meantime, but it is not lost forever. The SNP will continue to press for fairness for all Scotland's students.

People should be under no illusion about student loans. They burden today's students with massive debts that restrict their life chances, and remove from the economy money that would otherwise have helped to drive it. Student loans make the recession worse. Anyone would have thought that politicians would be eager to change that system for something far more sensible, but they would be wrong—only one party has put forward a proposal to change it. The SNP believes in access to education based on the ability to learn, not the ability to pay, and we will continue to drive Scottish education in that direction. That is why, when part-time students—who are often the least well-off—had their loans turned into grants, the SNP Government delivered the first part of its programme to provide grants, not loans, thereby improving the lives of 20,000 students.

Important research has been published by the Association of Scotland's Colleges. Entitled "Supporting Scotland's Future: A Research Report by Scotland's Colleges", the report is based on

feedback from 1,000 students and the Opposition would do well to read it. A couple of points leap out of that study. First, 74 per cent of students at college are concerned about the debt that is being built up under their student loan. Secondly, 71 per cent of students would rather suffer hardship than incur debt. I congratulate Scotland's colleges on taking the time to talk to students to find out what their position is.

There is evidence in that report that potential students are deterred from studying by the debt that is incurred under student loans. People who have taken steps to improve their lives, who have taken the decision to get themselves on to the learning ladder and who have been through the hardest part of the process arrive at the doorstep only to find themselves turned away by the dementor of student loans and graduate debt. We must change that situation, and the SNP intends to change it. Judging by the ignorance and intransigence of the Treasury, we might need independence to deliver that. Nevertheless, I can guarantee that the SNP will continue to press for proper access to that money for Scotland's students.

The Liberal Democrat motion calls for a minimum income guarantee of £7,000 from grants, loans and parental contributions, but with no indication of how those proportions would be decided. Margaret Smith would happily—perhaps even jauntily—increase the burden of debt under student loans to £7,000 a year. What a tuition fee that would be—£7,000 plus interest for a higher national certificate; £14,000 plus interest for a higher national diploma; £28,000 plus interest for most Scottish degrees; and £35,000 plus interest to qualify as a doctor or a dentist. That shocking proposal would make the graduate endowment tuition fee a minor insult by comparison. Such education policies are a poisonous recipe for Scotland and should be rejected.

I would have thought that even the Lib Dems could recognise the disasters that have been wrought around the world by unsustainable debt. It would be far better for all concerned if we followed the SNP's lead and continued to drive the student support system—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I am afraid that the member's time is up.

11:00

James Kelly (Glasgow Rutherglen) (Lab): I welcome the opportunity to take part in the debate, which comes at an important time for Scotland's students, who face the problem of trying to get through their courses in a time of financial hardship and economic recession.

As students embark on their courses, they are looking for appropriate support from Government, and it is important that we link that to economic growth. To try to grow the economy we need people who are trained up and properly skilled. In order for that to happen, we must widen access to education and tap into talent throughout Scotland. From that point of view, I welcome Scottish Labour's proposals to tackle student hardship and to seek to provide minimum income guarantees of £7,000 for the poorest students. That would be welcomed across student campuses.

The issue of child care support for students, which has been raised with me by students in my constituency, must also be addressed. If we are trying to get as many people as possible into the student population in order that we can get them qualified to help Scotland's economy, we must help those who are parents and who have child care responsibilities. There is no doubt that, in recent times, child care funds have been under pressure. We must consider measures that will reverse that trend.

Although I am sympathetic towards the general principles of the Liberal Democrat motion, I think that it falls down in its failure to provide a cost for the policy. Margaret Smith was unable to be specific about the cost, which, to an extent, is the story of the Liberal Democrats over the past six months.

Keith Brown: I agree with the member about the uncoded nature of the Liberal Democrat proposals. Can he put a cost to the proposals in the Labour amendment? How will he reconcile those proposals with the £500 million in cuts that are coming down the line?

James Kelly: The £30 million that is being set aside for additional student support could go a long way towards funding Labour's proposals.

In the autumn, Tavish Scott announced a proposal for a tax cut of 2p. As Murdo Fraser said, the Liberal Democrats then embarked on a programme of spending commitments totalling £8.3 billion between September and the start of the budget. Today, an uncoded proposal has been brought before us. That is not good enough. The Liberal Democrats must be honest with the voters.

That is also where the SNP falls down on the issue. Kenny Gibson chided the Liberal Democrats for their election ploy in 1999. However, the SNP pledge to dump the debt was an election ploy that has melted in the full glare of Government responsibility. Voters in my constituency told me that they were supporting the SNP only because of that pledge, and they will remember the SNP's cynicism when they return to the polls next time around.

We must support students now. We must deliver for Scotland's students and dump the SNP.

11: 04

Bill Wilson (West of Scotland) (SNP): The first part of the motion states:

"That the Parliament recognises the importance of the higher and further education sector; notes the outcome of the *New Horizons: responding to the challenges of the 21st century* report and the need to involve key stakeholders in discussions".

Who could possibly disagree with that? The "New Horizons" report praises the reputation and quality of Scotland's universities and highlights how they contribute to the wellbeing of Scotland. Furthermore, who could disagree with the inclusion of stakeholders in discussions? Perhaps one day—oh happy day!—the Lib Dems will allow stakeholders their say on the constitution.

Next, we come to:

"believes that Scotland's students have been let down by the SNP government's failure to deliver on its manifesto pledge".

I ask members to note the tone of that phrase and compare it with that of the following statement:

"We welcome the opportunity of working with the minority government to end the graduate endowment as a move towards reducing student indebtedness."

There is something of a contrast there. The latter—a statement by Jeremy Purvis—reflects the kind of constructive attitude needed to solve the debt problems that our students face. What has changed since Mr Purvis made that welcome and mature statement? Far be it from me to waste valuable parliamentary time by accusing the Liberal Democrats of hypocrisy and inconsistency. I merely ask the party that would deny Scots the democratic right to decide their own future to adopt a constructive attitude to the Scottish Government's open-minded approach to student income, and to its genuine attempts to alleviate student debt and remove deterrents to those thinking of entering higher education.

I remind the Liberal Democrats that, apart from abolishing their graduate endowment, thereby removing the spectre of a £2,300 fee and benefiting about 50,000 students, the Scottish Government has replaced loans to part-time students with grants, benefiting 20,000 students; extended an existing postgraduate funding scheme to part-time students; boosted discretionary hardship funds; increased helper support for disabled students; and announced a trebling of career development loans for postgraduate and vocational study. It has not stopped there. The Scottish Government is adding an extra £30 million to the student support budget—further commitment to tackling student

hardship. By contrast, thanks to the Lib-Lab loans system, 370,000 students and graduates owed more than £2 billion by the end of the 2007-08 financial year.

The closing words of the motion are:

"and calls on the Scottish Government to deliver a simplified support system, which includes a minimum income guarantee of £7,000 per annum for full-time higher education students made up from a combination of grants, loans and parental contributions."

I fully support the aim of a decent minimum income, but how do the Lib Dems expect to create a simplified support system? Why does a system become complex? It becomes complex because there are many contingencies to cover. An overly simplified system will result in individuals falling through the gaps. Personally, I prefer complexity and genuine help to simplicity and abandoning those who need help.

The Lib Dems singularly failed to increase the student support package during their seven years in power. They did not propose any amendments to the most recent Scottish budget. The present Government has already improved the situation, and will continue to do so in every practical and effective way.

Speaking of effective, I take issue with the loans element of the Liberal Democrat proposal. Can the Liberal Democrats refute the evidence that loans—which are future debts—deter the least privileged from accessing education? I challenge them to do so. The Liberal Democrats attack the Scottish National Party for failing to abolish completely student debt, and then suggest that we increase it through loans. I am proud to be a member of a party that supports grants rather than loans, and that has the interests of the poorest members of society at its heart.

There may be a way of simplifying things, but the Liberal Democrats' call for a simplified system that would cover the needs of every student is puerile grandstanding from the luxury of opposition, where, if the motion is any evidence, they are clearly set to remain.

The Liberal Democrats attacked the Scottish Government for not abolishing student debt, but clearly stated their opposition to Scottish Government proposals to abolish said debt. Moreover, they insist that loans—in other words debt—are part of their proposed minimum income. If that is not muddled thinking, what is?

11:08

Marilyn Livingstone (Kirkcaldy) (Lab): The debate could not be taking place at a more opportune time, as funding for our poorest students is reaching crisis point. During economic difficulties, resources should be focused on those

in greatest need and that must be done as a matter of urgency. The SNP Government is letting down Scotland's students, who are already at a major disadvantage compared to students in other parts of the United Kingdom. As other members have said, only this week we heard about the problems at the University of Abertay Dundee, which are having an impact on students in my constituency.

I will focus on those in most need, and draw the cabinet secretary's attention to a funding crisis looming within the college sector that I hope will receive her immediate attention. Today's debate is about all Scotland's students.

The Scottish funding council method of allocation for bursary funding is on an historical basis, which means that funding coming into the sector is based on data that are two years out of date. However, the Government must take on board and react to the different issues that face students and colleges this year.

It is now apparent that the composition of the student body is very different from what it was two years ago, as are students' requirements. An example of that is the greater number of mature students entering post-school education. Their bursary payments are considerably higher than those of students without family commitments. Many students come from families accessing education for the first time. Those include mature students, lone parents and students with dependent families. Colleges also support students from those areas of Scotland with the highest levels of deprivation.

This year, the college sector has experienced a significant shortfall in bursary funding. As Jeremy Purvis said, the sector highlighted that potential shortfall to the Scottish funding council in autumn 2008. By February 2009, the sector shortfall was £9.5 million, and the SFC responded by saying that it anticipated being able to allocate a further £5 million, although that has not been confirmed.

Fiona Hyslop: I do not doubt that there is increased demand, but I would like the member to acknowledge that increased resources are going in. Does she acknowledge that the colleges congratulated the funding council on moving quickly to help address some of the problems that she is talking about?

Marilyn Livingstone: I will come back to that point.

Even with the further £5 million, there will still be a shortfall of £4.5 million. What I want to emphasise is the hardship that that will cause.

My local college is Adam Smith College, which serves the whole of central Fife. As things stand, the college anticipates a shortfall in excess of

£500,000 in meeting bursary commitments to its existing body of full-time students. The college is, rightly, committed to addressing access, inclusion and diversity by targeting those in some of the poorest areas in my constituency. It has been very successful in improving student retention rates—the Parliament should support that.

My concern is that if the Scottish funding council does not fully meet its obligation and colleges have to make up the shortfall from their already stretched budgets, cuts are inevitable. Those cuts are coming at a time when we need the sector to grow and to contribute fully to our ambition to have a highly skilled workforce, which has never been more crucial. I have used my local college as an example, but the £4.5 million shortfall throughout the sector shows that it is an issue affecting the whole of Scotland.

For the reasons that I have highlighted, I believe that we must concentrate our efforts, and I hope that the cabinet secretary will act now—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I am afraid that the member's time is up.

11:12

Bob Doris (Glasgow) (SNP): I welcome this debate on student income, secured by the Liberal Democrats. I may not agree that this is the appropriate time to hold such a debate—certainly not with a consultation on student support, “Supporting a Smarter Scotland”, on-going—and I may not necessarily agree with the solutions proposed by the Liberal Democrats, but it is an important topic. Given that under the previous Executive there was at best a stand-still position on tackling student debt—I am trying to be polite—and that student debt doubled, it is welcome that the Liberal Democrats and the SNP Government are perhaps moving in the same direction in relation to student support and student debt.

The Scottish Government has abolished the graduate endowment, lifting £2,300-worth of debt off each student and benefiting about 50,000 students and graduates, and has reintroduced student grants to part-time students with a £38 million investment that will benefit 20,000 students. There is also a 14.6 per cent increase in funds available to tackle student hardship. Those catalysts surely set the agenda for the debate.

The SNP Government has moved to tackle student hardship and debt, and the Liberal Democrats have joined us. Although I welcome that, I am sure that members will understand that I cannot support the Lib Dem motion. The Scottish Government has moved to deliver the SNP's pledges where possible. With the on-going consultation, we are keen to go further. For many students, their debt is far smaller than it was.

While not all of it has been dumped—not as much as we would like—we have gone far beyond what any other party promised the electorate at the previous election.

I have an open mind on the £7,000 minimum income guarantee but, like everything else in life, funding must be identified and allocated and a delivery mechanism must be put in place. I am delighted that a further £30 million has been identified and that the Scottish Government is consulting on how to allocate those funds, but basic arithmetic shows that a £7,000 minimum income guarantee cannot be delivered using £30 million. It also pre-empts the on-going consultation. That is not right, which is why I cannot support the Lib Dem motion.

That said, at least the Lib Dems are clear about what a minimum income guarantee is. I will tell members what it is not. It is not the Labour amendment. A minimum income guarantee for students is just what it says: a minimum income guarantee. It might be a cocktail of parental contribution, student grant and student loan, but, once implemented, it should be available to all students. Helping the poorest students is, of course, a positive act and is why the graduate endowment has been dumped, why parental contribution has been taken into account and why student hardship grants have been increased. However, a minimum income guarantee by definition gives all students a minimum income. If we give some students a minimum income and not others, we will not help the poorest students who will be left. The bar must be put at the same level for a minimum income guarantee.

Labour's proposal is simply an oxymoron. In fact, after nearly two years in the chamber, I am beginning to feel that the Labour Party is an oxymoron. The Liberal Democrats might not agree with the Scottish Government's position this morning, but I genuinely hope that, come decision time, they will not be made a patsy by the Labour Opposition.

11:15

Karen Whitefield (Airdrie and Shotts) (Lab): I welcome this opportunity to participate in a debate on an important matter for Scotland's students and their families.

We all aspire to a Scotland in which every individual has the opportunity to reach their full potential and in which access to education is based on ability, not on ability to pay. However, in the past few weeks, I have received numerous letters from constituents who are struggling to complete their education courses because of shortfalls in child care funding. Indeed, the same issue was highlighted by my colleague James

Kelly. There is no doubt that many more potential students have been deterred from applying to college or university because they have no hope of securing affordable child care.

However, while students in Scotland are struggling to fund child care, students elsewhere in the UK are able to access guaranteed child care support as a result of the Childcare Act 2006. Access to affordable or free child care while studying should be a right for all students; no one should be forced out of college or university or be deterred from applying because they cannot access an affordable child care place. The Government needs to address the issue urgently and ensure that parents who are returning to education and training are supported, not penalised.

On the new horizons task force, I am greatly concerned that important stakeholders, including the trade unions and FE colleges, were asked merely to give evidence to it. Surely a task force that has the responsibility of highlighting important challenges with regard to future funding for the sector should involve all those with a stake in the process, including students.

Fiona Hyslop: Does the member acknowledge that students and various unions involved in higher education gave evidence to the task force?

Karen Whitefield: They did indeed give evidence. However, my point is that students, trade unions and further education colleges deserved not just to be consulted after the decisions had been taken, but to be given a seat at the table at which the discussions were taking place. After all, they are key to the future of Scotland's higher education sector.

On the proposal for a minimum income guarantee for all students, there is no doubt that the growing levels of student hardship and debt need to be addressed urgently. Although the SNP Government scrapped the graduate endowment, it has failed to put a single penny into the pockets of any of Scotland's students. That said, although I support the guarantee in principle, I believe strongly that a promise to provide every student in Scotland with a £7,000 minimum income would simply become another broken promise. Funding such a policy would result in sizeable cuts elsewhere in the Scottish budget—and most certainly in the education budget.

As a result, I urge that we target support at the students who need it most. Delivering a £7,000 minimum income guarantee for Scotland's poorest students by the end of the parliamentary session would represent a significant step forward and, more important, would be achievable. That is why the Labour Party believes that it is important to deliver on that policy, which would ensure that

Scotland's poorest students received the support and encouragement that they deserve.

I urge members to support the Labour amendment.

11:20

Elizabeth Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): As several members have made clear, the Government in its 2007 manifesto made an unequivocal promise to dump student debt. The campaign cry gained considerable student support at the time, but, along with other key pledges on class sizes and local income tax and in view of the SNP's reputation for failing to deliver, it now looks completely hollow. I have no doubt that, 18 months on, the same students feel disillusioned and betrayed by the same Government.

The cabinet secretary will tell us that an extra £30 million has been put aside for 2010 and 2011. Although she is right about that, it does not solve the fundamental problem of how we can support the more and more people whom we are encouraging to attend university and college. It is a very harsh economic lesson, and I do not think that the Liberal Democrats have quite taken it on board.

As Murdo Fraser said, we fully agree with the motion's references to the incredible importance of the tertiary sector and—as Karen Whitefield made clear—the need to involve all stakeholders in future discussions. However, we reject the call for a minimum income guarantee of £7,000. The idea is attractive in principle, but politicians have to deal with reality, especially during an economic recession, and, as Marilyn Livingstone pointed out, a more effective solution would be to target the money at the most vulnerable students.

Margaret Smith: Does the member accept that in my speech I made it clear that this could not and should not be done in one fell swoop and that the £7,000 minimum income guarantee for the poorest students would be a step along the way towards a wider target?

Elizabeth Smith: Forgive me, but I do not think that the motion actually says that. No matter what party we belong to or what view we take in this debate, we cannot get away from the fundamental—and harsh—economic lesson that needs to be learned. Can the number of people whom we are encouraging to attend courses in the tertiary sector actually be supported, either to look after themselves or in teaching time?

We need to think about what we are saying to students about their approach to the tertiary sector. As my colleague Murdo Fraser has pointed out a number of times, the danger lies in accumulating a commercial debt and the

associated—and massive—level of repayments. Credit cards and bank overdrafts have very high interest rates and can leave students mired in bad debt for a very long time.

In conclusion, Presiding Officer—I know that you are short of time—the Scottish Conservatives firmly believe that the best way of addressing the problem is to target the very scarce money that is available in the budget at the most vulnerable students and that the most effective method of doing so is through a system of student loans and grants. There are great benefits in possessing a degree, not least in financial recompense, and if that is to be set alongside the ambition of widening access—which we all support—we must be doubly sure that we are putting resources in the right places. If we ignore the benefits of increasing student loans, we will let down our students very badly, not just today but for many years to come.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I can give Ken Macintosh four and a half minutes.

11:23

Ken Macintosh (Eastwood) (Lab): I welcome this Liberal Democrat debate. Although, as my Labour colleagues have made clear, we wish to amend the motion, we should thank the Lib Dems for bringing the issue to Parliament.

The financial difficulties of students have never been more apparent as they have in recent years. Many of us have heard from young constituents who are struggling to cope—or, more likely, from their parents. Only yesterday, I read a letter from a mother whose son started at college in August but who has yet to receive the bursary to which he should be entitled. Indeed, he has not even received a reply to his application to the hardship fund. His mother says:

“It seems extremely unfair that I am now forced into the position of supporting him when I cannot afford it. I have provided financially for him for 26 weeks since the start of his course. Surely he is entitled to have some independent income? My mortgage arrears are now such that there is a decree allowing repossession of my house to start immediately if I miss another payment. I have council tax arrears, and have just finished paying off gas arrears.”

The case would be worrying enough if it was a one-off, but we all know from our constituency case loads that such cases are all too common. I will hear back directly from the institution in question, but it appears that many institutions, such as Edinburgh Napier University, Glasgow Caledonian University and Adam Smith College, which Marilyn Livingstone highlighted, are either struggling to cope or, like the University of Abertay Dundee, have run out of funds altogether and cannot meet their obligations to students.

Fiona Hyslop: Edinburgh Napier University did not make more requests for funding. Funding was not allocated as it did not ask for it.

Ken Macintosh: Edinburgh Napier University is struggling. If the minister cannot even recognise and is not even willing to concede that universities' diversionary and hardship funds are running low, we cannot engage in a debate today.

Cases such as the one that I mentioned are dispiriting, but what has been most disheartening this morning and in discussions of student funding over the past two years has been the level of dishonesty involved. I refer not just to the broken dump-the-debt promises, which were bad enough—they have been shown up for the empty election bribes that they were—but to the contrast between SNP ministers' grandiose language and the reality of the student experience. Not one penny of the money from abolishing the graduate endowment has helped a current student to maintain their studies. The SNP promised to move from loans to grants, but as Margaret Smith pointed out, not only has it failed to come close to delivering on that promise, but replacing a £500 loan with a grant does not address the immediate needs of students or provide them with any extra income. Instead, we still hear the SNP's high-falutin' words about abolishing debt without any mention being made of the millions of pounds in commercial debt at credit card rates that our young people at colleges and universities have taken on. Murdo Fraser made that point.

There is a gap, which I believe is widening, between the way in which the SNP talks about higher and further education and the day-to-day financial difficulties that students have to wrestle with. Throughout the country, students are either working longer hours—if they can get work at all—or relying more than ever on their parents, who can often scarcely manage to cope. Yet again, the SNP Government has failed to recognise or rise to the challenge and to invest in our future workforce in the middle of our broader economic difficulties.

We all agree that we need a highly productive and highly skilled graduate-level or postgraduate-level workforce, for example, for a productive economy. Yet again, the SNP is willing to talk about a highly skilled workforce, but unwilling to will the means to make it happen. We have the empty rhetoric of a so-called return to free education, but nothing tangible to offer to address student hardship. If education were free, we would not need to worry about hardship funds; colleges and universities would not need to worry about the impact of the joint future thinking task force; and we would not be having this debate.

If we are to continue to operate with the limited funding that the SNP Government has made available, we must refocus support on those who

most need it: Scotland's poorest students. The real targets of the policy should be hardship funds and widening access. Drop-out rates are on the rise, and many thousands more students have considered dropping out because of financial hardship. Although we seek to amend the Lib Dem motion, the debate has been helpful in flagging up the gulf between the current maximum level of support of £4,500 that is available to Scottish students and the £7,000 that it is estimated they need to live on.

I hope that colleagues will accept that I am not cynical about my politics, Parliament or what we can achieve together. However, the doublespeak on student support and the raising of expectations without ever delivering on promises breed the cynicism that undermines everything we do. I urge members to stop the SNP trying to con Scotland's students and to support the Labour amendment.

11:28

The Minister for Schools and Skills (Keith Brown): The debate has been wide ranging. However, it is important in summing up to send a clear message to students and graduates. The Government values the contributions that students and graduates make to society, and it will do all that it can to support them at the most crucial stages of their lives.

Maintaining a world-class education system is essential if we are to create a more successful country with higher levels of sustainable economic growth. A number of members have said that we must ensure that access to that education system is based on the ability to learn, not the ability to pay. We made a commitment on that, and it is what we intend to do.

We believe, of course, that student loans are wrong for students and for Scotland. It would be better for students if grants were paid directly to them and better for graduates if they were not forced to leave higher education with thousands of pounds-worth of debt. That is why we have set aside £30 million to support the first phase of the move from loans to grants.

Marilyn Livingstone: As a matter of urgency, will the minister speak to the Scottish funding council and ask it to fully fund college bursary programmes throughout Scotland?

Keith Brown: The Scottish funding council is aware of the problems. We are in the middle of a consultation process and further changes should await the completion of that process. I will come back to that.

We appreciate that a number of things have changed since we developed our proposals, not least the economic environment, which has

increased financial pressures on everyone. As a result, we are willing to consider the case that students and others have put forward for an increase in the overall amount of support. We welcome views on how the £30 million could best be used overall to help students who are most in need. We have heard views from members, some of which I would like to respond to.

Margaret Smith said that she is proud of the Lib Dem record on student funding, but many members have pointed out that the Lib Dem proposal is uncoded. I understand that a proposal was to be put forward by Jeremy Purvis at this week's Lib Dem conference on increasing tax cuts in the UK. I think that that explains as much as anything why we are having this debate. We have been told that there will no longer be £800 million of tax cuts in Scotland, but tax cuts will now be applied in the UK. I have heard one price tag of £20 billion in that context. If we have to try to achieve £20 billion of cuts in the UK, with Scotland taking its share, we will be back to the Lib Dem dichotomy of increasing tax cuts and therefore reducing the revenue that is available to finance them. A massive number of promises have been made.

Jeremy Purvis: Will the minister give way?

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

With her backing vocalists—Frank McAveety and Hugh O'Donnell—Claire Baker made the point that broken Labour promises of the past are irrelevant to the debate. That is absolute nonsense. Students are still paying loans that the Labour Party and the Conservative party created. That is a fact that the Government simply has to deal with. We cannot wish it away, no matter how much members of previous Administrations might like to forget it.

The claim that hardship funds have flatlined is not borne out by the facts. As Kenny Gibson pointed out, there has been a 14.6 per cent increase in this year's hardship funds.

Claire Baker: Will the minister take an intervention?

Keith Brown: I will do so when I finish my point.

The reason that the hardship funds are massively increasing has a lot to do with the disastrous economic situation in which we find ourselves as a result of the Labour Party's mismanagement of the economy. I am interested in whether Claire Baker wants to accept responsibility for that.

Claire Baker: The member talks about the increasing pressure on hardship funds. According to my calculations, the SNP Government has spent £56 million so far on tackling graduate debt.

How much has been spent on tackling student hardship?

Keith Brown: I have just mentioned the 14.6 per cent increase in this year's hardship funds, which takes the figure to more than £16 million. I am glad that Claire Baker acknowledges the resources that we have put into reducing graduate debt. Of course, someone in Scotland has roughly half the student debt that a person in England has, and in the past two years, the average graduate debt has gone down for the first time. Therefore, we are doing our bit to address the debt that students find themselves with.

Claire Baker: Will the minister give way?

Keith Brown: No. I have just taken an intervention from the member.

If what has been proposed is accepted, students will face massively increased private debt. They would be asked to do that at the same time as they are looking at a societal debt of trillions of pounds. Future generations in this country must face Labour's disastrous debt management process for the whole economy, and they are being asked to take on further private debt, too. That is wrong.

Murdo Fraser said, rightly, that the Lib Dem proposal is uncoded. It seems that, having had the straitjacket of cuts of £800 million taken away, the Lib Dems are back on another spending spree. Their proposal has no credibility whatsoever.

Kenny Gibson mentioned the massive debts that exist, and I have just mentioned the trillions of pounds of future debt that we are accumulating, which consists of public debt for public authorities and private debt for individuals. That is the real problem for students. When they go through their courses and try to learn to create a better future for themselves, they are well aware of the massive debts hanging over them.

In the past, Labour has said that it is not possible for it to say anything coherent about its council tax proposals, for example, because it was the wrong part of the electoral cycle. If Labour is not willing to address the difficult issues, such as what it would do about the council tax, it is incumbent on it to start to create future spending commitments, as it would like to give the impression today of having done. However, that is simply not the case.

Finally, the consultation is an opportunity—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I am sorry, but the minister's time is up.

11:34

Hugh O'Donnell (Central Scotland) (LD): I almost congratulate the minister on what is, I think,

his first ministerial speech from the front bench. I do not necessarily agree with its contents, but such courtesies are nonetheless due. I have damned him with faint praise.

The debate has been interesting, important and in some ways acrimonious, because we have all taken different positions. There is a lesson to learn for us all: parties should be careful what they put in their manifestos, because they might find themselves having to deliver it. That is the reality of what has happened to SNP promises in several areas. To return briefly to the minister's speech, we have heard concerns, perhaps legitimate, about the cost of providing a minimum income guarantee of £7,000 to full-time students. I will be interested to hear from the Government benches at some point—summing up after the minister is a unique experience for me, in that I will not get an immediate reply to my question—how much it will cost to replace the entire loan situation with the grants that the minister just mentioned. Perhaps he will write to me about that with an indication of how things will pan out. As a supplementary to that, I ask whether the minister has Treasury support for his proposal.

We need to realise that we are facing dire economic times, and in that regard I have some sympathy with the Labour Party amendment. In the Central Scotland region, which I represent, a high number of people will need to reskill and retrain as a result of the economic downturn. Most of that will take place in our FE and HE institutions. Notwithstanding the remarks of the cabinet secretary and the minister, there is no doubt that all such institutions are in serious trouble when it comes to meeting the demand on their funds. Additional funding has come from the funding council, particularly for child care. However, given the situation in this country and the hardship that our students face, it is not sufficient for us to sit here and play party-political bip-bap—the issue is far too important for that.

Keith Brown: I take the member's point about party politics. However, having made their position clear today, how do the Lib Dems intend to take into account all those replies that are yet to arrive in the remaining consultation period, given that it was the Lib Dems who asked for that consultation?

Hugh O'Donnell: Our policy position has been clear since before 2007, if memory serves, and we have reiterated our policy principle on student income. Given that the NUS will debate the subject at its forthcoming conference and, as the minister said, it has been lodged for further debate by the Liberal Democrats, today's airing of the subject is entirely appropriate when the FE colleges and HE institutions will be under such pressure. The figures on demand that they have

been working with are two years out of date by dint of the cabinet secretary's letter. It is impossible to see that far into the future.

The value of our kicking around who claimed what and how much in a manifesto or promissory note on Fiona Hyslop's website is irrelevant unless we tackle the situation clearly. The consultation is important but, as the NUS said this morning, the £30 million that is currently available is completely inadequate. There are various ways in which we can combine the expenditure and the means of resourcing to deliver the £7,000—

Murdo Fraser: I am genuinely confused by the Liberal Democrat position. Is it that the Government should spend more money on student support? If so, how much and where will that money come from? Can we please have a straight answer?

The Presiding Officer (Alex Fergusson): Mr O'Donnell, you have 40 seconds left.

Hugh O'Donnell: That is a very good rescue, because I do not have the details that Murdo Fraser asks for.

I thank members for engaging in the debate, which has aired a valuable, useful and important subject, and I encourage them to support our motion at decision time.

Ross Finnie (West of Scotland) (LD): On a point of order, Presiding Officer.

During the debate, Mr Kenneth Gibson, in concluding his remarks—the Deputy Presiding Officer had instructed him so to do—made a complaint about being asked to conclude. In his final remarks, which I heard clearly from where I was sitting, he used the words “With friends like you”. The Deputy Presiding Officer said that he had not heard the remark. I regret to say that, in my view, the phrase “With friends like you” is not respectful to the chair. I invite you, Presiding Officer, to rule whether such comments are appropriate in this place.

The Presiding Officer: Thank you for the point of order. As you are aware, I was not in the chair at the time; it was my deputy. I will reflect on the matter in discussion with my deputy and consider whether any further action is required.

Question Time

SCOTTISH EXECUTIVE

General Questions

11:41

Football

1. Christine Grahame (South of Scotland) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will consider carrying out an economic impact assessment in relation to the support that it and other public bodies provide for football, in light of petition PE1233, submitted by former Scotland coach Craig Brown, regarding the creation of a Great Britain football team. (S3O-6240)

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Health and Wellbeing (Nicola Sturgeon): The Scottish Government has been asked by the clerk to the Public Petitions Committee to respond to Craig Brown's petition, and I advise Parliament that the Government will do so in full.

Christine Grahame: Does the Scottish Government share the concerns of the Scottish Football Association, the tartan army and former Scotland managers that the UK Government has indicated this week that, regardless of the consultation that FIFA has undertaken with the four home football associations, it will press ahead with fielding a GB team even if it is made up entirely of English players and regardless of the dangerous precedent that it will set and the threat that it poses to Scottish football? Does the cabinet secretary agree that such direct political interference, which originated from Gordon Brown and 10 Downing Street, is precisely the type of behaviour that will risk Scotland losing its independent footballing status?

Nicola Sturgeon: I certainly share the concerns of the individuals and organisations that Christine Grahame mentioned about the notion of a GB football team. Like most people in Scotland, I do not favour the idea of a GB football team. It is an absolutely ridiculous idea that has no public support whatsoever in Scotland, probably made all the more ridiculous by suggestions earlier this week that the team might consist entirely of English football players.

If the notion were just ridiculous, it might not be so serious, but the idea is also dangerous. Notwithstanding Gordon Brown's desperate attempts to show otherwise, a GB team would pose a real threat to Scotland's footballing independence. That is completely unacceptable.

I agree with Christine Grahame that we would not be talking about the issue if Gordon Brown had not started pushing it for his own political reasons. Let us call on him to stop pushing it and allow football to be the politics-free zone that people want it to be.

Mr Frank McAveety (Glasgow Shettleston) (Lab): In light of the petition's being in front of the Public Petitions Committee, which I convene, does the minister agree that it is appropriate for that committee to address any petition that is put to it? Does she agree that comments such as those from the SFA and Gordon Smith about politicians addressing the issue by raising it directly with all the football authorities to receive clarification are helpful?

Nicola Sturgeon: The Public Petitions Committee is doing the job that it exists to do on this matter, as on so many others, and it is doing that job well—if that is not currying favour too much with the Public Petitions Committee.

It would be preferable if politicians did not have to get involved in such a debate, but let us be under no doubt that the only reason why Scottish politicians are involved is that the debate was kicked off by the Prime Minister for reasons best known to himself. If he stops pushing a GB football team that has no support, the rest of us can stop opposing it.

Town Centre Regeneration Fund (Licensed Trade)

2. Hugh Henry (Paisley South) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive whether it will support applications from the licensed trade to allow responsible publicans to play a part in spending the town centre regeneration fund. (S3O-6205)

The Minister for Housing and Communities (Alex Neil): We are currently working on the details of the fund, and we expect to be able to make an announcement by the end of March 2009.

Hugh Henry: The minister's colleagues are on a crusade against the irresponsible consumption of alcohol. I am sure that most people support that crusade, but as part of it responsible elements in the licensed trade have been demonised. Pubs in our town centres perform critical economic and social functions. Is the minister prepared to meet Scottish Beer and Pub Association representatives and other representatives of the licensed trade to discuss how it can play its part in transforming Scotland's town centres?

Alex Neil: We are happy to listen to any representations from anyone in developing our proposals, but we must move fairly quickly: as I said, we expect to make a full announcement about the fund by the end of March. I acknowledge

the role that responsible landlords play in the communities in our town centres; we do not wish at all to demonise responsible landlords for their role.

Jeremy Purvis (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD): The Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Sustainable Growth confirmed that the source of the fund is accelerated capital funding as a result of Barnett consequential on accelerated affordable housing investment in England and Wales. Will the minister confirm that that accelerated capital must be not only identified but spent in this financial year?

Alex Neil: The member is correct: the money must be identified and spent in the incoming financial year.

Young Drivers (Rural Areas)

3. Alison McInnes (North East Scotland) (LD): To ask the Scottish Executive what action it is taking to improve road safety among young drivers in rural areas. (S3O-6179)

The Minister for Transport, Infrastructure and Climate Change (Stewart Stevenson): Through Road Safety Scotland, the Scottish Government is taking action to raise awareness among young people of their vulnerability on the roads and to encourage responsible driving attitudes. The Scottish road safety framework, which is to be published later this year, will include measures to address young driver safety.

Alison McInnes: The Government's research in "Rural Road Safety: Drivers and Driving", which was published in December, noted that

"younger respondents reported that there was a gap in the process of learning to drive, with the focus more on manoeuvring the car and learning how to pass the test than on learning the types of skills necessary for driving on rural roads."

It was concluded that a strengthened pass plus scheme would have merit. Will the minister commit to supporting the development and roll-out of a pass plus squared scheme that is targeted at young rural drivers?

Stewart Stevenson: There is much in what the member says. I share concerns about the development of the necessary skills for driving on rural roads, particularly at night. We are working with the United Kingdom Government, through the Driving Standards Agency, on driver training.

The pass plus scheme has been piloted throughout Scotland and has provided modest advantages. We will certainly consider it as part of the future of driver training, particularly once we see what the DSA proposes.

Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab): What discussions has the minister had with local

authorities to encourage them to use their powers to lower speeds on dangerous single-track roads?

Stewart Stevenson: I have not discussed single-track roads, but I agree with Rhoda Grant that many drivers who are unfamiliar with such roads do not realise their particular dangers. When a driver approaches a corner that they cannot see round on a single-track road, it is different from approaching such a corner on a dual-track road.

I discuss road safety regularly with local authorities. Rhoda Grant makes a good point, and I will add the matter to the list of issues that I discuss with appropriate councils.

Rob Gibson (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): The minister talked about the pass plus scheme. Has he considered discussing with the police, insurance companies and the Institute of Advanced Motorists the inclusion of advanced driving tests in his proposals? Young drivers in Caithness and other areas in the north have approached me to suggest that, and we think that that well-known means of improving driving would be a great enhancement for them.

Stewart Stevenson: I declare an interest as a member of the Institute of Advanced Motorists. The IAM is one source of additional driver training, and I support all such sources—the Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents, for example, is also keenly engaged in the issue. The Institute of Advanced Motorists is represented on our road safety strategy group, and I am sure that, when we publish the road safety strategy, it will reflect the additional and voluntary training that bodies such as ROSPA and the IAM can provide.

Forestry

4. Ms Wendy Alexander (Paisley North) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive whether it will abandon its proposal to lease out a large proportion of Forestry Commission Scotland land, given that 71 per cent of respondents to its consultation opposed the idea. (S3O-6190)

The Minister for Environment (Roseanna Cunningham): As the member knows, the option of leasing parts of the national forest estate was part of our consultation on the forestry provisions in the Climate Change (Scotland) Bill. The responses to the consultation are being considered, along with an options review prepared by the Forestry Commission Scotland. An announcement will be made in due course.

Ms Alexander: I wonder how long we will have to wait for the Scottish National Party to admit that it got the proposals wrong and to end the uncertainty in the wood-processing industry and the worries of staff about their jobs.

Did the minister read last week's *Campbeltown Courier*, which reported that

"the ... unions had been told to expect"

an announcement this week? Will she confirm that, if she has something to say on the matter, it is her duty to tell the Parliament her decision first?

Roseanna Cunningham: I regret that the *Campbeltown Courier* is not on my regular reading list; perhaps the member will give me a copy of that press coverage.

The unions have been reassured that the proposed leasing would have no deleterious effects on their situation. As for waiting for a decision, it will be taken far sooner than the time that it will take the Labour Party to produce something constructive on the subject—that has been totally absent.

John Scott (Ayr) (Con): The minister will accept that the published responses to the Government's consultation were largely hostile and that the evidence to the Rural Affairs and Environment Committee provided more questions than answers about the leasing scheme. It is clear that the proposal simply does not command sufficient support throughout the Parliament to progress. On that basis, is it not more sensible for the Government to withdraw the proposal and instead focus on the opportunities that could arise from pursuing joint ventures between the Forestry Commission and other interested parties, which could generate the tens of millions of pounds of investment that are necessary to meet the planting targets?

Roseanna Cunningham: As I have said, we are considering all options. The Forestry Commission Scotland has prepared an options review, which will be taken into consideration when the decision is made. I will make the decision when I make it, and members will be informed in due course.

Community Enterprises

5. Shirley-Anne Somerville (Lothians) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what action it is taking to support community enterprises. (S3O-6252)

The Minister for Enterprise, Energy and Tourism (Jim Mather): We are committing a record level of investment—£93 million over the 2008 to 2011 spending round, which represents a 37 per cent increase on the previous spending review—to help the sector grow and build capacity, capability and financial sustainability.

The Scottish Government's "Enterprising Third Sector Action Plan 2008-2011" creates the right environment for the third sector to thrive, and our direct investments will allow the sector to respond

to the challenges and opportunities of the current economic conditions.

Shirley-Anne Somerville: Does the minister agree that social enterprises offer a valuable source of local employment and training in addition to making a positive difference to their community? Will he join me in congratulating the Leith-based Out of the Blue Arts and Education Trust on its success in securing a grant and loan from the new Scottish investment fund?

Jim Mather: Indeed—all that is true. I see examples of that contribution every day in my constituency and elsewhere. I join Shirley-Anne Somerville in congratulating Out of the Blue on its excellent award from the Scottish investment fund, which will enable Out of the Blue to refurbish its facilities, provide more space for artists and give artists the opportunity to develop their careers and artistic competence. The award means that the community in Leith has a centre that will help local people to undertake a variety of new activities that relate to health, waste reduction and other matters. All in all, it is delivering a positive contribution.

Lewis Macdonald (Aberdeen Central) (Lab): Does the minister recall his announcement on 16 April regarding the aye can project in Aberdeen, which provided supported employment in recycling for disabled people, and its transfer from the city council to become part of a social enterprise? Does the minister recall that the Scottish Government news release at that time promised that aye can would reopen on 1 August? Is he aware that it still has not reopened? What will he do to deliver on his promises to those disabled people?

Jim Mather: The current climate is favourable for the aye can project. The direct investment of £30 million that is available from the Scottish investment fund exists for projects that are investment ready. The aye can project clearly qualifies for that, and I look forward to the project making its case strenuously and moving forward to a new phase.

Royal Mail

6. Jamie Hepburn (Central Scotland) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what concerns it has for the Scottish economy and wider society in relation to Her Majesty's Government's proposals to part-privatise the Royal Mail. (S3O-6242)

The Minister for Enterprise, Energy and Tourism (Jim Mather): The Scottish Government shares the widespread public concern about the United Kingdom Government's proposals to part-privatise the Royal Mail, particularly concerning the dangers of diluting the universal service obligation and of further reducing the role and

presence of Royal Mail and the prospect of job losses in Scotland. The Scottish Government will continue to express our concerns and monitor developments to ensure that service levels, amenity and jobs in Scotland are protected.

Jamie Hepburn: I thank the minister for that answer. Does the minister share my view that the fact that more than 130 Labour members of the UK Parliament have indicated their opposition to the UK Government's plans indicates that there is little support in the UK's governing party, as well as no real support in the wider country, for the move? Does the minister agree that the UK Government should swiftly reconsider its proposals?

Jim Mather: I fully concur with the member's view, analysis and suggestion about what the UK Government should do. I think that about 170 MPs in total have signed the parliamentary motion opposing the plan. Further, in the House of Lords, Lord Clarke of Hampstead is disputing the claims of Lord Mandelson regarding the viability of Royal Mail Group by pointing out that all of its four sections—Royal Mail, which handles UK letters, General Logistics Systems, Parcelforce Worldwide and Post Office Ltd—are now in profit and that the Post Office is making a profit of £1 million a day.

Clearly, what is needed is transparency in the facts. A message must be sent to the UK Government that it must reconsider the proposal to go down the route of part-privatisation.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): The Royal Mail's slimming down in anticipation of part-privatisation is probably the reason for its unfortunate decision to axe post bus services in my constituency. Does the minister share my view that that is a backward step for the local economy of a remote and economically fragile part of Scotland? Will he join me in the campaign to persuade the Royal Mail to change its mind? If necessary, will he make appropriate representations to ministers in London who are responsible for the Royal Mail?

Jim Mather: I share the member's views to the letter. I deeply regret the withdrawal of that service and the impact on people, the climate and the economy that it will have. It is the antithesis of optimising the local economy and the local environmental and social system. The Royal Mail has a golden opportunity to reverse its decision and grasp some corporate social responsibility. I will meet representatives of the Royal Mail on Monday, and I will convey that message to them.

HM Revenue and Customs

7. Elizabeth Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): To ask the Scottish Executive, in light of the potential impact on jobs, what representations

it has made to the United Kingdom Government regarding the closure of HM Revenue and Customs offices in Scotland. (S3O-6160)

The Presiding Officer (Alex Fergusson): Order. There are far too many conversations taking place in the chamber. I would like to hear what is going on.

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Sustainable Growth (John Swinney): I wrote to HM Revenue and Customs on 12 February 2009, and I await its reply. I made it clear in my letter that I expect HM Revenue and Customs to place the needs and expectations of customers in Scotland at the heart of any decision of this nature.

Elizabeth Smith: It is good to hear that. I recently met staff at the HM Revenue and Customs office in Perth, who have great concerns about the impact of the closures on the local community, particularly pensioners. Can the cabinet secretary confirm what support the Scottish Government can give to help limit the impact on those pensioners?

John Swinney: As I said, the Government is concerned about the impact that the decisions will have on consumers and the employees of HM Revenue and Customs. If the proposals are given the go-ahead, we will be prepared to enter into discussions about how other public facilities could perhaps deploy services in a way that ensured the convenience of members of the public, but I stress that the Scottish Government expresses its deep concern at the proposals of HM Revenue and Customs and urge that an alternative course be taken.

Linda Fabiani (Central Scotland) (SNP): The Parliament may well remember that, as Chancellor of the Exchequer, Gordon Brown sold more than 600 properties that were occupied by the Government's tax collectors to Mapeley Estates, a company that uses tax havens such as Guernsey and Bermuda to avoid paying United Kingdom taxes. Does the First Minister agree that it is indeed ironic that, while HM Revenue and Customs offices in Scotland are closing and Labour MPs rail against tax avoidance, a private company will continue to profit from assets that were transferred from public to private ownership by the current UK Prime Minister?

John Swinney: Linda Fabiani presents much better than I can an illustration of the complete hypocrisy of the United Kingdom Government on those issues. That complete hypocrisy prevails here among the front-bench Labour Party members in relation to some of their recent remarks.

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-1526)

The First Minister (Alex Salmond): A key engagement this afternoon is to meet the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Sustainable Growth to discuss the outcome of the finance meeting with Welsh, Northern Irish and Treasury spokespeople. Iain Gray will have noticed the statements from Andrew Davies from Wales and Nigel Dodds from Northern Ireland warning of the impact of planned cuts in 2010. Those people are speaking up for their countries. When will Iain Gray be allowed to do the same?

Iain Gray: I note, too, that the Scottish budget will continue to grow next year and the following year. I want to ask about the use to which the Scottish Government puts that money. I admit that I do not know Ellon academy, although the First Minister does. I read in one of today's newspapers that the buildings at Ellon academy are past their sell-by date, that pupils will not eat in the cafeteria and that they have to cross a busy road to get to classes, because the school has a split campus. I also read that a new school would have been built under the plans of the previous Labour-led Scottish Executive. The First Minister's fiscal dogma is putting Scottish kids in danger in his constituency. Does he think that that is okay?

The First Minister: Iain Gray says that spending in Scotland will continue to increase. Unfortunately, that is not the view of David Bell in a report to the Finance Committee, in which he points out that there is the possibility of real public spending falls in Scotland for the first time since the early 1980s, a view that was backed up at the weekend by John McLaren, the former Labour Party economist, who warned of exactly the same thing. Therefore, at some point, Iain Gray will have to come to terms with the cuts that are being forecast by the United Kingdom Treasury and their impact on Scottish budgets.

On the school building programme in Scotland, I am proud that more than 150 schools have already been completed or refurbished in this term of office. Iain Gray's lack of familiarity with Ellon does not come as any great surprise to me, as that school needed refurbishment right through Labour's wasted eight years in government.

Iain Gray: The First Minister is good at taking credit for other people's work. The schools to which he refers were commissioned under the

previous Executive. A plan to refurbish Ellon academy was made under the previous Executive. Official figures make it clear that it takes at least three years to get a school built from the date it is commissioned. To date, the First Minister has not commissioned a single school. Even if he says that he will pay for a brand new Ellon academy this very afternoon, it will not be built until 2012. Is not the First Minister's promise to match Labour's school building programme brick for brick now past the point of no return?

The First Minister: We will have built 250 schools during our term of office. Iain Gray forecasts that it takes three and a half years to build a school, and perhaps it does—under the private finance initiative. Only last month, Fiona Hyslop had the great pleasure of opening a school in Perth that was commissioned by the Government and Perth and Kinross Council in October 2007 under conventional procurement. As for paying for Labour's PFI schools, I have figures that are indeed frightening because they indicate that, over the next 30 years, there will be a £30 billion bill for the Labour Party's PFI mistakes. This year, £613 million will come out of the Scottish budget for councils and central Government to make PFI payments. Next year, the figure will be £723 million, rising to £1 billion by 2020—£30 billion will be paid by the Scottish people for Labour's mistakes. Labour members claim credit for the schools, but they did not pay for a single one of them.

Iain Gray: I am delighted that the First Minister has seen fit to repeat his promise to deliver 250 schools by 2011. If I understood and accept his answer, he said that, far from commissioning no schools in two years, he has commissioned one. When will he rebuild Ellon academy?

The First Minister: Not for the first time, Iain Gray has misunderstood; I was giving an example of a school that has been commissioned and opened by the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning, belying Iain Gray's theory that it takes three and a half years to go from commissioning to opening a school. It may take that long under the Labour Party, but not under the Scottish National Party Government. The school in question is Dunning primary school in Perth.

If Iain Gray wants to catch me by surprise at First Minister's question time, it would be best for him not to pre-leak his story to *The Scotsman*. This morning, I asked for a list of the schools that have been commissioned during the SNP Government's term of office. We have commissioned the new Kingspark special school in Dundee; major refurbishments of Inveralmond community high school, James Young high school and St Kentigern's academy in West Lothian; four new primaries in South Lanarkshire; four new

primaries in Glasgow; new primaries in Dumfries and Galloway; and the new Seaview primary in Angus. At present, £1 billion-worth of work is under way on major school projects. Now that that information has come to the attention of Iain Gray, will he accept that 250 schools will be built or refurbished during the SNP Government's term of office?

Iain Gray: The business cases for some of the schools that the First Minister mentioned were agreed by the previous Executive. Some have been built by local authorities, using their own resources. None has been planned, commissioned, developed and built by the Scottish Government. The Government's position on this issue is just like its pledge on class sizes—it has made progress towards the target and will get there by 2009.

The First Minister has broken every promise that he has made on education. He broke his promise on nursery teachers. This week, another pledge—to provide two hours per week of physical education in schools—was broken. The pledge on teacher numbers has been broken. It will take 90 years for the pledge on class sizes to be met. The pledge on school building has also been broken. Every one of the Government's promises on education is collapsing, brick by brick.

The truth is that 832 of our schools need to be rebuilt and refurbished. The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning is failing Scotland's children. When will the First Minister finally realise that she is past the point of no return?

The First Minister: We know that Iain Gray is struggling when he moves off the subject and wanders over the full range of activities. It is difficult without the autocue, so let us get back to schools. Now Iain Gray is asking not about schools that have been commissioned by the Government but about schools for which a business case may have been made some years ago. I gave him the list of schools that have been commissioned by the Government under conventional procurement. To complete his understanding, I could mention some of the other schools that have been signed off since May 2007—in Falkirk, Inverclyde, West Lothian, East Dunbartonshire and West Dunbartonshire—all of which will contribute to the 250 schools that will be completed or refurbished within the Government's term of office.

Iain Gray said that some of the schools have been built by local government—yes, schools are built by local government under this Government. Why has local government been able to build those schools? Perhaps it is because of the extra £100 million in the capital programme that the Government has delivered. If I remember rightly,

that was included in a budget on which Iain Gray abstained.

Prime Minister (Meetings)

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

To ask the First Minister when he will next meet the Prime Minister. (S3F-1527)

The First Minister (Alex Salmond): I have no plans to meet the Prime Minister in the near future, although there may be a requirement for a meeting if important issues are not resolved over the next week or two.

Annabel Goldie: Yesterday, the Cabinet Secretary for Justice confirmed to the Parliament that the ludicrous and completely unacceptable anomaly of there being no time bar in Scotland to actions under human rights legislation is now being addressed. That legal defect has exposed the taxpayer to millions of pounds in compensation payments to criminals. Why has it taken so long for the Labour Government at Westminster and the Scottish National Party Government at Holyrood to sort it out? What happened in the 14 months between Mr MacAskill's letter to the Lord Chancellor on 25 October 2007 and December 2008 when the Labour Government said that no action would be taken? After all that, can the First Minister categorically confirm that the problem will be fixed before the summer recess?

The First Minister: Let us start with the positive. I am very hopeful, given the statements that have been made over the past 24 hours, that the problem can indeed be fixed. The way to do it was outlined by the Cabinet Secretary for Justice yesterday. We need legislation to be tabled at Westminster—the required secondary legislation just needs to lie on the table of the House of Commons for 40 days—and then, with the co-operation, I hope, of all parties, emergency legislation is needed in this Parliament to sort out the anomaly.

Regarding the past 18 months, I could go over what has happened, but I am anxious to get a solution to the problem in the interests of the Scottish people. I am sure that Annabel Goldie will accept my word when I say that any delay was through no lack of urgency or action by this Administration.

Annabel Goldie: Regrettably, I think that this disgraceful and expensive episode is further evidence of the broken relationship between the SNP Government at Holyrood and the Labour Government at Westminster. However, let me ask the First Minister about something for which he is exclusively responsible. If the time bar issue is of such importance to him, and if his concern for the taxpayer is as great as he maintains it is, why has he allowed slopping out to continue in Peterhead

prison, which is in his constituency? How much will that cost the taxpayer?

The First Minister: There is in-cell sanitation at Peterhead, which is not the same as the slopping-out cases that have been pursued through the courts. Annabel Goldie will remember that within weeks of coming into office—after decades of delay—the Government committed to a new prison at Peterhead to serve the north-east of Scotland. The only way to solve the infrastructure problems of Scotland's prisons is to build new prisons to help the prison estate. I could remind Annabel Goldie that, during 17 years, not one prison was built in Scotland but, rather than do so, I look to continue an atmosphere of collegiate progress on the issue. For goodness' sake, let us unite as a Parliament to ensure that the Somerville anomaly can be removed so that valuable taxpayer cash in Scotland is devoted to fighting the recession rather than to giving grotesque payments to some of the most undesirable elements in our society.

The Presiding Officer (Alex Fergusson): Understandably, question 3 has been withdrawn. I propose instead to allow Mike Rumbles to ask two supplementary questions.

Mike Rumbles (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (LD): Presiding Officer, this is

"a Parliament of minorities where no one party rules without compromise or concession ... The days of Scottish Government imposing its will on the Parliament are behind us".—[*Official Report*, 16 May 2007; c 24-5.]

Does the First Minister recognise those statements? Does he agree with them?

The First Minister: Let me first congratulate Tavish and Kirsten on the happy news, which explains his absence from the chamber. Let me also welcome Mike Rumbles to the front bench. After all those years of sedentary interventions, he has finally got here.

Yes, indeed, we lead a minority Government. Obviously, to fulfil our programme, we need to put every proposal through the Parliament, measure by measure, and appeal for support to gain a majority. On some occasions, we have managed to get that support from the Liberal Democrats—I think in particular of the move to restore free education to the people of Scotland—but I just wish that the Liberal Democrats would support us more so that more could be done to help the Scottish people.

Mike Rumbles: The First Minister should indeed recognise those fine words, as they are taken from his nomination address in 2007. What I want to know is whether the rhetoric fits the reality.

In the past, when United Kingdom Governments put up the price of whisky, the Scottish National

Party used to say that it was “damaging”, “a betrayal”, “punitive” and “entirely wrong”. Alex Salmond used to lodge Opposition amendments to try to stop it happening. Now that he is in government, he has changed his mind. Why will his most controversial plan to impose a price rise that will hit the Scottish whisky industry not be open to full scrutiny in the Scottish Parliament and to democratic amendments? Why was that good enough for him at Westminster but not good enough for Holyrood? What should the whisky industry make of the decision? How can it get its voice heard properly in the Scottish Parliament?

The First Minister: The Licensing (Scotland) Act 2005, under which measures can be brought forward, was introduced into the Parliament by Tavish Scott so, obviously, it must have been a wise move.

I disagree entirely with the argument that proposals for minimum pricing will hit the whisky industry. Whisky must sell as a premium product. It is, of course, possible—I know this from my Westminster experience—both to oppose tax rises that go across the quality whisky brands and to support minimum pricing for alcohol. I plead in support Nick Clegg. He is in exactly that position of opposing punitive tax rises but supporting a minimum price for alcohol to stop deep discounting.

Nick Clegg is not attending the Scottish Liberal Democrats’ spring conference at the weekend. Last year, the question was, “Who’s Clegg?” This year, it will be, “Where’s Clegg?” and next year, it will be, “Why Clegg?” Perhaps Nick Clegg is not attending the conference because Liberals do not want to hear a speech in which the health benefits of a minimum price for alcohol are extolled.

The Presiding Officer: I will take further supplementary questions from Trish Godman and Patrick Harvie.

Trish Godman (West Renfrewshire) (Lab): Given the First Minister’s knowledge of the fishing industry, he will recall the fatal accident inquiry into the deaths of the crew of the Antares, which was sunk by a nuclear submarine in the Firth of Clyde in November 1990. Will he impress on his law officers the need for an FAI into the deaths of the three crew members of the tug the Flying Phantom, which foundered in the River Clyde in December 2007? The crew members were constituents of mine and my colleague Duncan McNeil. Does the First Minister agree that the widows and families of the crew of the Flying Phantom, and other seafarers, deserve a fatal accident inquiry into that terrible tragedy on the Clyde?

The First Minister: As the member anticipates in her question, the decision on such inquiries is a

matter for the law officers. I undertake to discuss the matter with them, after which I will write to the member. She is also right in saying that, for constituency reasons, I have had involvement with many maritime tragedies over the years. I well understand the feelings of the relatives of those who are lost in such tragedies and their commitment to get the fullest explanation of why a tragedy occurred.

Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green): The First Minister will be aware of the disruption to public transport in Glasgow, apparently as a result of the construction of the M74 motorway extension. Obviously, some of us argued all along that that absurd scheme would undermine public transport, but even I did not expect something to happen quite so directly or quickly. Will the First Minister assure the chamber that the delay and any cost increase in what is already a wildly expensive construction project will not cost the taxpayer a penny? Can he guarantee that the cost for the disruption to the subway that the construction caused and the repairs will be borne by the consortium that is carrying out the work and not by the taxpayer or fare-paying passenger?

The First Minister: The matter is a serious one. At present, the contractual issues are under investigation and—I hope—resolution.

Patrick Harvie needs only to glance around Edinburgh to come to the conclusion that transport projects of which he is a passionate supporter can have unintended consequences as far as city infrastructure is concerned. I note that, over the past three weeks, none of the parties that voted in June 2007 to go forward with the Edinburgh trams project has raised the issue at First Minister’s question time.

Freedom of Information (Scotland) Act 2002

4. Christine Grahame (South of Scotland) (SNP): To ask the First Minister what consideration the Scottish Government has given to the Scottish Information Commissioner’s call to extend the Freedom of Information (Scotland) Act 2002 to cover a wider range of organisations. (S3F-1531)

The First Minister (Alex Salmond): In November 2008, the Scottish Government published a discussion paper seeking views on an extension of the act to housing associations, bodies set up by local authorities—for example, leisure trusts—and contractors delivering public services. The closing date for the consultation was 12 January. The responses, which have all been published on the Government website, are being considered.

Christine Grahame: Does the First Minister agree that the Scottish freedom of information

legislation has proved highly effective in making government open, accountable and transparent, in stark contrast to the clawing-back of FOI legislation by the increasingly secretive Labour Government in London? Once the consultation is finished and once we are through this economic crisis, I look forward to the Scottish FOI legislation being extended to housing associations and other relevant bodies. I hope that the First Minister does, too.

The First Minister: I certainly agree that this Government is much more accountable and transparent than the Labour Government in London. It would be wrong of me to anticipate the results of the consultation, but one matter that is certainly of public interest and should be focused on is the previous excuses for not revealing the full extent of private finance contracts and obligations on the public sector, which are threadbare. If contracts are made at public expense, the public have the right to know the full financial implications.

Robert Brown (Glasgow) (LD): I genuinely welcome the First Minister's statement on this point. Does he agree that the Freedom of Information (Scotland) Act 2002 has made a significant contribution to opening up the corridors of power in Scotland and letting individual citizens know what is being done in their name? In particular, does he agree that there would be a great deal of good in opening up Glasgow Housing Association and the myriad arm's-length bodies to full scrutiny by the citizen under the FOI legislation? Can he indicate when new legislation might be likely to progress through the Parliament, following the Government's consideration of the consultation responses?

The First Minister: I allowed Christine Grahame to tempt me into one aspect of the outcome of the consultation, but we had better get the consultation over and finished before we decide on the date of any possible legislation. Referring to the area that I discussed with Christine Grahame a few seconds ago, I think that I am on the same page as Robert Brown.

George Foulkes (Lothians) (Lab): Would the First Minister not agree that another way of obtaining information and holding Governments to account, which he has used very effectively in Westminster, is through the means of written parliamentary questions?

The First Minister: I know that I have made it when praise comes from all parts of the chamber. I would have to acknowledge, in return, that Lord George asks more questions than the rest of the Parliament put together. I suppose that if the member applies that approach to questions, he will hit the bull's-eye at some point.

Student Hardship (Universities)

5. Claire Baker (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab):

To ask the First Minister what action the Scottish Government will take to address student hardship among those at university. (S3F-1534)

The First Minister (Alex Salmond): As Claire Baker knows, the Scottish Government has put in place a number of policies to help students and to tackle student hardship. After years of neglect under the previous Administration, we restored the principle of free education, with the abolition of the graduate endowment fee of approximately £2,300. That will benefit more than 50,000 graduates and students. It will also help to relieve some of the financial pressure on graduates as they start their working lives.

That compares with the reality for students under the previous Labour and Conservative Administrations, when students were loaded with debt. In 1999, the average debt of a student in Scotland was £2,863. By 2006, it had doubled to £5,737. I am delighted to tell the Parliament that, for the first time since devolution, the student debt level in Scotland fell in 2007, under the Scottish National Party Government.

Claire Baker: SNP actions in government have been wholly inadequate in tackling student hardship. Just this morning, the president of the National Union of Students Scotland, Gurjit Singh, said that abolishing the graduate endowment had

"little impact on the day to day life of students and does nothing to tackle the issue of financial hardship students face while studying."

What will the First Minister do to address the needs of the 35 institutions that have requested additional funds to tackle student hardship, considering that more than half of what is requested—more than £6 million—is not being met by the Government? Will he today pledge to bin his inadequate student support consultation and to produce new proposals that provide a minimum of £7,000 for Scotland's poorest students, relieving pressure on hardship funds and finally acting to address student hardship?

The First Minister: I did not tell Claire Baker in my first answer—although I am sure she knows—that we have also introduced a £38 million package of support for part-time learners in higher education. That removes from them the need to rely on student loans and benefits up to 20,000 students. We have also increased the threshold for the non-medical personal helpers element of disabled student allowance by 60 per cent, which is of huge importance to disabled students.

Claire Baker should also know that we have increased the funds that are available for student hardship from the £14 million that we inherited from the previous Administration to £16.1 million

this year. That is a rise of 15 per cent. We should acknowledge not only that student debt has fallen for the first time since devolution but that its level of £5,354, which is still high, compares with £9,309 south of the border. Perhaps she could mention some of the good intentions that she has for students to her colleagues in the Westminster Government.

Christina McKelvie (Central Scotland) (SNP): The First Minister is, of course, aware that there was £14.04 million in discretionary funds in 2006-07, which the SNP inherited from the Liberal Democrat-Labour Administration. Is he also aware that the Student Awards Agency for Scotland also budgeted £14 million in 1999-2000 and that the previous Administration's legacy was discretionary funds that stood still in the face of student hardship but are now finally getting the increases that they deserve under the SNP?

The First Minister: I agree with that. We have made an almost 15 per cent increase in funds for student hardship.

I watched the Labour conference with great interest—I think that there is a bigger audience here today than there was at that conference. I counted up all the millions that the Labour Party would spend if only it got power back in Scotland and could not help but think that the almost £100 million of pledges that Labour made in that single weekend contrasted sharply with the £500 million of cuts that the United Kingdom Labour Government has in store for Scotland.

Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): Talking of spending commitments, I remind the First Minister that, at the most recent Scottish election, he and his acolytes went round the campuses of Scottish universities promising students that an SNP Government would dump the debt. Will he now apologise for that broken promise?

The First Minister: My acolytes and I will celebrate the fact that, in the teeth of Tory opposition, the Government has reintroduced free education for the people of Scotland.

General Practitioners (Appointment Times)

6. Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): To ask the First Minister what discussions the Scottish Government has had with the Scottish council of the Royal College of General Practitioners and others regarding GP appointment times. (S3F-1538)

The First Minister (Alex Salmond): The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Wellbeing has regular contact with the Royal College of General Practitioners in Scotland on a broad range of issues that relate to general practice.

The length of time that is available for general practitioner consultations is not set by the Government but determined by the practice, and the length of an individual consultation is determined by the clinical needs of each patient. The Scottish Government's target on access to GP services is that anyone who contacts their GP practice should have guaranteed access to a GP, nurse or other health care professional within 48 hours.

The Scottish Government continues to invest in general practice. Total investment has increased by 38 per cent since the new GP contract was introduced in 2003-04 and reached £698.4 million in 2007-08. The number of GPs contracted to work in Scotland has also increased from 4,553 in 2005 to 4,721 in 2007.

Jamie Stone: Notwithstanding what the First Minister said, no less a person than Dr Ken Lawton, the chairman of the Scottish council of the Royal College of General Practitioners, says that the amount of time that is allocated for each visit to a GP should be increased from the current standard of 10 minutes to a quarter of an hour. Dr Dean Marshall, the head of the British Medical Association's Scottish GP committee, says exactly the same thing. Does the First Minister agree that it is extremely worrying that doctors' leaders feel that there is not enough time for patients? Surely a swift and accurate first diagnosis is crucial to the fight against disease. Does the First Minister accept that GPs need the time to get the diagnosis right?

The First Minister: Yes, I do. However, I am sure that Jamie Stone would agree that the clinical reasons that I gave in my first answer also predominate. I undertake to have the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Wellbeing write to Jamie Stone to explain some of the thinking behind the measures. I point out to him that Jean Turner, who is executive director of the Scotland Patients Association and well known to members, is on record as being delighted about the extra appointments and working hours being offered by GPs to the people of Scotland. However, I undertake to have the cabinet secretary write to Jamie Stone to address some of his concerns.

The Presiding Officer: We started slightly late, so I will take a brief supplementary question from Dr Richard Simpson.

Dr Richard Simpson (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): Further to the answers that the First Minister has given, can he invite his cabinet secretary to take steps to move beyond the 48-hour access guarantee to ensure best practice for appointments and ensure that not only rapid access for emergency matters but routine appointments when patients request them in

advance are applied throughout the whole of general practice?

The First Minister: I will get the cabinet secretary to write to Dr Richard Simpson. I know that he, by obvious definition, has considerable expertise in these matters, so I will get Nicola Sturgeon to write to him directly on the point that he raised.

12:30

Meeting suspended until 14:15.

14:15

On resuming—

Question Time

SCOTTISH EXECUTIVE

Europe, External Affairs and Culture

Creative Industries (Employment Opportunities)

1. John Park (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab):

To ask the Scottish Executive what measures it is taking to support employment opportunities in the creative industries. (S3O-6223)

The Minister for Culture, External Affairs and the Constitution (Michael Russell): As somebody who previously worked in the creative industries, I am glad to say that the Government is committed to supporting the creative industries, which contribute more than £5 billion in turnover and employ more than 60,000 people in Scotland. With our investment in modern apprenticeships, we are ensuring that young people can get into the industry; with our investment in training, we are ensuring that people have the right skills to be successful; and with our development of the creative industries framework agreement, we are ensuring that creative practitioners can access effective support.

John Park: As the minister said, there are opportunities in the sector. I hope that, in the coming weeks, he will take the opportunity to meet Creative and Cultural Skills, the sector skills council for the sector, to ensure that the opportunities for apprentices are fully explored and met. I encourage him to meet other employers in the sector and encourage them to take part in the apprenticeship summit that was agreed recently during the budget process.

Michael Russell: I am happy to commit myself to working closely with employers and other organisations to ensure that our positive policy is followed through. At the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities conference two weeks ago, I met Councillor Harry McGuigan to discuss COSLA's involvement in the creative industries framework agreement, and he and I will jointly convene the first meeting of the short-life group to ensure that that agreement becomes real. That meeting will take place within the next month or so.

I am committed to ensuring, wherever possible, that people get the right skills, that they are enabled to use them, and, most important, that they have the opportunities to use them. Creative Scotland will be an important part of that as well.

Andrew Welsh (Angus) (SNP): Will the minister lend his support to community creative arts such as the Angus Minstrels, the Abbey Theatre, Angus Musical Youth Theatre, musical societies, the National Operatic and Dramatic Association and other amateur organisations that not only serve as a platform for talent, but act as a launch pad for future professionals, both back of house and on stage?

Michael Russell: I am happy to make that commitment. Support for all those who work in the arts, at either amateur or professional level, is crucial. The member and I disagree on one or two cultural things. I remember that he is not fond of Gilbert and Sullivan, whereas I might admit to a slight fondness there. However, amateur musical theatre companies, amateur musical societies and NODA all make important contributions, and I hope that they continue to do so. Everything that the Government does within culture is designed to encourage creativity, access and participation.

Performing Arts (Aberdeen)

2. Richard Baker (North East Scotland) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive how it is supporting the performing arts in Aberdeen. (S3O-6192)

The Minister for Culture, External Affairs and the Constitution (Michael Russell): Aberdeen and the north-east's thriving arts scene is supported in a number of ways. The Scottish Government provides funding for local cultural services through the local government finance settlement. It is for each local authority to determine how to allocate resources for particular services based on local needs and priorities. Funding for the performing arts is distributed by the Scottish Arts Council, which is the main funding body for the arts in Scotland. The five national performing companies receive direct funding from the Scottish Government, which enables them to reach audiences throughout Scotland, including in Aberdeen and Aberdeenshire.

Richard Baker: Does the minister agree that the great and hospitable city of Aberdeen deserves and needs thriving performing arts, just as other Scottish cities do? The Scottish Arts Council's help has been welcome in ensuring that the city's famous venue the Lemon Tree can reopen under the excellent management of Aberdeen Performing Arts. However, does the minister agree that further support will be required if, in addition to visits to Aberdeen from touring productions by national companies—I am sure that Gilbert and Sullivan productions will be welcome—more productions are to be developed in the city?

Michael Russell: I regard the Lemon Tree as an important venue. The Government has shown

that in its support and encouragement for the solution that has now been found. Of course, it would be entirely inappropriate for me to allocate moneys myself to any particular venue, but I think that everybody agrees that the Lemon Tree fulfils an important role in the ecosystem of the arts in the north-east. It does just the things that the member said and, in those circumstances, it deserves to be supported.

Creative Scotland

3. Karen Whitefield (Airdrie and Shotts) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive when creative Scotland will be operational. (S3O-6228)

The Minister for Culture, External Affairs and the Constitution (Michael Russell): Creative Scotland will become operational in the first half of next year. As I said on 18 February, in a contribution that I think was well reported, creative Scotland is needed and it will come to fruition.

Karen Whitefield: I am grateful to the minister for his comments and I welcome his assurance that creative Scotland will be established. Is the minister aware of the concerns and anxieties of a number of cultural organisations about their short and medium-term funding in the absence of creative Scotland? What assurances can he offer them that that problem will be resolved?

Michael Russell: I am always aware that organisations that are involved in the arts have constant questions about their future and operation. It is important that we have a stable structure that supports the arts and culture in Scotland. There is at present a structure that consists of creative Scotland and the Scottish Arts Council. The new structure, which we anticipate will be in existence in the first half of next year, will succeed that. There is no interregnum; there is a structure and there will be a structure. Organisational support and funding are there and are secure. They will become better when creative Scotland is in place. A great deal of work needs to be done to ensure that that happens.

The whole Parliament has the opportunity to participate in that. I invited the Opposition culture spokespeople to the event at the Traverse on 18 February. I am happy to work with members throughout the Parliament and with the Education, Lifelong Learning and Culture Committee, which the member convenes and which has oversight of the matter, to ensure that we deliver creative Scotland in the best way possible. We can then put an end to what I have called the decade of debate about the structures of the arts in Scotland and ensure that we are doing the real job of supporting the arts by supporting creativity, access and participation.

Lübeck Letter

4. Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): To ask the Scottish Executive whether it has approached the city of Lübeck to request that the Lübeck letter be loaned to Scotland on a long-term basis. (S3O-6164)

The Minister for Culture, External Affairs and the Constitution (Michael Russell): The Scottish Government has no plans to request a long-term loan of the Lübeck letter. We have taken advice in that regard and we believe that such an arrangement would be contrary to archival good practice and could seriously damage an extremely important document.

Murdo Fraser: I thank the minister for his reply, albeit that it was rather disappointing. I remind him that the Lübeck letter was previously loaned to Scotland, apparently without any damage being done to it. Does he agree that the letter is an important historical document, given that it is the only surviving document offered by William Wallace and Andrew Murray? Does he agree that a return of the letter on a long-term loan, possibly to the Wallace monument in Stirling, would provide a real boost to tourism in the area?

Michael Russell: Such is the state of technology that an excellence facsimile of the letter could easily be made available for display anywhere. There is a different issue around cultural return.

The member is right to say that the letter was previously exhibited in Scotland. It has been exhibited here three times in the past 100 years or so. It was exhibited in 2005 when the National Archives of Scotland borrowed it for a single month—the maximum time permitted—to feature in the for freedom alone exhibition in the Scottish Parliament. In 1999, the National Museum of Scotland borrowed it for two months—that loan period was permitted at the time, but it is not permitted now—for display in the opening exhibition of the new museum. In 1911, it was borrowed for an unknown period for the Glasgow palace of history exhibition. However, the document is very old and very fragile. If we were to ask for its return on a long-term basis, even if we were allowed to get it—I think that that is very unlikely—the conditions that would apply would be onerous indeed. We do not need to get the letter to be able to display it in perfect facsimile form.

I have spent a lot of time over the years working on the issue of cultural return. There are occasions when artefacts should be returned to where they came from, but I do not think that this example meets any of the criteria that are normally applied in cultural return.

Visual Arts

5. Robin Harper (Lothians) (Green): To ask the Scottish Executive what its priorities are in relation to supporting the visual arts, in particular painting and sculpture. (S3O-6172)

The Minister for Culture, External Affairs and the Constitution (Michael Russell): The Scottish Government's aims for visual arts, as for other art forms, are to encourage and sustain people who create; to ensure that their work is widely accessible; and to give people of all ages the opportunity to take part in creative activities. The Scottish Government pursues those aims through working with our partners in local authorities, the national collections and the Scottish Arts Council, and through supporting the work of higher education institutions in the visual arts.

Robin Harper: The minister is aware that there is considerable concern among artists about the commercial ethos behind the Government's proposals. I briefly offer a sketch of Sweden's objectives for national cultural policy, which include—

The Presiding Officer (Alex Fergusson): Very briefly, Mr Harper.

Robin Harper: I will be as brief as I can be. Sweden's cultural policy aims

"to take action to enable everyone ... to experience culture, and to engage in creative activities of their own;

to promote cultural diversity, artistic renewal and quality, thereby counteracting the negative effects of commercialism;"

and

"to enable culture to act as a dynamic, challenging and independent force in society".

The minister has had conversations on the matter. How does he react to criticisms that have been levelled at the ethos behind the Government's proposals?

Michael Russell: There are many reasons why the arts should be supported and why we should encourage people to take part.

At the risk of being boring, I repeat what I have said in answer to almost every question. I regard the purpose of the Government's cultural policy as being: first, to encourage creativity—that is, to centre on the artist; secondly, to encourage access; and thirdly, to light that creative fire that exists in every individual, therefore to encourage participation. I see that purpose in the context of what one would call a national and international culture. Many people might write a host of detailed objectives around that, but that is what I am concerned about delivering and what I hope to deliver during whatever period I am in office.

Ian McKee (Lothians) (SNP): Will the minister elaborate on the support that the Government is giving to Scotland's colleges of art?

Michael Russell: I am delighted to do so. During the next couple of months I hope to have a range of meetings with a range of individuals in the colleges of art, to consider the work that they are doing. The colleges of art have a number of basic functions, which my friend the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning strongly supports. Those functions might be divided into, first, placing people within the tradition—that is, educating them in what art is and how the tradition affects them; and secondly, encouraging people to be daring, to go on to the cutting edge and to innovate as much as possible. I am sure that those are the most important things that art colleges do, although they do many other things. I hope to be able to encourage such activity.

Year of Homecoming (St Andrew's Day)

6. Iain Smith (North East Fife) (LD): To ask the Scottish Executive what support it is giving to events to celebrate St Andrew's day in the year of homecoming. (S3O-6185)

The Minister for Culture, External Affairs and the Constitution (Michael Russell): A decision has yet to be made about the level of Government funding to support St Andrew's day activities in 2009. However, I aim to do that soon. I will certainly do it in the context of an outstandingly successful start to the year of homecoming, particularly in Dumfries, where between 17,000 and 20,000 people took part in an event on 25 January. I am happy to welcome Provost Jack Groom, provost of Dumfries, to the Parliament.

I and the Government will do all that we can do to encourage events throughout Scotland, to ensure an outstanding finale to the homecoming celebrations, to mark our national day and to bring a wonderful thing to a conclusion.

Iain Smith: I am sure that the minister agrees that the earlier the people who are organising events for St Andrew's day can be assured of funding, the more successful the events are likely to be.

The minister might be aware that there are ambitious plans to enhance the St Andrew's week festival in St Andrews, in my constituency, which is a major homecoming event that features in the homecoming Scotland events guide. The plans are at risk because of uncertainty about the funding that is available, which has led to the loss of some acts and planned events. The centrepiece of the festival, the son et lumière display, which has significant long-term potential as a tourist attraction in St Andrews, will be at risk if funding

decisions are not taken now. Will the minister do all that he can do to ensure that funding applications for St Andrew's week are processed quickly, to allow a potentially prestigious event to take place as advertised?

Michael Russell: Yes.

Iain Smith: Thank you.

Cultural Opportunities

7. Mary Mulligan (Linlithgow) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive what its priorities are for improving cultural opportunities for people across Scotland. (S3O-6220)

The Minister for Culture, External Affairs and the Constitution (Michael Russell): Improving cultural opportunities has to start with encouraging and sustaining the people who produce the artistic and creative output that people experience and enjoy, which should embrace all sectors, art forms and types of creative expression. We must ensure that artists' work can be accessed and give everyone the chance to take part in creative activity. Those are the basic building blocks; that is what we have put in place and will continue to put in place.

Mary Mulligan: The Regal theatre in Bathgate recently reopened after refurbishment. Something as simple as having a fully staffed box office that is open every day has made a significant difference to theatre audience numbers. What is the Scottish Government doing to increase and—an important point—maintain audience numbers in venues throughout Scotland?

Michael Russell: I hope that we will learn from good examples such as the one that the member mentions. The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning, who is sitting next to me, has indicated what a good example is provided by that project, which she knows well. I would have thought that we will follow those examples. Not every model works, or can work, in every different place but, within the confines that exist, I would certainly want to learn from the Bathgate example on a variety of aspects of good practice. I thank the member for drawing our attention to that.

Intergovernmental Organisations (Meetings)

8. Jackson Carlaw (West of Scotland) (Con): To ask the Scottish Executive what meetings it has had with intergovernmental organisations in the past six months. (S3O-6173)

The Minister for Culture, External Affairs and the Constitution (Michael Russell): Ministers and officials have regular meetings with intergovernmental organisations. It is difficult to define what an intergovernmental organisation is,

although the member might do so in his supplementary.

Let me give some examples. The Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs and the Environment, Richard Lochhead, has attended the fisheries council twice in the past few months. Ministers attended various European Councils on 17 to 19 December, 18 to 20 November, 27 to 28 October and 29 September. The Solicitor General for Scotland, Frank Mulholland, has attended the justice and home affairs council. Officials have been involved in meetings with the World Health Organization. The British-Irish Council meetings have been well attended—indeed, in my new role, I attended a meeting of the British-Irish Council along with the First Minister and Deputy First Minister two weeks ago. We have been involved in a range of such meetings, including this week's meeting of the joint ministerial committee, which I think would also qualify.

Jackson Carlaw: I am grateful to the minister for that comprehensive reply.

We are all well aware of the split in the Scottish Cabinet on membership of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, which has guaranteed the security of Scotland for the past 60 years. The Deputy First Minister's opposition to NATO is well documented, as is the Cabinet Secretary for Justice's support for the organisation. The Minister for Environment is against NATO, yet the Minister for Culture, External Affairs and the Constitution has openly supported membership of NATO. Does the SNP Government support membership of NATO? Without in any way wishing to bring about such a tragedy, I would like to know whether the Government supports an independent Scotland remaining part of NATO.

The Presiding Officer: I do not accept that the question falls within the responsibility of the Minister for Culture, External Affairs and the Constitution. Therefore, I call question 9.

European Union Directives (Transposition)

9. Malcolm Chisholm (Edinburgh North and Leith) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive how many EU directives have been transposed into Scots law in the past three months. (S3O-6197)

The Minister for Culture, External Affairs and the Constitution (Michael Russell): Just as the Scottish Government is united on the subject of the previous question, we are united on this one.

Since 1 December 2008, a total of four directives have been transposed into Scots law.

Malcolm Chisholm: I welcome Michael Russell to his first question time as Minister for Culture, External Affairs and the Constitution. I hope that

the omission of the word "Europe" from his title is not of any significance.

Will the minister turn his attention to the accelerated procedures under the public procurement directive that were triggered within the past three months by the Commission and Council of Ministers because of the exceptional nature of the current economic situation? Will he explain why the Scottish Government's response to that is so unremittingly negative in tone? The Scottish procurement policy note is almost an exercise in giving reasons not to employ the accelerated procedures.

Michael Russell: I think that the member is talking about his interpretation of the policy note rather than the facts of that note. As a Government, we are strongly committed to ensuring that all resources that can be brought forward are brought forward to meet the present difficult circumstances. For example, in advance of next weekend's European Council meeting, discussion is continuing on how the European reflationary package might make available resources that can be focused on real need in Scotland.

The transposition of directives is a complex process that involves a range of issues, including the requirements of Scots law and the requirement to ensure that the directives do not bear down unfairly on Scottish businesses and organisations that are struggling during the recession. If there is any way in which we can ensure that the procurement process benefits Scotland more, members should be under no doubt that we will take that route.

Museums and Art Galleries (Glasgow)

The Presiding Officer: In a moment of rare pleasure, I can call question 10.

10. Bill Butler (Glasgow Anniesland) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive what support it provides to museums and art galleries in Glasgow. (S3O-6196)

The Minister for Culture, External Affairs and the Constitution (Michael Russell): In my reply on 5 March to a written parliamentary question from Mr Butler, I gave details of the funding to local authorities for cultural services that is provided by the Scottish Government both through the local government finance settlement and via Museums Galleries Scotland, with which I had a meeting this morning. In addition, I understand that the University of Glasgow was awarded £35,688 this financial year by Museums Galleries Scotland.

I intend to meet Bailie Liz Cameron and her colleagues in Glasgow to discuss the issue that the member has raised. I have made it quite clear

that I believe that the issue requires substantive discussion.

Bill Butler: The minister is a well-read man. I am sure that he is therefore an avid reader of that fine paper of record, *The Evening Times*. Does he agree with that paper—and, indeed, with me—that Glasgow's collections are of national and international significance and that a compelling case can be made for direct financial support from the Scottish Government?

Michael Russell: I think that everybody acknowledges the quality of Glasgow's collections. Indeed, Museums Galleries Scotland has acknowledged that in making available resources through its special collections fund. There is no doubt that many of the items that are held in Glasgow are of great importance, as are the collections themselves.

It is difficult to draw a direct line between that and the funding of some of the national collections. Nonetheless, as I hope the member accepts, I acknowledge that the issue requires discussion and resolution. I acknowledged that when I was a shadow minister some six years ago, and I acknowledge it now. I intend to start a process of discussion with Glasgow that I hope will lead us forward. It will not be easy, particularly in a time of financial difficulty and recession. That said, not only am I sympathetic to Glasgow on the matter but I admire its collections and what it does with them.

Education and Lifelong Learning

Student Support (Kilmarnock College)

1. Willie Coffey (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what funds it is providing to Kilmarnock College in 2008-09 to support students with child care responsibilities. (S30-6233)

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning (Fiona Hyslop): Kilmarnock College received more than £125,000 in higher education discretionary funds in 2008-09, of which £68,918 was specifically allocated for its higher education child care funds. It also received more than £2.1 million in main allocation for further education student support funds in 2008-09, of which £194,000 was specifically for its further education child care funds. The college then received almost £231,000 in additional further education discretionary funds from the November in-year redistribution process, which represented 4.2 per cent of the total amount of funds that the Scottish Further and Higher Education Funding Council reallocated. Of those funds that were reallocated to the college, £115,466 was specifically for its further education child care fund.

Willie Coffey: Will the cabinet secretary join me in welcoming the news that Kilmarnock College has provided child care support for all eligible students who require it? Will she confirm that the system of allocating child care support that she inherited is deeply flawed and causes major problems for students and colleges? Has progress been made in persuading the United Kingdom Government to reverse its ill-conceived benefit reforms that place even more pressure on this flawed system?

Fiona Hyslop: I am pleased to hear that child care has been provided for all eligible students.

I know that there were some concerns earlier in the year. The current system, which we inherited from the previous Executive, is based on information that is two years old. That is why it is important to have in-year redistribution. I am pleased that that happened at Kilmarnock College to help to support child care places. I have raised the issue of changes to lone parent benefits with the Department for Work and Pensions and sought assurances that lone parents will not be sanctioned under the new system.

Karen Whitefield (Airdrie and Shotts) (Lab): Is the cabinet secretary aware that many colleges and universities in Scotland are not offering free child care provision to all students? Does the Scottish Government have any plans to guarantee that all Scottish students have the same rights in that regard as their counterparts in England and Wales, where free child care provision is guaranteed to those who require it?

Fiona Hyslop: Child care funding for lone parents in higher education in Scotland is more generous than it is in England. Scottish students are in the positive position of having funding of more than £4,000 in comparison with funding in England of £3,500. Universities are independent, autonomous institutions, as are colleges. They make their own provision for child care and receive supportive funding from the Government.

As I said in my answer to the first question, the in-year redistribution is very important. In the returns that we received from universities, many did not request additional funds to support child care. A number of further education colleges also did not request further funds. For those that made a request, the Scottish funding council not only provided funds but responded promptly to the pressures that many students are facing as a result of the economic recession. Perhaps at some point the Labour Party will take some responsibility for that.

Margaret Mitchell (Central Scotland) (Con): Does the cabinet secretary agree that it is important to target the £30 million that has been made available in reforming support for the most

vulnerable students, including those with child care responsibilities, by introducing a mixture of grants and by increasing access to student loans?

Fiona Hyslop: I am not sure that the member heard the debate this morning, but if she reads the consultation paper "Supporting a Smarter Scotland", she will see that options 1a, 1b and 3 all cover proposals on targeting resources with which she might find some sympathy. We in the Government will have to take the decisions, but we will listen to the views of everybody who responds to the consultation. I urge Parliament to refrain from passing judgment until consultees have a chance to respond. The closing date for the consultation is 30 April.

Teaching (Older Entrants)

2. John Lamont (Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con): To ask the Scottish Executive what measures it is taking to encourage older people to take up teaching as a profession. (S3O-6159)

The Minister for Schools and Skills (Keith Brown): Widening access to initial teacher education courses, which includes encouraging course providers to offer part-time and distance learning options, is a priority for the Scottish Government. The advice and guidance that is offered to those who are interested in teaching is targeted equally at school leavers, graduates and potential career changers.

John Lamont: The minister will be aware of the issue that is facing some of my constituents. They qualified as teachers in the 1960s and 1970s but, as they qualified in England, they are prevented from teaching in Scotland. They could, of course, work in England or in any other European Union country. Does the minister think that that is acceptable? How does that fit with the European principle of the free movement of workers?

Keith Brown: I am happy to discuss the matter further with John Lamont, but I should say that a working group is considering the supply of teachers into Scottish education. It is concentrating much more on the skills that are required for schools, rather than on where the supply of teachers comes from. There are currently discussions about how we secure the effective supply of teachers, and there have been discussions in the past about the fact that some teachers and people in some skill sectors find it difficult to get employment. We are trying to address that, too. As I said, I am happy to discuss further the issue that John Lamont has highlighted.

Ken Macintosh (Eastwood) (Lab): The minister will be aware of the growing problem that all our newly qualified teachers face in finding a permanent or temporary post, following their probationary year. Is the minister also aware that

the average age profile of entrants into the teaching profession is rising, and that many new entrants have mortgages, families and other commitments that might make them less able to move freely around the country? What specific action is the minister taking to help those newly qualified teachers to find a permanent or temporary post following their probationary year?

Keith Brown: As I have mentioned previously, the annual workforce planning is based on maintaining teacher numbers at 2007 levels, I think, and the concordat that we have signed with local government confirms that funding is included in the settlement for that to happen. We are confident that local authorities, which are the employers of teachers, are equally committed to the terms of the concordat.

Kenneth Macintosh is right about the demographic trends within teaching. Entrants who were over the age of 30 comprised 25.7 per cent of entrants in 2006-07, 27.2 per cent in 2007-08 and 25.7 per cent in 2008-09, and roughly 10 per cent of entrants each year were over the age of 40. We are trying to address the issue of secure permanent employment. It is not easy to address the point that Kenneth Macintosh raised about teachers being less mobile, but we are aware of it and we are addressing it through the working group that I mentioned.

Glasgow City Council Education Department (Meetings)

3. Bill Kidd (Glasgow) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government when the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning last met Glasgow City Council education department and what issues were discussed. (S3O-6243)

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning (Fiona Hyslop): Officials from the Scottish Government regularly meet officials from Glasgow City Council on a range of issues related to the provision of education in the city. Recently, there have been meetings regarding the implementation of 16+ learning choices, enterprise in education and support for Glasgow's schools of ambition. I had the pleasure of visiting Govan high school, Castlemilk high school and St Paul's high school this week. An official from Glasgow City Council took part in two of those visits.

Bill Kidd: Glasgow City Council has decided to press ahead with the closure of 25 primary and nursery schools despite, as we saw in the demonstration outside today, overwhelming opposition among parents and Scottish National Party councillors' objections to the inadequate consultation. Does the cabinet secretary agree that the council should apply the proposed list of mandatory consultees in the Schools

(Consultation) (Scotland) Bill, which includes pupils and teachers?

Fiona Hyslop: Yes. It would not be unreasonable for the public to expect the council to do so, particularly in view of its response to our consultation paper last year on the proposal to extend the list of those who should be consulted, in which it said:

"GCC agree that children and young people should be consulted. However, younger children would need to be supported and clear guidance would be required to ensure it is the views of the children that are reflected."

The council did not comment either way on the proposal to extend the list to include teachers and other staff.

Paul Martin (Glasgow Springburn) (Lab): The leader of Glasgow City Council advises me that he would be willing to postpone his plans under the school estate strategy if the Government was willing to provide additional funding to allow new schools to be built. Will the cabinet secretary make representations to Mr Swinney, the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Sustainable Growth, to allow for a new school building programme of the kind that took place under the previous Scottish Government?

Fiona Hyslop: This year alone, Glasgow City Council has received £196 million in capital funding. It is up to the council to choose whether to use that for refurbishment and capital spend on schools. Other local authorities are doing so. Those who are protesting today might rightly ask why Glasgow City Council is not spending it on schools.

The funding that the Government is providing for 1,000 of the apprenticeships that Steven Purcell wants to provide in Glasgow will free up £6 million over the next few years that would otherwise have been used for those apprenticeships. Perhaps Mr Purcell will want to invest that money in schools.

Anne McLaughlin (Glasgow) (SNP): Is the cabinet secretary aware of the challenges that face teachers of English as an additional language in Glasgow? Over three years in which an additional 3,000 to 4,000 foreign national children came into Glasgow schools, the number of such teachers dropped from 165 to 140. Does the cabinet secretary agree that, unless Glasgow City Council increases the number of EAL teachers, many children will simply slip through the net and be unable to fulfil their academic potential?

Fiona Hyslop: That issue has been raised a number of times and Anne McLaughlin is right to raise it again. The Government is providing record levels of funding for local government but is conscious of the pressures that local authorities face. The 2008 teacher census, which will provide the number of teachers in each local authority, will

be published in the next few weeks, and will reflect the numbers that are employed by Glasgow City Council.

There are clearly challenges in Glasgow, and I encourage everybody involved to help to support the council in delivering additional support for learning for children with English as a second language. That is one of the reasons why we provided funding for the Scottish Further and Higher Education Funding Council to assist with family learning for speakers of other languages who are learning English.

Primary School Kitchens (Argyll and Bute)

4. Jamie McGrigor (Highlands and Islands) (Con): To ask the Scottish Executive what recent contact or discussions it has had with parent councils in Argyll and Bute concerning the possible closure of primary school kitchens. (S30-6165)

The Minister for Children and Early Years (Adam Ingram): The Scottish Government has had no contact or discussions with parent councils in Argyll and Bute concerning the possible closure of primary school kitchens. However, I understand that Argyll and Bute Council has now taken a decision not to close the primary school kitchens concerned.

Jamie McGrigor: I welcome the fact that, since my question was lodged and after a determined campaign by parent councils, which I supported, Argyll and Bute Council has withdrawn its decision to close six rural primary school kitchens, including those at Glenbarr, Skipness and Rhunahaorine. Does the minister share my concern that the dinner ladies first learned of the threat by reading the local press? Does he agree that the provision of healthy and nutritious school meals for our primary school children is an important priority for local authorities?

Adam Ingram: Of course I agree with Jamie McGrigor's point on the benefits that children can derive from nutritious school meals. Clearly, he needs to take his former point up with Argyll and Bute Council.

I emphasise that there was no question of the council deciding to close the kitchens because of a lack of a funding, as it has significant funds through the local government finance settlement. However, there is apparently an historical problem in Argyll and Bute with recruiting catering staff for some small schools in outlying rural areas. Perhaps Jamie McGrigor can take that up with the council.

Apprenticeships

5. Duncan McNeil (Greenock and Inverclyde) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government what

measures it intends to take to expand apprenticeship opportunities. (S3O-6217)

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning (Fiona Hyslop): I have already announced that Glasgow will be offered funding over three years for an additional 1,000 new modern apprenticeship places worth £6 million, and I recently announced 50 new modern apprenticeships in Scotland's creative industries in 2009-10. Those early decisions are in direct response to the additional skills needs for Glasgow as set out in the early Commonwealth games planning and the evidence in the recent creative blueprint for Scotland. In addition, I intend to use the apprenticeship summit to explore with employers how the modern apprenticeship programme and its development can best support employment opportunities in Scotland as part of our economic recovery planning and beyond.

I have started discussions with major employers on approaches to deliver the 73 per cent increase in new starts for 2009-10. I have already met Jim McColl of Clyde Blowers and I plan to meet others such as Scottish and Southern Energy.

Duncan McNeil: I hope that the cabinet secretary will meet Michael Levack, chief executive of the Scottish Building Federation, and note his support for the proposal that every Scottish Government contract should be required to recruit apprenticeships. Does that proposal have the support of the cabinet secretary or the Scottish Government?

Fiona Hyslop: It is important that, in public procurement, all agencies of Government and, indeed, local government use whatever measures they can to benefit the public and the common good. Particularly at this time, all those who receive taxpayers' money must use and invest it responsibly to ensure that we maintain skills in areas such as construction so that, when we come through the recession, the jobs and skills are in place to take the country forward.

Knife Crime (Schools)

6. Jim Hume (South of Scotland) (LD): To ask the Scottish Executive what its schools directorate is doing to prevent knife crimes in schools. (S3O-6177)

The Minister for Schools and Skills (Keith Brown): Knife crime in schools, while extremely serious, is extremely rare and the vast majority of children and young people in our schools behave well. The schools directorate works with a wide range of partners, both within and outwith the Scottish Government, to create peaceful and positive learning environments in Scottish schools. That work includes the Government-funded violence reduction unit, which promotes

programmes and resources in schools on the dangers of knife carrying as part of its anti-violence campaign, and a youth conference that the Government hosted on 4 March to address violence and knife crime.

Jim Hume: Given that, it was all the more poignant when, last week, a young lad in my region in Ayr was, sadly, taken to hospital with a stab wound that he received at school.

The initiatives are welcome, but does the minister agree that the best and most productive projects are those that young people lead and which focus on active engagement, as opposed to current initiatives, which concentrate on promotional material? Does he agree that young people desperately need local facilities that can be used to divert them from knife and other crime? How will the minister ensure that communities are provided with facilities for young people, to run alongside current initiatives?

Keith Brown: I cannot comment on the case to which Jim Hume referred, which is now the subject of investigation by South Ayrshire Council. However, I repeat that such serious incidents are extremely rare and the vast majority of children behave very well in our schools.

I accept Jim Hume's point about the need for engagement. At the conference to which I referred, the Cabinet Secretary for Justice launched the Government's new knife crime youth engagement initiative, which commits an additional £500,000 to working with young people to prevent and reduce knife crime, under the new brand "No Knives Better Lives". It will be delivered in schools and the community and over the internet, using a range of communication tools.

On Jim Hume's final point about facilities, I agree that the Scottish Government should do what it can, and it is doing that through the renewal of the school estate. However, the provision of facilities is also a question for other organisations, including local authorities.

The Presiding Officer: Richard Baker can ask a very brief supplementary question.

Richard Baker (North East Scotland) (Lab): Given the concerning incidents of pupils being found with knives in a number of schools, is it not vital to have a clear picture of the extent of the problem? Why have I been told that the Scottish Government does not hold centrally the number of such incidents and that it has no plans to do so? Does the minister agree that such data should be collected to inform the action that we all want to be taken on this important issue? Knife crime in schools might be rare, but we should know whether it is.

The Presiding Officer: I ask the minister to give an equally brief response.

Keith Brown: The behaviour in Scottish schools survey is now under way and will report later this year. The Government, working in partnership with local government and other key stakeholders, has improved that three-yearly survey, which will provide greater clarity on the definitions and experience of serious indiscipline and violence in schools. In addition, the sample size has been nearly doubled to provide more accurate data. That will help to address Richard Baker's point about having clear information in order to determine the size of the problem.

Business Motion

14:55

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Trish Godman): The next item of business is consideration of motion S3M-3671, in the name of Bruce Crawford, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, setting out a timetable for stage 3 consideration of the Health Boards (Membership and Elections) (Scotland) Bill.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees that, during Stage 3 of the Health Boards (Membership and Elections) (Scotland) Bill, debate on groups of amendments shall, subject to Rule 9.8.4A, be brought to a conclusion by the time limits indicated, each time limit being calculated from when the Stage begins and excluding any periods when other business is under consideration or when a meeting of the Parliament is suspended (other than a suspension following the first division in the Stage being called) or otherwise not in progress:

Groups 1 and 2: 30 minutes

Groups 3 to 5: 1 hour

Groups 6 to 8: 1 hour 20 minutes.—[Bruce Crawford.]

Motion agreed to.

Health Boards (Membership and Elections) (Scotland) Bill: Stage 3

14:55

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Trish Godman): The next item of business is stage 3 proceedings on the Health Boards (Membership and Elections) (Scotland) Bill. In dealing with amendments, members should have the bill as amended at stage 2, the marshalled list—that is, SP bill 13A-ML—and the groupings, which the Presiding Officer has agreed. The division bell will sound and proceedings will be suspended for five minutes for the first division this afternoon. The period of voting for the first division will be 30 seconds. Thereafter, I will allow a voting period of one minute for the first division after a debate and 30 seconds for all other divisions.

I take it that members understood all of that—good.

Section 1—Constitution of Health Boards

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Group 1 is on the composition of health boards. Amendment 1, in the name of Bill Butler, is the only amendment in the group.

Bill Butler (Glasgow Anniesland) (Lab): I am pleased to speak to amendment 1. Members will be aware that the bill's explanatory notes make it clear that in section 1(2), which replaces schedule 1 to the National Health Service (Scotland) Act 1978, paragraph 2(1) of the new schedule sets out the

“three different types of member”

that will sit on a health board.

“These are:

- ‘appointed members’ (a chairman and other members appointed by the Scottish Ministers);
- ‘councillor members’ (councillors appointed by the Scottish Ministers following nomination by local authorities ...); and
- ‘elected members’ (individuals elected as members of the Health Board at an election).”

As amendment 1 makes clear, we are talking about the injection of a directly elected element that is not independent in some theoretical way but which takes part in the board's work, along with two other categories of appointed member. I believe that such an injection of democracy is a good thing. One should seldom quote oneself, but as I said in my submission to the Government's consultation on its proposed local health care bill,

“Direct public elections would allow the public a mechanism to influence service delivery in their area”.

I also believe that the public are clearly saying that “there must be greater openness and transparency, and there must be direct accountability”.

After all, the bill is about transparency and direct democratic accountability.

In my consultation response, I also said:

“I have yet to hear a convincing argument as to why the make-up of regional NHS boards should not contain a strong”

direct democratic element. Accordingly, I propose that, as amendment 1 provides, 50 per cent plus one of the members of each health board—or, depending on the arithmetic, a simple majority—be directly elected to represent the local communities affected by its decisions.

Boards must have a proper balance between those with expertise, knowledge and experience from working in the health service—something that we should not lose—and those who are most directly affected by any proposed change, by which I mean the public. I feel that the blend of experience and direct accountability for which amendment 1 provides is about right.

Again, I emphasise that I support the retention of local authority members on NHS boards—as a former councillor, I do not have a problem with that—but, as the bill makes clear, the local authority members will not be directly elected to boards but be appointed by ministers.

I was going to finish on that point, but I must not forget the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Wellbeing. I suspect that she had a great say in the Scottish National Party manifesto for the 2011 elections—sorry, I meant for the 2007 elections; I hope it is not for 2011. On page 36, under the heading “Accountable healthcare”, appears the following quotation. I will not read out the whole paragraph, but I do not think that I have wrenched the quotation out of its context:

“Sometimes difficult decisions must be made and local people should always be at the heart of the process. To ensure this is the case we will introduce direct elections to health boards. At least half of health board members will be elected by the public.”

I could not agree more with the cabinet secretary and the manifesto—on that one specific aspect. It seems to me an unequivocal commitment, and it does not preclude the suggestion in amendment 1, which is for a simple majority. I hope that colleagues across the chamber will support the amendment.

I move amendment 1.

15:00

Ross Finnie (West of Scotland) (LD): I have no difficulty in acknowledging that Bill Butler's

approach has been entirely consistent, both during discussions on his own member's bill and during all the stages of this bill. However, the artificial distinction that he seeks to make could cause real difficulty.

Bill Butler is right to say that people who are elected as councillors in their local authority will then, technically, have to be appointed by the cabinet secretary to the health board, but there is surely a real distinction to be made between an individual who gains legitimacy from being elected to public office by the electorate and an individual who responds to an advertisement, placed by the civil service, inviting people to apply to be appointed to a health board.

If one does not acknowledge that real distinction, one runs into a real problem. One would be saying that people who are elected directly to a health board have greater legitimacy than people who are elected to serve their own constituency. That would be entirely false and a recipe for storing up a real sense of frustration. There would be two entirely different camps, both of whom—the people directly elected to the health board and the people elected to their constituency—ought properly to be able to say, "I represent the public."

To introduce an artificial distinction into the bill, in the manner that Bill Butler suggests, is wholly wrong, and I and the other Liberal Democrats will oppose amendment 1. We wish to retain paragraph 2(3)(a) of schedule 1 to the National Health Service (Scotland) Act 1978 as it stands.

Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab): I speak in support of amendment 1 in the name of my colleague Bill Butler. Members with a better memory than mine will recall that, during the previous session of Parliament, I was one of the Labour members who supported Bill Butler's proposals for elections to health boards. I pay tribute to him for leading the debate and to the cabinet secretary for getting us where we are today.

Like many members, I am shaped by experience in the constituency. I have witnessed at first hand the dismissive and sometimes arrogant actions of successive health boards and their contempt for the views of my local community. I therefore strongly believe in amendment 1 and in elections to health boards.

Amendment 1 seeks simply to ensure that directly elected members are in the majority—a simple 50 per cent plus one. In evidence taken by the Health and Sport Committee, it was suggested that the wrong type of person might be elected, that community activists who care about their local health services would somehow not be appropriate, and that strange people might win—

people who could not possibly be allowed to be in the majority. We should just look around this chamber: sometimes unusual people do get elected, but that is the will of the electorate—that is democracy. The public are perfectly able to elect sensible people to represent them in public services, and health boards will be no different.

If we are serious about improving the operation of health boards, it is right that there is a majority of directly elected members. I do make a distinction: councillors on health boards are told that they cannot represent—*[Interruption.]*

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I am sorry, Ms Baillie. Mr Lochhead, would you mind sitting down? And please do not use electrical equipment when you are in the chamber.

Jackie Baillie: I said that strange people get elected—I rest my case, Presiding Officer.

I think that there is a distinction to be made and, with respect, that Ross Finnie is wrong on this occasion. Having directly elected members is the right place for us to be. I am sure that the cabinet secretary and the Minister for Public Health and Sport, who will have had a hand in the SNP manifesto, can be persuaded of the value of that approach. If they are not, I hope that at least the SNP back benchers will be. It was a promise in the SNP manifesto, and I would hate to see the commitment watered down.

I urge members to be radical and to support Bill Butler's amendment.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call the cabinet secretary to speak to the amendment.

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Health and Wellbeing (Nicola Sturgeon): I am grateful for the opportunity to respond to amendment 1. I was tempted to intervene on Jackie Baillie and ask her to name names when she talked about unusual people, but she then did. Obviously, I disagree with her entirely, but I hope that that will be the only discordant note to be sounded this afternoon.

I recognise and pay tribute to Bill Butler's involvement in the issue, and I am glad that he appears to be winning over his colleagues to his way of thinking. We have always been in agreement with him. I intended to quote Bill Butler in my speech, but he got there before me, so I will resist that temptation.

Amendment 1 seeks to make a clear majority of a health board's members directly elected. Although, as evidenced by the bill, I strongly agree that the way in which health boards engage and involve their communities must change—and it will change as a result of the bill—I believe that our approach of having a majority of a board's members drawn from local authorities and direct

elections represents the most balanced and sensible way to achieve that goal. That will not only ensure democratic input to and accountability of health boards, which is the rationale behind the bill; it will help to cement the joint working between health boards and councils that is so important in ensuring that we provide integrated services to the public.

Through our approach—and absolutely in line with our manifesto commitment before the election—we will ensure that the majority of a health board's members are democratically elected. They will be either directly elected to the health board or elected as councillors. As a result, health boards will operate better.

I regret that I cannot support Bill Butler's amendment. I suspect that he will not withdraw it, so I ask Parliament to vote against it.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Bill Butler to wind up and to press or withdraw his amendment.

Bill Butler: I say to the cabinet secretary that she should never resist the temptation to quote me.

To Ross Finnie, I say that we have a disagreement but we will not fall out over it—well, not too much. The distinction is not between legitimacy and illegitimacy. The bill, as it is outlined in the explanatory notes, recognises three different categories of board member, two of which are appointed directly by the cabinet secretary.

Councillors and those who are directly elected through health board elections will not be appointed to health boards in the same way and cannot be construed as forming a democratic majority. The system fails the democratic test because councillors are elected at diets of council elections, which is not the case for directly elected health board members. If the electorate for a health board election are disappointed with a councillor, they must wait until the council elections to show that—they cannot get rid of that councillor at a health board election. That fails one of the tests that Tony Benn set out in his Nottingham lectures in 1991—the litmus test of democracy, which is how the electorate can get rid of an elected member. That is a serious point: if the electorate cannot get rid of a board member immediately in a health board election, that member is different—they are appointed rather than directly elected.

I wholly agree with Jackie Baillie because she wholly agrees with me.

I hope that the cabinet secretary, even at this late stage, will think again. It would take only a nod from the cabinet secretary, who is also the Deputy First Minister for Scotland, to give the SNP back

benchers the wherewithal to join Labour. We can form a majority today and, if we do, we will have health boards with a simple majority of directly elected members. What could be a more opportune moment than when we have pilots? Pilots could test whether the system works, so I ask the cabinet secretary to think again.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The question is, that amendment 1 be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: There will be a division. I suspend the proceedings for five minutes to allow the division bell to be rung and members to return to the chamber.

15:10

Meeting suspended.

15:15

On resuming—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We move to the division on amendment 1.

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)
 Gillon, Karen (Clydesdale) (Lab)
 Gordon, Charlie (Glasgow Cathcart) (Lab)
 Gray, Iain (East Lothian) (Lab)
 Henry, Hugh (Paisley South) (Lab)
 Jamieson, Cathy (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (Lab)
 Kelly, James (Glasgow Rutherglen) (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)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow Kelvin) (Lab)
 McNulty, Des (Clydebank and Milngavie) (Lab)
 Mulligan, Mary (Linlithgow) (Lab)
 Murray, Elaine (Dumfries) (Lab)
 Oldfather, Irene (Cunninghame South) (Lab)
 Park, John (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Peattie, Cathy (Falkirk East) (Lab)
 Simpson, Dr Richard (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Smith, Elaine (Coatbridge and Chryston) (Lab)
 Whitefield, Karen (Airdrie and Shotts) (Lab)
 Whitton, David (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (Lab)

AGAINST

Adam, Brian (Aberdeen North) (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)
 Brown, Robert (Glasgow) (LD)
 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)
 Finnie, Ross (West of Scotland) (LD)
 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)
 Hume, Jim (South of Scotland) (LD)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Lothians) (SNP)
 Ingram, Adam (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Johnstone, Alex (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Lamont, John (Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 MacAskill, Kenny (Edinburgh East and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Marwick, Tricia (Central Fife) (SNP)
 Mather, Jim (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 Maxwell, Stewart (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney) (LD)
 McGrigor, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 McInnes, Alison (West of Scotland) (LD)
 McKee, Ian (Lothians) (SNP)
 McKelvie, Christina (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 McLaughlin, Anne (Glasgow) (SNP)
 McLetchie, David (Edinburgh Pentlands) (Con)
 McMillan, Stuart (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 Milne, Nanette (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Mitchell, Margaret (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Munro, John Farquhar (Ross, Skye and Inverness West) (LD)
 Neil, Alex (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 O'Donnell, Hugh (Central Scotland) (LD)
 Paterson, Gil (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 Pringle, Mike (Edinburgh South) (LD)
 Purvis, Jeremy (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee East) (SNP)
 Rumbles, Mike (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (LD)
 Russell, Michael (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Scanlon, Mary (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Scott, John (Ayr) (Con)
 Scott, Tavish (Shetland) (LD)
 Smith, Elizabeth (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Smith, Iain (North East Fife) (LD)
 Smith, Margaret (Edinburgh West) (LD)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Lothians) (SNP)
 Stevenson, Stewart (Banff and Buchan) (SNP)
 Stone, Jamie (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD)

Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Govan) (SNP)
 Thompson, Dave (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Tolson, Jim (Dunfermline West) (LD)
 Watt, Maureen (North East Scotland) (SNP)
 Welsh, Andrew (Angus) (SNP)
 White, Sandra (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Wilson, Bill (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 Wilson, John (Central Scotland) (SNP)

ABSTENTIONS

MacDonald, Margo (Lothians) (Ind)

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 38, Against 77, Abstentions 1.

Amendment 1 disagreed to.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Group 2 is on the power to remove councillor members. Amendment 12, in the name of Helen Eadie, is grouped with amendments 13 and 14.

Helen Eadie (Dunfermline East) (Lab): First, I point out that amendment 12 does not seek to remove ministers' right to dismiss a council-elected health board member whom they have appointed. I acknowledge that the appointment of such members is up to ministers, but it would set quite a precedent if the same ministers decided to remove someone who has been democratically elected on to a council and nominated by the council for membership of the health board.

Ministers might well feel that there were good reasons for taking such a big decision, but such reasons could, at the very least, be perceived as political. As a result, one safeguard would be to make any such move subject to an affirmative, not negative, resolution. There would have to be safeguards given that it would be a very big step.

Although the removal of a health board member might be 100 per cent justified, experience suggests that such matters can become very political and that the people involved might make different claims. After all, ministers might remove a politician who, for example, was not of the same political hue as the Government. If ministers are confident about their decision, they will not be afraid of seeking Parliament's affirmation or otherwise.

As I have said, the provisions should be subject to affirmative procedure. Ministers might have good reason for removing someone from a health board—and Parliament might well agree with them—but I feel that in this case affirmative procedure is the right way to go. As soon as ministers make an appointment, the matter moves into the political arena, because, as I have said, they appoint someone who is already a politician. That has consequences—[*Interruption.*]

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Excuse me, Ms Eadie. There is far too much noise in the chamber.

Helen Eadie: If such a decision is to be reversed, politicians need to be objective and confident that they are not simply wasting their time on the matter. I believe that ministers in the previous Administration were very objective, and I am sure that, in seeking the Parliament's support and giving Parliament the right to take a view on such matters, ministers can be confident that parliamentarians can be just as objective.

This is an important and controversial matter. There have been few, if any, occasions on which a minister has removed a health board member in such circumstances—it might well have happened, but I must say that I am not aware of it. I hope that members understand that the point is not to take away the minister's right to remove people but that the Parliament should fundamentally and finally decide whether to endorse the decision.

I move amendment 12.

Ross Finnie: The Liberal Democrat position is entirely consistent with that which we set out on amendment 1. We genuinely see a distinction when it comes to the legitimacy of members who have been elected to a board in the first place, notwithstanding their terms of appointment. Helen Eadie proposes an entirely sensible compromise, which strikes the right balance in recognising that there is an issue with the removal of an elected member. I am grateful to her for forcing me to read section 105 of the National Health Service (Scotland) Act 1978, which her amendment would amend. I cannot say that I found it particularly riveting, but at least I now know what the amendment means.

I hope that members will support amendment 12.

Nicola Sturgeon: I thank Helen Eadie for lodging amendments 12, 13 and 14. I do not agree with them, but I recognise that judgments on the issues are finely balanced. I understand that Helen Eadie pursued the issue with the Subordinate Legislation Committee, which considered it and decided not to proceed with it.

Members will recall that, at stage 2, I acknowledged the special position that the new category of directly elected health board members would occupy and agreed that they should not be removable at the discretion of the Scottish ministers. Helen Eadie's amendments would set local councillor members apart from the other appointed members of a health board by ensuring that any regulations that specify circumstances in which ministers may determine that a council member is to vacate office are subject to the affirmative procedure.

The existing power in the National Health Service (Scotland) Act 1978 to make such regulations is subject to the negative procedure. It

is also worth pointing out that no member of a health board has ever been dismissed under that legislation and that such a move would therefore be quite extraordinary. I dare say that that leaves it open to people such as Helen Eadie to say, "Well, why not agree to these amendments?" but a point of principle is involved.

The way in which local councillor members arrive on a health board is different from how a directly elected member will arrive on it. Currently, local authorities put forward their selected member for ministers to appoint. That process will continue, and the act will put the position of local councillor members on a statutory basis for the first time. That step has been welcomed, but councillor members will still be ministerial appointments, and the Scottish ministers should have the flexibility to remove members whom they have appointed if there are extraordinary circumstances to justify that.

It is important to stress that, if in an extreme scenario a health minister had to remove a local councillor member from a health board, the local authority would not be left without representation, and nor would the elected majority on the health board be affected, because the local authority would simply nominate another councillor to fill the vacancy.

As I said at the outset, the Subordinate Legislation Committee considered the matter and opted not to pursue it. I ask members to vote against Helen Eadie's amendments, which I assume she will push to a vote. However, it is of course for Parliament to make a judgment on such matters.

Helen Eadie: The convener of the Subordinate Legislation Committee is sitting not far from the minister; in fact, he is next to her. The reality is that the views of committee members were finely balanced and that its convener chose to propose to its members that we should not divide on the issue. We did not object to that proposition, as he said that he would have felt very uncomfortable taking a view at that stage. I accepted that on the day and thought that that approach was entirely reasonable.

I remind members that my amendment would not take away the minister's ability to sack someone or remove someone from office. It is about Parliament's right to endorse or not endorse the minister's view, which is fundamentally different from saying to the minister that she should not have the power to remove a councillor member. That is important.

In a matter as important as this, we must decide whether the removal of a councillor member should just go through on the nod, as under the negative procedure, or whether it should be the

conscious decision of Parliament under the affirmative procedure, which is what I am asking the Parliament to agree to. It is important that everyone agrees that, irrespective of whether a councillor member is appointed by the minister, the reality is that they are democratically elected by a community and recommended and nominated by a local authority. Very rarely does a local authority appoint someone to a position on a health board unless they are a senior politician, either from the ruling or opposition parties.

Parliament should understand the significance of the amendment, and I hope that it will vote with me. I will press amendment 12 and the consequential amendments if amendment 12 is agreed to.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The question is, that amendment 12 be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Deputy 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)
 Gillon, Karen (Clydesdale) (Lab)
 Gordon, Charlie (Glasgow Cathcart) (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)
 Livingstone, Marilyn (Kirkcaldy) (Lab)
 Macdonald, Lewis (Aberdeen Central) (Lab)
 MacDonald, Margo (Lothians) (Ind)
 Macintosh, Ken (Eastwood) (Lab)
 Martin, Paul (Glasgow Springburn) (Lab)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney) (LD)
 McAveety, Mr Frank (Glasgow Shettleston) (Lab)
 McCabe, Tom (Hamilton South) (Lab)
 McConnell, Jack (Motherwell and Wishaw) (Lab)
 McInnes, Alison (North East Scotland) (LD)
 McMahon, Michael (Hamilton North and Bellshill) (Lab)
 McNeil, Duncan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (Lab)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow Kelvin) (Lab)
 McNulty, Des (Clydebank and Milngavie) (Lab)
 Mulligan, Mary (Linlithgow) (Lab)
 Munro, John Farquhar (Ross, Skye and Inverness West) (LD)
 Murray, Elaine (Dumfries) (Lab)
 O'Donnell, Hugh (Central Scotland) (LD)
 Oldfather, Irene (Cunninghame South) (Lab)
 Park, John (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)

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, Elaine (Coatbridge and Chryston) (Lab)
 Smith, Iain (North East Fife) (LD)
 Smith, Margaret (Edinburgh West) (LD)
 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)
 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)
 Marwick, Tricia (Central Fife) (SNP)
 Mather, Jim (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 Maxwell, Stewart (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 McGregor, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 McKee, Ian (Lothians) (SNP)
 McKelvie, Christina (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 McLaughlin, Anne (Glasgow) (SNP)
 McLetchie, David (Edinburgh Pentlands) (Con)
 McMillan, Stuart (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 Milne, Nanette (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Mitchell, Margaret (Central Scotland) (Con)
 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)
 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 Deputy Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 54, Against 63, Abstentions 0.

Amendment 12 disagreed to.

Section 2—Health Board elections

Amendments 13 and 14 not moved.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Group 3 is on personal identifiers. Amendment 2, in the name of the minister, is the only amendment in the group.

Nicola Sturgeon: The use of personal identifiers for elections has caused a great deal of debate throughout the bill's progress—I entirely understand why. The requirement for personal identifiers was introduced by Jackie Baillie at stage 2.

I say at the outset that I both understand and respect the motive of all those who have pursued the change. We all want a robust approach to the administration of elections, but I am not persuaded that it is proportionate to insist on personal identifiers for pilot elections, as opposed to full roll-out of the elections. Our proceeding with the requirement for personal identifiers would add in excess of £800,000 to the cost of the pilot elections—a sum that many will consider to be disproportionate to the overall cost of the pilot elections, which is just under £3 million.

However, the debate is not just about cost. It is also the case that to require personal identifiers would, I believe—unless we were prepared to abandon proposals for a postal ballot—be a considerable mistake, in that it would delay the pilots significantly. I do not believe that anyone in the chamber wants delay, whether they strongly support the principle of direct elections to health boards, as my colleagues and I do, or are more sceptical about direct elections but are keen to see the experience of the pilots. I do not believe that anyone wants delay in the process.

15:30

The arrangements that we propose to follow for the pilot elections are similar to those that are already in place for national park elections in Scotland. We want to follow that approach because we want to ensure that health board pilot elections can take place soon, and that the maximum number of people possible are able and willing to participate.

I stress that the bill is about what we will do in respect of the pilot elections. What we choose to do in the future, should Parliament agree to roll out direct elections, would be up to Parliament at that time. The operation of the elections will be assessed as part of the independent evaluation of the pilots, and that experience will form part of the report that will be placed before Parliament. If elections were to be rolled out, I, for one, think it is highly likely that it would be considered sensible and proportionate to insist on personal identifiers. I do not, however, believe that their use is proportionate for the pilot elections.

The original approach that we took in the bill at stage 1 represents a sensible and balanced approach that is proportionate to the scale of the proposed pilot elections and will, crucially, allow them to proceed both cost-effectively and within such timescales as I believe we all want.

I move amendment 2.

Jackie Baillie: I speak against the cabinet secretary's amendment 2 because it seeks to remove the requirement for personal identifiers in postal ballots. Parliament should be aware that the Health and Sport Committee unanimously agreed the following on personal identifiers:

"The Committee considers that health board elections should be seen to be taken as seriously as other statutory elections. 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."

The committee recommended that

"the Scottish Government reconsider using personal identifiers for postal votes in health board elections."

That was the view of the whole committee and it remained the majority view at stage 2, so I am genuinely disappointed that the cabinet secretary has lodged this amendment at stage 3.

I will explain why I think amendment 2 is wrong. First, under existing arrangements for local and national elections, voters are, if they use a postal vote, required to provide personal identifiers—the identifier can be something as simple as a signature—which are, of course, used to ensure the security of the vote.

Members will surely not have forgotten the difficulties that we experienced in the 2007 Scottish Parliament elections. In some areas, questions were asked about the validity of the outcome because majorities were small and the number of rejected ballot papers was large. I even recollect that the Scottish National Party recently questioned the integrity of one aspect of the Glenrothes by-election result. The SNP was mistaken, but the validity of elections clearly exercises us all. I do not want there to be a scintilla of doubt about the validity of health board

elections. They will be important elections. They will be Scotland's fifth set of statutory elections.

Margo MacDonald (Lothians) (Ind): Although I fully appreciate Jackie Baillie's concern that the elections should be valid and seen to be so, the cabinet secretary said that she did not object to the use of personal identifiers per se, but to the expense that they would incur during a pilot. If the member could be assured that there is another cheaper way of monitoring, would she be satisfied with that?

Jackie Baillie: I am afraid not. I will come to explain why.

They elections will be the fifth set of statutory elections and will be run by returning officers, so they must be robust and consistent with other elections. I know that there will be considerable interest in them and that my local community shares my enthusiasm for them. I hope that they will be hotly contested, because the elections will represent the democratic means by which people will be able to express their views on their health boards. The cabinet secretary argued that personal identifiers would lead to increased costs and delay, so I find it strange that she has promised to consider them should there be roll-out of the elections. If the cost for the pilot is too high, the cost for the roll-out will be even higher. I say to Margo MacDonald that it is surely at the pilot stage that the proposal should be tested.

What price do we attach to democracy? How much do Scottish Parliament elections cost? There is no suggestion that we should do away with personal identifiers for those. We all believe in increasing voters' access to postal votes. At the heart of the matter is the status that we accord to health board elections. I ask Parliament whether we are content to settle for a lower electoral standard than exists for local government, even though health boards are responsible for spending more than individual councils.

The cabinet secretary points to the elections to the boards of the national park authorities, which have postal ballots without identifiers. The annual budget of the Loch Lomond and the Trossachs National Park Authority is £7 million. The annual budget of Greater Glasgow and Clyde NHS Board is £2.6 billion. There is a difference.

I know that some people might not be convinced by what I think, so I ask them to look at the evidence from the experts, such as the Electoral Commission and local authority returning officers from throughout Scotland. They are the people who have the responsibility for overseeing and running our elections. They are the experts, and they all believe that personal identifiers should be used in postal ballots. If members will not listen to

me, I ask them to listen to the experts and reject the cabinet secretary's amendment.

Ross Finnie: I am sorry that Jackie Baillie did not quote paragraph 84 of the committee's report in full. It is important for members to be aware that the committee was indeed cognisant of the potential cost. The final sentence of that paragraph states:

"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."

In the committee's view, as stated in its report, there was no question but that all aspects of the efficacy of the elections and, regrettably, the costs that might be attached to them, must be considered.

The Liberal Democrats' position is that we have to consider the end gain. There will be some form of pilot election. The result will have to be analysed and we will then have to come to a decision. If the pilot is to be valid, we must know that no questions about how persons came to be elected were asked at any stage. The Liberal Democrats believe that the experiment upon which the cabinet secretary seeks to embark is an important one. Regardless of the difficulties, if we are to have confidence in its outcome, we must have confidence in the basis upon which it takes place. We therefore oppose the cabinet secretary's amendment.

Jackson Carlaw (West of Scotland) (Con): I listened with interest to both the cabinet secretary and Jackie Baillie. The case that Jackie Baillie made—or restated—for personal identifiers is powerful, particularly given the need to protect the integrity of our democracy in future national elections. However, I also listened with care to what the cabinet secretary said: Conservatives have concluded that we see a distinction between national elections and pilots for health board elections and that there is therefore no need for the use of personal identifiers in the pilot phase. The additional costs would be substantial and hugely disproportionate and would militate against the proposal in that they would almost undermine the desirability of the pilots in the first place. Secondly, we too are concerned about the delays that would be attendant upon them. With that in mind, we will support the cabinet secretary's amendment.

Dr Richard Simpson (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): I decided to comment because I suspected that Jackson Carlaw was going to make that speech. It seems to me that the Conservatives have a difficulty: their predominant objection is to the cost of the elections, yet the cabinet secretary made it clear that she has not ruled out the use of personal identifiers in full roll-out of the elections. If we are to test the proposal properly in the pilot

stage, we also need to test the costs. If we are to do that properly, we must include the use of personal identifiers.

I will not reiterate the arguments that my colleague Jackie Baillie has made, but I stress that what happened in 2007 makes the point about the credibility and validity of the pilot elections much more important than it would otherwise have been.

Mary Scanlon (Highlands and Islands) (Con): We are facing the most serious economic crisis since the 1930s. On that basis—by today's standards—we judge that £800,000 is a huge amount of money.

Dr Simpson: I do not think that that alters my argument. The £800,000 cost for the pilots might make the difference between the elections being credible and not being credible. If the elections are questioned on the basis of credibility, Parliament will be in a very difficult position when we come to debate full roll-out. Therefore, I hope that Parliament will oppose the amendment.

Ian McKee (Lothians) (SNP): Jackie Baillie knows how much I admire her skills of persuasion and charm, but in this case I feel that she is in danger of making the best the enemy of the good. We heard good evidence that, in a perfect election, one would have personal identifiers, but we also heard evidence that including identifiers in the pilots would add £800,000 to the cost, and would delay their onset. The pilots might fail for all sorts of other reasons. If we go ahead with the full roll-out and decide that the elections are going to be the pattern for the health service in Scotland for many years to come, that will be the time to consider including identifiers. However, we can find out enough about the election process without having identifiers.

Jackie Baillie: Will the member take an intervention?

Ian McKee: I have finished my contribution, but I am always willing to hear Ms Baillie, if the Presiding Officer will allow her to intervene.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I will let Ms Baillie in briefly.

Jackie Baillie: I am grateful to Ian McKee and I hope that I will be persuasive.

Aside from the minister and her officials, did anybody argue against having personal identifiers?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I invite Ian McKee to respond to that briefly.

Ian McKee: We all agreed that having personal identifiers is the ideal way to run an election, but we are in the real world and we are trying out a pilot, which is entirely different from the full elections. That is the difference. As my Health and

Sport Committee colleague Mary Scanlon said, £800,000 is a lot of money to spend just to gold-plate something, when a simpler version would do the job.

Nicola Sturgeon: I thank all members who have contributed to this interesting and important debate. I do not for a second diminish the importance of the issue.

Ross Finnie—and Jackie Baillie, more by implication—suggested that if the cost of personal identifiers in the pilots would be so great, we should reconsider having an all-postal ballot. I think that would be a mistake. It is important that we encourage and enable as many people as possible to participate in health board pilot elections. The argument also leads me to point out an anomaly in the amendments that Jackie Baillie got passed at stage 2. Those amendments require personal identifiers only in an all-postal ballot. If I were to decide that we should move instead to a traditional ballot, personal identifiers would not be required for those who opted to vote by post in such a ballot. That seems to be an anomalous and bizarre situation.

The second point that I want to make is about the principle. I accept the principle of personal identifiers leading to the security of the ballot when we are dealing with a national election, but we are talking about pilot elections. There are two reasons why I think personal identifiers are not proportionate in this case. One is the cost. I stress that I do not object to the incurring of costs for personal identifiers per se; I was, rather, pointing out the disproportionality of that cost in a pilot election. Should Parliament decide later to roll out elections, and decide that personal identifiers would be appropriate in that context—that would be Parliament's decision, not mine—that cost, which would be disproportionate in a pilot election, would become proportionate in a national election.

Even if we are not worried about the cost, the requirement for personal identifiers would delay the pilots significantly, although we would try to minimise that. I want the pilots to go ahead and I know that Jackie Baillie wants them to go ahead. Even members who are not yet convinced that elected health boards are the way to go want the pilots to go ahead, so that they can assess the experience.

For all those reasons, I believe that personal identifiers for the pilots are not the right way to go. There would be a different consideration for full roll-out. I urge Parliament to vote for amendment 2.

15:45

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The question is, that amendment 2 be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

For

Adam, Brian (Aberdeen North) (SNP)
 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)
 McLaughlin, Anne (Glasgow) (SNP)
 McLetchie, David (Edinburgh Pentlands) (Con)
 McMillan, Stuart (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 Milne, Nanette (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Mitchell, Margaret (Central Scotland) (Con)
 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)
 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)

AGAINST

Aitken, Bill (Glasgow) (Con)
 Alexander, Ms Wendy (Paisley North) (Lab)
 Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)

Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Baker, Richard (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Edinburgh Central) (Lab)
 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)
 Gordon, Charlie (Glasgow Cathcart) (Lab)
 Gray, Iain (East Lothian) (Lab)
 Harper, Robin (Lothians) (Green)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Henry, Hugh (Paisley South) (Lab)
 Hume, Jim (South of Scotland) (LD)
 Jamieson, Cathy (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (Lab)
 Kelly, James (Glasgow Rutherglen) (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)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow Kelvin) (Lab)
 McNulty, Des (Clydebank and Milngavie) (Lab)
 Mulligan, Mary (Linlithgow) (Lab)
 Munro, John Farquhar (Ross, Skye and Inverness West) (LD)
 Murray, Elaine (Dumfries) (Lab)
 O'Donnell, Hugh (Central Scotland) (LD)
 Oldfather, Irene (Cunninghame South) (Lab)
 Park, John (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 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, Elaine (Coatbridge and Chryston) (Lab)
 Smith, Iain (North East Fife) (LD)
 Smith, Margaret (Edinburgh West) (LD)
 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)

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 61, Against 55, Abstentions 0.

Amendment 2 agreed to.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Group 4 is on entitlement to vote in health board elections. Amendment 3, in the name of Ross Finnie, is grouped with amendment 4.

Ross Finnie: Amendment 3 relates to a matter of some difficulty: how best we not only enable young people aged 16 and 17 to vote, but ensure that names can appear on an electoral register, given that details of persons who are 14 or 15

might appear on a public document. The matter caused serious concern during the committee's consideration.

The cabinet secretary tried hard to resolve the issue and continues to do so. I do not blame her for the problem; she is somewhat in the hands of the electoral registration officers who run our systems. As we emerged from stage 1, the committee learned that there were grave concerns about proposals to have a private register, which would be inimical to the open approach that we operate in elections in this country.

I lodged a probing amendment at stage 2 and I find myself in the same position today, to try to secure the appearance on the register of the maximum number of people in the simplest way. I acknowledge that the cabinet secretary has made considerable progress on the matter. I understand that the idea of a private register has been dropped and that electoral registration officers have proposed an alternative scheme, which would allow 16 and 17-year-olds who are on the local government register by virtue of the annual canvass automatically to be registered to vote in health board elections. That takes us quite a bit further.

Given that electoral registration officers update registers monthly, as we all know, it is unfortunate that they cannot propose a simpler arrangement that would reduce the requirement for 16-year-olds to apply for a vote. Liberal Democrats are asking the cabinet secretary to give an undertaking that work on the matter will continue, to try to ensure that the persons who are eligible to vote will appear automatically on the register and will not have to apply to do so. If such an undertaking is given, I will seek to withdraw amendment 3.

I move amendment 3.

Nicola Sturgeon: I will speak to amendment 4 and consider how we can extend the franchise to cover people who are 16 and over.

I know that Ross Finnie agrees that it is right to allow 16 and 17-year-olds to participate in the elections. That approach will allow young people to express their views on a service of which they will all have had experience. I noticed that during the Scottish Labour conference at the weekend Ed Miliband agreed with our position that changing the voting age to 16 more generally is the right thing to do. Of course, we recognise that achieving such a change is not without difficulty; after all, we are trying to use existing electoral mechanisms, which are set up to manage those aged 18 and over—

George Foulkes (Lothians) (Lab): Could the cabinet secretary help me on one point?

Nicola Sturgeon: I am sure that I could if the member asked to intervene.

George Foulkes: I am most grateful to the cabinet secretary for taking an intervention.

I agree with everything that the cabinet secretary has said about those aged 16 and over. However, those who are not entitled to vote at general elections comprise three groups of people: lunatics, prisoners and peers. What is their position in respect of the proposed health board elections?

Nicola Sturgeon: Perhaps Lord Foulkes should have declared an interest before asking that question. I look forward immensely to his voting for the bill at 5 o'clock this evening and to his enthusiastic participation in the first elections, if those are piloted by Lothian NHS Board—which, in case anyone gets the wrong idea, is a decision that I have not yet taken.

We are debating an important principle, which is that 16 and 17-year-olds should have the right to vote. I was in the process of saying that such a change is not easy to achieve because the current arrangements cater for those aged 18 and over. Concern has been expressed, particularly during the committee stages of the bill, about the original intention to use a private young persons register. Having listened carefully to those concerns, we have identified a way forward—the subject of amendment 4—that will use existing systems.

Let me briefly run through the key features of this alternative approach. First, those 16 and 17-year-olds who are already on the local government register by virtue of the annual canvass will automatically be registered to vote in health board elections. A cut-off date will be set, by which 16 and 17-year-olds who are not already on the register could apply to register so that they can vote in a health board election. The cut-off date will allow for registration of such voters and the preparation of a voting pack for them. Similarly, anyone whose 16th birthday falls before the cut-off date will be able to apply to register at any time up until the cut-off date once they have turned 16. We will maintain our original approach to publicising to 16 and 17-year-olds that they have a right to seek to register and participate in the elections.

The proposal means that a small minority—I hope very small—whose birthdays fall between the cut-off date and the election date will be excluded from the election. However, the approach will remove the need to store data on persons aged under 16 in a separate register. In my view, that deals with the concern that the committee expressed. Discussions with EROs have indicated that that would be a more straightforward approach than using a young persons register, as it would allow EROs to use

existing systems for maintaining the local government register.

Amendment 4 will ensure that the approach can be implemented in the election regulations that are made under the bill.

In response to Ross Finnie, I say that I believe that the approach represents a step forward from that which we discussed at an earlier stage of the bill. However, I am more than happy to agree with him that further work might still be required. I give him a clear commitment that we will continue to work with electoral registration officers, returning officers and the Electoral Commission to identify an even better system that will be robust enough to use if health board elections are rolled out across the country in the future.

I encourage members to vote for amendment 4.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I can give Mary Scanlon and Cathy Jamieson only one minute each.

Mary Scanlon: We support amendment 3, which we will push to a vote if necessary, for reasons that are probably different from those of Ross Finnie.

The Scottish Conservatives supported the reduction in the voting age from 21 to 18, but it is not our policy to reduce the voting age to 16. The SNP Government has raised the age for buying cigarettes to 18 and proposes to raise the age for buying alcohol in off-licences to 21, yet it proposes to lower the voting age for health board elections to 16. Voters who will be too young to give blood or to buy cigarettes and alcohol would be tasked with voting for people who will address Scotland's very serious public health problems. We are not convinced that lowering the voting age to 16 would increase voting turnout or interest in health board elections. If the piloted elections are to be considered on an equal basis with other elections, it would be consistent and appropriate to leave the voting age at 18.

I support amendment 3 in the name of Ross Finnie.

Cathy Jamieson (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (Lab): I, too, rise to support the amendment in Ross Finnie's name. I appreciate that a considerable amount of work has been done on the subject. As I said in an earlier debate, I am one of those in my party who is more relaxed about the idea of people voting at 16. That said, we should work with the electoral registration officers to look at the matter more generally. We should not pilot voting for 16-year-olds at the same time that we are piloting other public participation issues and assessing how they have worked. For that reason, I, too, ask Ross Finnie to press amendment 3.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: To allow further debate on amendment 3, I exercise my powers under rule 9.8.4A (a) and 9.8.4A(c) to extend the time limit for the debate. I call Ross Finnie.

Ross Finnie: We now know the answer to the question who cannot vote in the health board elections: lunatics, peers, prisoners and those under 18. That is not a happy combination and I hope that Lord Foulkes will not be proud of it.

Like the cabinet secretary and my Liberal Democrat colleagues, I am very much in favour of the principle that persons under 18 should have the right to vote. It is disappointing therefore that no member of the Labour Party or Conservative Party raised any fundamental objection before the stage 3 debate. They raised no objection at committee. I can think of no evidence that has been adduced in the five or six weeks since the conclusion of the committee process that could have led any member to come to that conclusion.

I repeat what I said earlier: my purpose in lodging amendment 3 was not to interfere with the principle or the right of people under 18 to vote; my purpose was to extract from the cabinet secretary the undertaking—which, I am pleased to say, she has given graciously—that she will continue to work with the electoral registration officers to ensure that the maximum number of persons who are eligible to vote can vote. As other members who had concerns about the private register will be, I am extremely pleased that it will be no more and that its replacement is a system that should—if that further work is carried out—allow the maximum number of people to be included.

On that basis, I seek leave to withdraw amendment 3.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Alasdair Morgan): Mr Finnie seeks leave to withdraw amendment 3. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The question is, that amendment 3 be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

For

Aitken, Bill (Glasgow) (Con)
 Alexander, Ms Wendy (Paisley North) (Lab)
 Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Baker, Richard (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Edinburgh Central) (Lab)
 Brankin, Rhona (Midlothian) (Lab)
 Brocklebank, Ted (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Brown, Gavin (Lothians) (Con)
 Brownlee, Derek (South of Scotland) (Con)
 Butler, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (Lab)

Carlaw, Jackson (West of Scotland) (Con)
 Chisholm, Malcolm (Edinburgh North and Leith) (Lab)
 Curran, Margaret (Glasgow Baillieston) (Lab)
 Eadie, Helen (Dunfermline East) (Lab)
 Ferguson, Patricia (Glasgow Maryhill) (Lab)
 Foulkes, George (Lothians) (Lab)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Goldie, Annabel (West of Scotland) (Con)
 Gordon, Charlie (Glasgow Cathcart) (Lab)
 Gray, Iain (East Lothian) (Lab)
 Henry, Hugh (Paisley South) (Lab)
 Jamieson, Cathy (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (Lab)
 Johnstone, Alex (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Kelly, James (Glasgow Rutherglen) (Lab)
 Lamont, John (Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 Livingstone, Marilyn (Kirkcaldy) (Lab)
 Macdonald, Lewis (Aberdeen Central) (Lab)
 Macintosh, Ken (Eastwood) (Lab)
 Martin, Paul (Glasgow Springburn) (Lab)
 McAveety, Mr Frank (Glasgow Shettleston) (Lab)
 McConnell, Jack (Motherwell and Wishaw) (Lab)
 McGrigor, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 McLetchie, David (Edinburgh Pentlands) (Con)
 McMahon, Michael (Hamilton North and Bellshill) (Lab)
 McNeil, Duncan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (Lab)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow Kelvin) (Lab)
 McNulty, Des (Clydebank and Milngavie) (Lab)
 Milne, Nanette (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Mitchell, Margaret (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Mulligan, Mary (Linlithgow) (Lab)
 Murray, Elaine (Dumfries) (Lab)
 Oldfather, Irene (Cunninghame South) (Lab)
 Park, John (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Peattie, Cathy (Falkirk East) (Lab)
 Scanlon, Mary (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Scott, John (Ayr) (Con)
 Simpson, Dr Richard (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Smith, Elaine (Coatbridge and Chryston) (Lab)
 Smith, Elizabeth (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Whitefield, Karen (Airdrie and Shotts) (Lab)
 Whitton, David (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (Lab)

AGAINST

Adam, Brian (Aberdeen North) (SNP)
 Allan, Alasdair (Western Isles) (SNP)
 Brown, Keith (Ochil) (SNP)
 Brown, Robert (Glasgow) (LD)
 Campbell, Aileen (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP)
 Constance, Angela (Livingston) (SNP)
 Crawford, Bruce (Stirling) (SNP)
 Cunningham, Roseanna (Perth) (SNP)
 Don, Nigel (North East Scotland) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness East, Nairn and Lochaber) (SNP)
 Fabiani, Linda (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Finnie, Ross (West of Scotland) (LD)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee West) (SNP)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Gibson, Rob (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Grahame, Christine (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Harper, Robin (Lothians) (Green)
 Harvie, Christopher (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Hume, Jim (South of Scotland) (LD)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Lothians) (SNP)
 Ingram, Adam (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 MacAskill, Kenny (Edinburgh East and Musselburgh) (SNP)

Marwick, Tricia (Central Fife) (SNP)
 Mather, Jim (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 Maxwell, Stewart (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney) (LD)
 McInnes, Alison (North East Scotland) (LD)
 McKee, Ian (Lothians) (SNP)
 McKelvie, Christina (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 McLaughlin, Anne (Glasgow) (SNP)
 McMillan, Stuart (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 Munro, John Farquhar (Ross, Skye and Inverness West) (LD)
 Neil, Alex (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 O'Donnell, Hugh (Central Scotland) (LD)
 Paterson, Gil (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 Pringle, Mike (Edinburgh South) (LD)
 Purvis, Jeremy (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee East) (SNP)
 Rumbles, Mike (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (LD)
 Russell, Michael (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Salmond, Alex (Gordon) (SNP)
 Scott, Tavish (Shetland) (LD)
 Smith, Iain (North East Fife) (LD)
 Smith, Margaret (Edinburgh West) (LD)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Lothians) (SNP)
 Stevenson, Stewart (Banff and Buchan) (SNP)
 Stone, Jamie (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Govan) (SNP)
 Thompson, Dave (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Tolson, Jim (Dunfermline West) (LD)
 Watt, Maureen (North East Scotland) (SNP)
 Welsh, Andrew (Angus) (SNP)
 White, Sandra (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Wilson, Bill (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 Wilson, John (Central Scotland) (SNP)

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 52, Against 62, Abstentions 0.

Amendment 3 disagreed to.

Amendment 4 moved—[Nicola Sturgeon].

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The question is, that amendment 4 be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

FOR

Adam, Brian (Aberdeen North) (SNP)
 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)
 Brown, Keith (Ochil) (SNP)
 Brown, Robert (Glasgow) (LD)
 Butler, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (Lab)
 Campbell, Aileen (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 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)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Gibson, Rob (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Gordon, Charlie (Glasgow Cathcart) (Lab)
 Grahame, Christine (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Gray, Iain (East Lothian) (Lab)
 Harper, Robin (Lothians) (Green)
 Harvie, Christopher (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 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)
 Kelly, James (Glasgow Rutherglen) (Lab)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Livingstone, Marilyn (Kirkcaldy) (Lab)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 MacAskill, Kenny (Edinburgh East and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Macdonald, Lewis (Aberdeen Central) (Lab)
 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)
 McConnell, Jack (Motherwell and Wishaw) (Lab)
 McInnes, Alison (North East Scotland) (LD)
 McKee, Ian (Lothians) (SNP)
 McKelvie, Christina (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 McLaughlin, Anne (Glasgow) (SNP)
 McMahon, Michael (Hamilton North and Bellshill) (Lab)
 McMillan, Stuart (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 McNeil, Duncan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (Lab)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow Kelvin) (Lab)
 McNulty, Des (Clydebank and Milngavie) (Lab)
 Mulligan, Mary (Linlithgow) (Lab)
 Munro, John Farquhar (Ross, Skye and Inverness West) (LD)
 Murray, Elaine (Dumfries) (Lab)
 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)
 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)
 Scott, Tavish (Shetland) (LD)
 Simpson, Dr Richard (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Smith, Elaine (Coatbridge and Chryston) (Lab)
 Smith, Iain (North East Fife) (LD)
 Smith, Margaret (Edinburgh West) (LD)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Lothians) (SNP)
 Stevenson, Stewart (Banff and Buchan) (SNP)
 Stone, Jamie (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Govan) (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

Aitken, Bill (Glasgow) (Con)
 Brocklebank, Ted (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Brown, Gavin (Lothians) (Con)
 Brownlee, Derek (South of Scotland) (Con)
 Carlaw, Jackson (West of Scotland) (Con)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Goldie, Annabel (West of Scotland) (Con)
 Johnstone, Alex (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Lamont, John (Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 McGregor, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 McLetchie, David (Edinburgh Pentlands) (Con)
 Milne, Nanette (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Mitchell, Margaret (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Scanlon, Mary (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Scott, John (Ayr) (Con)
 Smith, Elizabeth (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 97, Against 16, Abstentions 0.

Amendment 4 agreed to.

Section 5—Report on pilot scheme

16:00

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Group 5 is on the evaluation report. Amendment 5, in the name of Dr Richard Simpson, is the only amendment in the group. You will need to be very brief in speaking to the amendment, Dr Simpson, as we are out of time.

Dr Simpson: I will be brief. Amendment 5 recognises the crucial importance of having an independent evaluator in place sufficiently ahead of the pilot health board elections taking place. By agreeing to the amendment, we will ensure that the person who is tasked with the evaluation of the pilot schemes is appointed at least three months before the health board elections are held. That will allow them to set out fully the scope of their assessment and to establish a baseline around a board's public engagement and local accountability activity prior to the elections.

I thank the cabinet secretary for working with me on the amendment.

I move amendment 5.

Nicola Sturgeon: Richard Simpson's amendment simply ensures that there is adequate time for any independent person who is tasked with the evaluation of the pilot schemes to set out their approach. It also enables the existing structures in the pilot board areas to be assessed before any election. I thank him for lodging the

amendment, and I urge the Parliament to support it.

Amendment 5 agreed to.

Section 6—Termination of pilot scheme

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Group 6 is on termination of pilot schemes. Amendment 6, in the name of Ross Finnie, is grouped with amendments 9 and 11.

Ross Finnie: The bill has one very important feature: for the first time, it gives a statutory underpinning to the right of councillors to be members of health boards. Liberal Democrats believe that to be an important position. Unfortunately, however, under section 6, if the procedure for the pilots under the bill does not proceed, sections 1 to 3 will be repealed, which will have the effect of removing the statutory underpinning of the right of councillors to be members of health boards. That would be a retrograde step, and I am sure that it was not the original intention.

I moved an amendment to the same effect at stage 2, but I was advised by the minister that, although she was perfectly sympathetic to the position, she believed that the amendment could be better drafted. I accepted that, and I am grateful to the minister for assisting with the drafting of amendment 6 at this stage. I put it to the Parliament that it would be better to retain the statutory right of councillors to be members of health boards. By voting for amendment 6, and the consequential amendments 9 and 11, that will happen.

I move amendment 6.

Nicola Sturgeon: I agree entirely with Ross Finnie. Local authority members of health boards play a vital role in providing a link between the organisations that are charged with delivering health care and those that are charged with delivering social care to our communities. I am grateful to him for lodging his amendments, which will protect and enshrine the statutory position of local councillors on health boards, notwithstanding what might or might not happen with the roll-out of health board elections at a later stage. I am therefore happy to support the amendments.

Amendment 6 agreed to.

Section 7—Roll-out

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Group 7 is on roll-out. Amendment 7, in the name of the minister, is the only amendment in the group.

Nicola Sturgeon: Amendment 7 seeks to respond to concerns raised by the Subordinate Legislation Committee, not at stage 2 but at a

recent meeting. The committee was concerned that the 60-day consultation period for a proposed draft roll-out order for elections might not be sufficient for parliamentary consideration if that period took place across a recess. The process is only one of the stages that any roll-out order would have to go through as part of the super-affirmative procedure that was introduced by an amendment in the name of Michael Matheson at stage 2.

I am happy to respond positively to the Subordinate Legislation Committee's concerns, and I have lodged amendment 7 to guarantee that the period for consideration of such an order will be no shorter than 60 days, and that it must include at least 30 days when the Parliament is not dissolved or in recess.

I move amendment 7.

Amendment 7 agreed to.

After section 7

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Group 8 is on an annual financial impact report. Amendment 8, in the name of Derek Brownlee, is grouped with amendment 10.

Derek Brownlee (South of Scotland) (Con): In light of the very helpful undertaking that the Minister for Community Safety gave yesterday on a similar provision during the debate on the Damages (Asbestos-related Conditions) (Scotland) Bill, which was of general application, and of the Government's commitment to work towards a non-legislative solution to deal with the principles that are raised in amendment 8, I do not seek to press it to a vote.

Amendment 8 not moved.

Section 11—Commencement

Amendment 9 moved—[Ross Finnie]—and agreed to.

Amendment 10 not moved.

Amendment 11 moved—[Ross Finnie]—and agreed to.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That ends the consideration of amendments.

Health Boards (Membership and Elections) (Scotland) Bill

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Alasdair Morgan): The next item of business is a debate on motion S3M-3543, in the name of Nicola Sturgeon, on the Health Boards (Membership and Elections) (Scotland) Bill.

16:06

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Health and Wellbeing (Nicola Sturgeon): I am extremely pleased to open the debate on what I consider to be an extremely important bill. I thank all those who contributed to its development. Many people took the time to become engaged during the consultation and the bill's passage through the Parliament, and I believe that the bill that we have considered—and which I hope we will pass—is significantly better for their involvement.

I especially offer my thanks to the Health and Sport Committee, the Finance Committee and the Subordinate Legislation Committee for their extremely thorough scrutiny of the bill. I also thank the committee clerks, who worked hard to support committee members and enable them not only to scrutinise the bill but to improve it at different stages. I hope that committee members recognise that the Government has, in turn, worked hard to address as many of their concerns and comments as possible. We have made a number of amendments and, although we have not been able to agree on absolutely everything, we have found consensus on most of the contentious issues. I hope that all members agree that we have worked well together to strengthen the bill.

I also take the opportunity to place on record my sincere thanks to my officials in the bill team, who have worked extremely hard on a short but complex bill. Their work has produced a bill that delivers one of the Government's key manifesto commitments in a way that is sensitive to the suggestions, comments and concerns that have been expressed throughout the bill process.

It is important to set the bill firmly in context. Members will recall that, in "Better Health, Better Care: Action Plan", we 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 throughout Scotland believe that there is a democratic deficit in the operation of our health boards. Too often, the public have felt shut out of the big decisions that health boards take day and daily that account for significant sums of public money. The bill addresses that democratic deficit.

I believe that democracy is always a good thing and that opening up health boards to the public through elections will deliver better decision making and, ultimately, services that are even better than those that we already enjoy. The bill's clear objective is to allow the public's voice to be heard and, more important, to be listened to at the heart of the decision-making process, which is exactly how it should be.

Understandably, people have strong views, but, more important, they have real-life experiences of what does and does not work in the national health service. People should therefore be involved in considering developments in their area, in decisions about how resources are best spent to meet challenges and in the day-to-day decisions that impact on the health and lives of everybody in Scotland.

Of course, notwithstanding the passing of the bill, health boards will still be faced with regularly making many difficult decisions.

Gil Paterson (West of Scotland) (SNP): I think that we all recognise that there will always be difficult decisions. In recent years in particular, the impact of health board decisions on, for example, the St Margaret of Scotland hospice—the cabinet secretary knows a lot about that—and the Vale of Leven hospital has meant that the legitimacy and public standing of health boards have deteriorated. Does the cabinet secretary think that elections to health boards will raise expectations about the security of their decisions?

Nicola Sturgeon: I believe that to be the case, and I agree with Gil Paterson. The position is unfortunate because, despite the fact that difficult decisions must be made and that it is inevitable that sometimes health boards take decisions with which the public disagree, I believe that our health boards do a fantastic job on behalf of the people of Scotland on most occasions and that they deserve the country's respect for that. I believe that the bill that we will—I hope—pass today will enhance not just the public's ability to influence decisions but the standing of health boards in the communities that they serve.

Malcolm Chisholm (Edinburgh North and Leith) (Lab): While welcoming the bill, does the cabinet secretary understand the concern of nurses that, under the alternative pilots outlined in her letter of 4 March, there may not be a position for a nurse director? Given how long and hard

they fought for that position, can she guarantee that there will continue to be a nurse director on the board under any alternative pilot?

Nicola Sturgeon: Malcolm Chisholm will be aware that one of the alternative pilots that we have proposed is intended to address what many people think is the imbalance in health boards between executive and non-executive directors. Indeed, members who are in the chamber have made that comment during the bill's passage. One of the pilots will therefore look to limit the number of executive directors who have voting rights on health boards. Having said that, I hear what Malcolm Chisholm says and I agree with him about the importance of nurse directors. I will certainly take very seriously his point. Like other professionals in our health service, nurses make an enormous contribution and it is right that their voice is heard.

Electing people to health boards does not take away the need to make difficult decisions, but, in my view, it ensures that the quality of the decision-making process is enhanced and improved. We know that, when people are involved in that process and understand and become persuaded of the reasons for change, they are far more likely to be drivers of change than barriers to it. However, I have listened at all stages of the bill to the views of those who have urged caution. That is why the elections that the bill will enable will be piloted and independently evaluated before any decision is made on roll-out. It is right that we take that approach and that Parliament, and not just the Government of the day, will decide whether to roll out the proposals across Scotland.

I know that 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 will not change the ministerial powers of direction or the clear line of accountability that exists from health boards, through me, to Parliament.

I hope that members agree that we have responded positively to concerns expressed about the power of ministers to remove directly elected members. Indeed, we supported an amendment to that effect at stage 2.

The bill means that a majority of a board's members must consist of directly elected members and locally elected councillors. For the first time, it gives statutory underpinning to local authority membership of boards, which I believe is extremely important.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The minister should wind up.

Nicola Sturgeon: If the bill is passed, it will enhance the decision-making process, which will

be a good thing for communities right across Scotland.

I move,

That the Parliament agrees that the Health Boards (Membership and Elections) (Scotland) Bill be passed.

16:15

Cathy Jamieson (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (Lab): Like the cabinet secretary, I would like to thank everyone who has been involved in bringing the bill to this stage. Like her, I know just how hard the bill teams work. Although it might be a relatively small bill, a number of serious issues had to be teased out. I also thank the Health and Sport Committee.

It is, of course, Labour Party policy to support the introduction of pilots for directly elected health boards. I pay particular tribute to Unison Scotland, which has pressed that case through our policy-making processes, and to Bill Butler, Jackie Baillie, Helen Eadie and Richard Simpson, who have worked so hard to refine the bill so that we could reach a position in which we felt that supporting it was the right thing to do.

Having said all that good stuff, there are some cautionary notes that I would like to put on record, which I hope that the cabinet secretary will deal with when she sums up. She will be aware of some of the concerns that exist—particularly those of the Royal College of Nursing—about the situation that Malcolm Chisholm outlined, and I am grateful to her for her comments on the matter.

We were concerned to ensure that genuine alternatives to direct elections as a way of involving the public in meaningful participation would be introduced, and I think that the options that have been brought forward today still require some work. We might have to take some responsibility for that, given that we pressed the cabinet secretary to produce options in advance of stage 3. Option 1 would involve at least one member of each public partnership forum in a health board area being appointed to the health board, but if sufficient support and resources are not available to ensure that the PPFs work properly, simply appointing people from those bodies to health boards will not, in itself, necessarily ensure additional public participation.

The options that the cabinet secretary has developed include enhancement of the public appointments process to increase diversity. We have all struggled with that issue in relation to a range of public appointments over a number of years. I would certainly like more detail to be provided on how that proposal will be implemented and what specific actions will be taken to ensure that there is delivery.

A further point that I want to put on record relates to resources. There was considerable discussion of the cost of introducing the use of personal identifiers for health board elections. If we are to make public participation happen, adequate resources need to be set aside. The detail on that is sketchy. As I said in the stage 1 debate, I am keen to ensure that public participation is not just for the affluent and the articulate but that it stretches out to involve voluntary sector organisations, patient groups and people who live with and have to manage long-term conditions, so that we can ensure that those people have a genuine opportunity to influence the decisions that health boards ultimately make. I hope that the cabinet secretary will be able to deal with that point in her summing up.

A specific public participation issue was brought to my attention fairly recently. Information must be provided to people that is meaningful; it must also be accurate and up to date. A patient who went to their local general practice surgery picked up a leaflet that invited them, with great gusto, to have their say in local health services. It described how to get involved, mentioned the public partnership forums and what they would do, and gave dates for a range of meetings. It was only on investigating the matter further that the person concerned discovered that the meetings that were referred to had taken place almost two years previously. There is little point in having the will to involve the public if that is not filtering down to the ground. If we are preventing people from participating by getting such basic things wrong, we still have a considerable amount of work to do.

Having made those points, I welcome the fact that we have reached this stage. We will support the bill at stage 3, even though members did not agree to all the amendments that we wanted. I hope that the cabinet secretary will continue to work on the points that I have raised. We will do what we can to ensure that the bill actually makes a difference in practice. At the end of the day, there are communities—geographical communities and communities of interest—who feel that their views have not been adequately represented by health boards in the past. That is what has to change, once the bill is implemented.

16:20

Mary Scanlon (Highlands and Islands) (Con):

On behalf of my party, I thank the clerks and the excellent and feisty convener of the Health and Sport Committee, as well as all who have helped in the bill's passage.

It is odd, to say the least, that in the midst of the worst economic recession this country has seen since the 1930s, the democratically elected representatives of this Parliament are passing a

bill for elections to health boards, when the full costs of those elections, once they are eventually rolled out, will be taken from front-line services. However, I acknowledge that the costs of the pilot elections will not be taken from front-line services.

Written evidence to the committee did not offer a ringing endorsement. Only 27 per cent of responses were in favour of elections to health boards. Of the 19 responses against the proposal, only five were from national health service bodies. We should not therefore assume that it is the NHS that is against elections.

I hope that Jamie Stone will agree that not all health boards are poor at consulting. However, there is no doubt that the demand for elections comes from health board areas with a history of poor engagement. As I have said before, I have not met an MP or an MSP in the Highlands who has ever been asked to promote elections to health boards.

People in some parts of Scotland will now face eight elections—relating to their national park, the Crofters Commission, their community council, their local authority, the Scottish Parliament, Westminster, the European Parliament, and now their health board. However, we will support this bill to have pilot elections. It could be said that we belong to the sceptical side, but we will carefully consider the outcomes of the pilots and the extension of the franchise.

I have some concerns. I am trying to understand clearly in my mind what criteria will be used, in the evaluation process, to judge success or failure. Some people may think, because decisions went their way, that the pilot was successful; but others may think, because decisions did not go their way, that the pilot was a failure. We have not debated the evaluation process, which is for another day, but I am pleased that the cabinet secretary agreed to the use of the super-affirmative procedure. When we come to roll-out, parliamentarians will have to receive substantial information that spells out exactly why the elections proved beneficial for patient care.

The SNP naturally wants to keep to its manifesto pledge, but the cost to the NHS—taken from front-line services in the depth of today's economic recession—has to be a significant consideration as it will have a serious impact.

One and the same consultation—or one and the same chance to participate, work in partnership, or form procedures for joint decision making—can lead to huge support and enormous criticism, sometimes depending on the outcome of decisions. I hope that the health boards used in the pilots will not avoid controversial decisions during the pilots; rather, I hope that they will take on the difficult decisions faced by the NHS today.

Change is needed in the NHS, to embrace new technology and new ways of working and to empower patients to take more responsibility for the management of their own care—a point that Cathy Jamieson raised. Sometimes, very difficult decisions must be made, and the challenge for elected members will be to face those tough choices to ensure that Scotland has an NHS that is fit for this century and fit for the patients who depend on it.

16:25

Ross Finnie (West of Scotland) (LD): It is fair to say that the proposition that directly elected health boards per se were going to address all the problems of NHS boards was one that overwhelmed my party by quite some way. Indeed, in looking at the bill in the first instance, we thought it curious because it was a bit of a hybrid. Section 1 purported that the bill would give effect to directly elected health boards. However, when one read sections 2 to 6, one found that what was really intended was simply to proceed with pilots to that purpose. I am pleased that the bill is now fundamentally different from the one that was introduced.

The bill is fundamentally different now because its long title—which, after all, sets the principles on which it is to be considered—makes clear that it is a bill to provide for pilots that might, after Parliament has given due and careful consideration to their results, lead to some other form of board. Also, as Mary Scanlon said, the serious changes that have been made to section 7, providing for the use of the super-affirmative procedure for roll-out orders, mean that the bill will allow the pilots to take place while making it clear that Parliament alone will decide which pilot might be rolled out.

As I have listened to the debate on the bill, in which I have taken a keen interest, one of my main difficulties has been with the bill's starting point. The cabinet secretary and I exchanged views on the matter in discussing the committee's report, but Bill Butler will be gratified to know that I will follow his example and resist the temptation to quote myself. I do not believe that direct elections will necessarily be the answer. The evidence shows that there is a completely mixed picture across Scotland. As Mary Scanlon points out, boards such as NHS Highland appear to have a higher level of engagement, whereas in some board areas the engagement is, frankly, downright awful—in fact, unacceptable. There is no doubt that the situation has resulted in great cynicism.

However, when one hears how the boards operate, what the balance is between executive and non-executive directors, what they believe to be their functions and how they act as a matter of

corporate governance, one is left with a horribly confused picture. I became worried that if what is supposed to be the solution is simply bolted on to that confused picture, it may not work. Therefore, I repeat what I said in the debate at the committee stage: it would be helpful, even before we get to the stage of considering the pilots, to clarify the precise nature of the boards and the way in which they are supposed to function.

My view is supported by the cabinet secretary's letter, which sets out the kind of pilots that she would contemplate. I share Cathy Jamieson's view that those of us who posited the idea of pilots have a duty towards them, and I note with considerable interest that the cabinet secretary intends to involve stakeholders, active partners and the Health and Sport Committee. That will be helpful, as I recognise that we have a duty to contribute to that process.

A reason is given for the suggestion to reduce the number of executive members of a health board, but it is not based on any careful analysis of how the boards function at present. Nor does it follow that, apart from by increasing the ease with which a non-executive majority can be created, reducing the number of executive directors will address the issue of why, at present and with the current numbers, boards do not always function. That remains a fundamental issue, which is why some of us may wish to suggest different forms of board.

The Lib Dems have made our opinion clear throughout the passage of the bill that there is merit in an experiment in which local councillors have a greater degree of influence than they currently exercise.

I acknowledge the cabinet secretary's role in the constructive work to change the bill fundamentally to recognise that it is there to create the circumstances in which pilots can take place. It means that the bill is now an instrument that the Liberal Democrats are prepared to support. That is how we will vote this evening.

16:30

Ian McKee (Lothians) (SNP): I acknowledge the hard work that Bill Butler put into the bill, which began long before I became an MSP. I hope that he achieves a sense of satisfaction at seeing his efforts come to fruition today. I acknowledge, too, the work that has been put in by my colleagues on the Health and Sport Committee. Together with the cabinet secretary, we have arrived at a bill that is a lot more satisfactory than it might have been.

The core difference between the health services of England and Scotland is that, in England, the public are largely seen as consumers of health services, while we, more in the tradition of Aneurin

Bevan, founder of the national health service, see the public also as owners. The difference is more than academic. Owners of a venture have responsibilities not only for the quality of the service that is provided but for how the venture is run, its direction, its funding, how it treats its staff and a variety of other factors that are of much less concern to a simple consumer.

To develop that theme, Governments in Scotland—particularly this one—have placed great emphasis on public ownership, whereas Governments in England have elected for choice and a much greater private involvement in the provision of services.

The problem is that up until now, those responsibilities of ownership in Scotland have not been accompanied by a mechanism whereby they can be easily discharged. The health minister of the day appoints members to health boards and those members decide collectively how the health service is run in their area of responsibility. Few members of the public know even the names of the non-executive health board members purportedly looking after their interests. They often come from a small section of middle-class society and are not easily accessible. The bill seeks to ensure that, in future, they are chosen by the voters in their area and are responsible for explaining to those voters any decisions that they make.

What are the alternatives that some say are more desirable? Various bodies are associated with representing the public voice in the health service. There are the illness-based organisations, which are organised and effective but which—very reasonably—are only interested in advocating their particular causes. Public partnership forums relate only to community health partnerships and not to hospital services, and are nearly all groupings of self-selected individuals, which can be dissolved at will by a health board. Independent scrutiny panels are great for considering specific issues but not for considering the entire direction of a service. The Scottish health council works largely through the efforts of self-selected volunteers. None of those bodies brings members of the public anywhere near the centre of local decision making, and all but independent scrutiny panels can easily be ignored.

It is perhaps not surprising that the most vituperative opposition to direct elections comes from those whose somewhat cosy world would be disturbed by them: existing health boards and professional organisations. They argue that directly elected members will not be representative of the community that they seek to represent. Do they really think that that representation is achieved at present by the non-executive directors who are on most health boards? They support

investigating how the existing range of mechanisms can be improved to achieve greater public engagement in decision making, but those are meaningless words if existing mechanisms cannot possibly be adapted for that purpose. That is why I have doubts about the likelihood of success of the three alternative pilots that we have before us. I do not see how, at the end of the day, any of them can meaningfully involve the wider public in the decisions that affect them so much. We need the public to be at the centre of decision making, not at the fringe.

I began by highlighting the role of the public in Scotland as owners of the health service. Owners of anything often have to make difficult decisions, for example where to invest and how much. For too long, politicians from all sides have tended to treat the public more as children than as adults in that respect. In the past, we have too often said, “We can have the best health service in the world, free at the point of need, and not have to pay for it.” Now is the time to realise that we are dealing with responsible, sensible adults. They must be directly involved in spending decisions, rationing decisions and all the awkward but essential aspects of delivering an effective health service in the modern era.

Directly elected members of health boards will be visible, accessible and accountable to—and ultimately replaceable by—the public. I see no more effective way of running a responsive public service.

16:35

Bill Butler (Glasgow Anniesland) (Lab): First, I congratulate the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Wellbeing on introducing the bill. I am sorry only that she failed to accept my amendment, which would have ensured that a simple majority of 50 per cent of health board members plus one would have been directly elected by the public in health board elections. I never thought that I would see the day that Ms Sturgeon would be described as timid and conservative and I hope that it is simply an aberration.

However, I am a democrat. The Parliament's will, as expressed earlier this afternoon, has been to reject Labour's radical policy position and to opt for the Scottish National Party Government's overly cautious position. Nevertheless, on the basis that half a loaf is better than none, the Labour Party will, as Cathy Jamieson has indicated, support the bill at decision time. It is still a significant reform that I hope can be built on in the years ahead. Finally, I applaud the work of the members of the Health and Sport Committee and its excellent convener, Christine Grahame.

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

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 own communities. I emphasise that, in supporting its main aim of introducing more democracy into the operation of health boards, I am not saying that all health board decisions are necessarily wrong or detrimental to local health services. Such a view is simply absurd and I agree with members who have made the same point.

However, there is an undeniable problem with the operation of health boards and the way in which decisions are reached. The public perception is that such decisions are flawed. Indeed, the anger that some people feel about certain decisions is to an extent generated by the manner in which they are made. They are made in secret and are seen as being predetermined, with little or no explanation as to how they have been arrived at. They often ignore the community's views and the responses that have been made in the board's own consultation process.

Many people believe that health board consultations are, in effect, fake. That is not a happy situation; such a view corrodes confidence in socialised medicine and in our NHS. That is simply not acceptable.

As members know, there is no perfect method for consulting the public on major local health issues and I do not believe for a moment that direct public elections will lead to everyone being happy with every decision that is made by an NHS board. This policy is not a panacea. However, I contend that decisions that are made by health boards on which there is a large element of democratically elected members will have more credibility than decisions that are made under the current system.

Introducing greater democracy will mean more than just structural change. This kind of electoral accountability will involve patients and communities and will provide an opportunity for public debate and greater access to information. That is, of course, a good thing.

I believe that the bill will, as Unison correctly pointed out in its evidence to the committee, lead to a sea change in the culture of NHS boards. I believe that that will be a very good thing. We

have all had enough of top-down bureaucratic decision making, which too often merely echoes vested interests. That is a bad thing.

There has been a fairly long journey to arrive at this juncture for some of us. Despite the reservations that I have expressed, I genuinely think that the bill is a welcome first step towards the positive extension of democracy and democratic accountability in our NHS. On that basis, Labour will support the motion at 5 o'clock. I welcome the Government's endeavours on the matter and support the motion.

16:40

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): It is appropriate to say a few words of thanks at this point. I thank my colleagues on the Subordinate Legislation Committee, two of whom are in the chamber, and the clerks to that committee. I should not forget the legal team, who backed us up at all times with detailed and expert advice. Without those people helping us, we would not have done as much as we managed to do. Like others, I thank the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Wellbeing and her team and the bill team for their thoughtful and effective responses to the Subordinate Legislation Committee's comments.

It is clear that the issue of personal identifiers has divided members. The cabinet secretary made the point that what was proposed would delay things.

I acknowledge the work that Helen Eadie put in on the Subordinate Legislation Committee on the powers of ministers to dismiss elected members. I sought not to have a division in the committee on that because, apart from its role of considering the commas in and language and appropriateness of instruments, the Subordinate Legislation Committee has a role as the Parliament's guardian in taking a view on which procedure should be used for an instrument. There are members of many parties in the Parliament, and it is helpful if the Subordinate Legislation Committee tries to speak with one voice as much as it can, as it has a role in representing the whole Parliament. However, we knew perfectly well when we took a decision on the powers of ministers to dismiss elected members that Helen Eadie would press her point in the way that she has done. So that my true colours as the convener of the Subordinate Legislation Committee can be known, I should say that I voted for Helen Eadie's proposal. However, like Bill Butler, I accept the democratic will of the Parliament.

I recognise, as my colleague Ross Finnie does, the work that has been done on extending the franchise and recording the names of 16 and 17-

year-olds, and the significant moves that have been made in the right direction on that. I also compliment the cabinet secretary and her team on the speed with which they reacted to the points that we made in the Subordinate Legislation Committee on the roll-out order in particular. I recognise that the Parliament's interests have been safeguarded, and thank her very much for that.

The cabinet secretary talked about addressing the democratic deficit and enshrining local councillors in and protecting them on health boards. To conclude my brief speech, I want to take up a point that Mary Scanlon made about the varying levels of accountability in health boards. There is no doubt that there was a perceived democratic deficit some time ago with respect to Highland NHS Board, which covers the areas that Mary Scanlon and I represent. It did not enjoy the support of ordinary people in the Highlands. Part of the perceived deficit was due to what might be referred to as a geographic bias. People in my constituency and in more far-flung parts of the Highlands said that everything was controlled in Inverness, which was why we reached the impasse that we did on issues such as maternity services in the far north of Scotland. The bill will, of course, help to address that issue, because there will now be elected representatives.

Mary Scanlon: It is probably not surprising that the other major concerns existed in Fort William, Ardnamurchan and Lochaber, where 22 per cent of the local population turned up to a public meeting on the health service. I think that Jamie Stone would agree that there was a good outcome for both of those excellent campaigns.

Jamie Stone: I completely accept Mary Scanlon's point. People power was exercised in a way that was encouraging to all members. We all believe in democracy.

I come to my final point. Can the issue of geographic bias be remembered in view of the powers that remain to the cabinet secretary and ministers to appoint members of health boards? It would be a huge mistake for us to say that, simply because there are elected members in Highland, ministers need not worry about geographical coverage and may appoint only members who live in or around Inverness—the issue will still have power and weight.

As Ross Finnie said, we Liberal Democrats see the bill as a step in the right direction. We recognise that the democratic voice of the Parliament has spoken and will support the bill shortly.

16:45

Jackson Carlaw (West of Scotland) (Con): I offer just a few words in closing for the Conservatives. I congratulate all those who have contributed to the considerable work that was involved in taking the bill through the Parliament. Both Mary Scanlon and I pay tribute to Bill Butler for the passion that he has brought to the subject. I do not share his passion for every subject that he brings to the chamber, but he has led on this matter for a number of years. Not all parties approach the bill from the same perspective or with the same enthusiasm, but all have acted constructively to develop a final measure that commands support across the chamber. I thank and congratulate the cabinet secretary and the minister for the flexibility that they have shown throughout.

The purpose of the pilots is to test the policy. As representatives of a party that supports the principle of directly elected members serving on health boards—although, on the basis of the discussions that have taken place, we are slightly more sceptical about the issue than we once were—we will support the bill in a few minutes' time.

It is important to note that the revised financial memorandum assumes that as much as 20 per cent of the electorate may be affected by the pilots. It is fair to suggest that such widespread coverage goes beyond what many members of the public assume to be the scope and reach of a pilot. For that reason, it is not enough to be glib about dealing later with general concerns that arise in relation to the pilots. A huge and committed effort will be required by all those who are involved in the pilots to ensure that, as a consequence, local health care is not compromised, but enhanced through greater transparency and accountability.

We must all wish the pilot areas every success. It will be unfortunate if the pilots fail, because one must assume that any judgment of failure will be made on the back of a collapse of public confidence, arising from situations too diverse to predict. Mindful of that point, I believe that ministers will have to be even more closely involved in the affairs of the pilot health boards than in those of boards elsewhere—not necessarily to interfere, but to satisfy themselves that the core business of the boards remains on course.

We have always argued that success will depend, in part, on those elected being supported sufficiently to enable them to make meaningful contributions and to have the courage of their convictions in any crunch vote; they must never be left feeling beleaguered or overwhelmed. However, we can all allow ourselves to be just a

little excited at the prospects offered by the pilots, in the hope that the public will come to feel engaged in the process. As the bill is a health measure, it is appropriate for me to conclude by saying that the proof of this pudding will be in the eating; we must all hope that it will sit easily in our stomachs. With that cheery thought, we wish the pilots well.

16:48

Dr Richard Simpson (Mid Scotland and Fife)

(Lab): I join other members in thanking the cabinet secretary and the bill team for working flexibly with the Health and Sport Committee. I thank colleagues on the committee and all those who have given evidence on the bill for their work.

The Parliament can be proud of the fact that it has moved quite a long way since it was established in 1999. When we first gathered to look at the state of the NHS, the available guidance on how the public was to be consulted on health service issues was, to say the least, antiquated. As Ian McKee said, it reflected a situation in which the NHS was often autocratic and paternalistic. In the past 20 years or so, we have moved to a situation of far greater partnership in the delivery of health care. It is therefore entirely appropriate that the public should have a sense of ownership of how services are delivered at an operational and strategic level. The bill will help to deliver that.

Ross Finnie, Mary Scanlon and others have made the point that, in the period between 1999 and the introduction of the bill, a number of changes have substantially altered the process and have resulted in different health boards progressing at different rates. When considering the proposal for elected health boards, we should not allow that progress to be lost. Those boards that have moved are now involved in a process of genuine consultation, using public forums, citizens juries and a range of other mechanisms that have been introduced.

As many members have said, that does not remove the problem of making hard decisions when communities are divided. I remember the discussions on where the new hospital in the Forth Valley NHS Board area would be placed. Falkirk wanted it in Falkirk, Stirling wanted it in Stirling and, as I represented mainly the Clackmannan area, I did not care as long as we got a bridge that gave us rapid access to it. I ended up being the meat in the sandwich between the two groups, but a decision had to be made. There was wide consultation and a decision was reached that was accepted.

There were people around in 1999 whose view of consultation was, "This is the option that we

have decided on, which is what you will accept, and we will now consult." That is not consultation. Unfortunately, some health boards still have a culture problem in that respect, which will not be totally solved by the pilots.

Some may see the pilots as overly cautious; they may ask why we did not move to direct elections for all health boards. I sensed, from their final speeches, an unusual partnership developing between Dr McKee and Bill Butler. Had Dr McKee been in the Parliament in the previous session, there might have been a different configuration of support for Bill Butler's proposal for directly elected health boards as a totality.

It is important that the evaluation of the pilots is robust, and the Parliament's decisions today have reflected that. With due respect to our Conservative colleagues, it is not only about the economic climate, although that is important. The evaluation must be robust and must demonstrate that the elections add value to the process of ensuring democratic accountability, as well as a sense of ownership. It must also demonstrate that elections do not undermine the existing structures of participation, but add to them, and it must commence well before the elections so that the baselines of existing participation and consultation processes can be fully established.

The super-affirmative resolution, which will be accepted at decision time and was accepted in an amendment to the bill, has been an important element of the bill as it has emerged.

In 1948 we gained a new institution, which no party would now try to remove, but in doing so we lost one thing: local community control. Until that point, health services were local rather than national. When the Parliament votes at decision time, it will re-establish a degree of local control, which is important.

I support Ross Finnie's view—I hope that the cabinet secretary will work with us on the matter—that the involvement of a substantial number of councillors, not only at the level of community health partnerships but on the health board, should be one of the alternative pilots. That would test a more economic version of representation, albeit indirect, and it would allow us to come back at the time of the super-affirmative resolution, if that occurs, and find out what the best method is for ensuring the democratic accountability that the whole of the Parliament wants.

16:53

Nicola Sturgeon: I thank all the members who have contributed to the debate; it is usually not fair to single out one, but for the purposes of this summation I will single out Bill Butler. He has doggedly pursued the issue and he deserves

considerable credit for that. I am glad to see—I hope that it is not for the last time—that in the cause of progressive reform he has found the SNP Government to be perhaps a more willing partner than the previous Administration.

Bill Butler: Will the cabinet secretary take an intervention on that point?

Nicola Sturgeon: I know that I should not, but I will.

Bill Butler: I hope that this will not be the only time that the SNP brings something to the chamber that can be seen as progressive and radical.

Nicola Sturgeon: I will move swiftly on.

I will quickly address some of the points that have been made in the debate.

Cathy Jamieson said, rightly, that some further work is needed on our suggestions for alternative pilots. I acknowledged that in the letter that I sent to Opposition spokespersons. I said that the details will be worked out in parallel with our preparations for elections and I offered to include not just the Health and Sport Committee but the Opposition parties in those further discussions. I hope that they will all take me up on that offer.

I thank Mary Scanlon and her colleagues for their constructive approach to the bill. It is fair to say that Mary Scanlon is, if not the biggest sceptic, one of the biggest sceptics in the Parliament about elected health boards. I hope that the pilot elections will help to persuade her of the case for them. It is to her credit that she has not allowed her scepticism to lead her to try to block the pilot elections and deny other people the right to participate. In her speech, she offered the view that there are too many elections in Scotland. Notwithstanding my earlier comment that democracy is always a good thing, I tend to agree, and that is why I will be only too happy to see the Westminster elections rendered redundant when Scotland becomes an independent country. We will be glad to be of service in that respect.

Ross Finnie said that elected health boards are not a panacea. I agree. Electing people directly to health boards can help to bridge the democratic gap that undoubtedly exists in the minds of many people—and in reality in many communities—throughout Scotland, but such elections will not in themselves deal with some of the culture issues that Richard Simpson mentioned. Dealing with those issues is part of a much bigger effort to ensure that the health service reflects the communities that it serves and listens to the views that are expressed. However, the elections will be a significant step in that direction.

Jamie Stone: In saying that, and given her remaining powers of appointment, is the cabinet

secretary mindful of the point that I made about the geographic bias in a health board area as big as that of NHS Highland?

Nicola Sturgeon: I am always mindful of the points that Jamie Stone makes, and that one is no exception. The pilot elections will test such concerns.

If the bill is passed today—I am glad to say that it looks as if it will be—the intention is to pilot the elections in two health board areas that are representative of Scotland's population and geographical diversity. The pilots will take place over a reasonable period. I hope to announce the decision on which boards will take part in the pilots before the Parliament goes into the summer recess.

I conclude by doing something that I did not do earlier this afternoon, and that is quoting Bill Butler. There is no doubt that the bill that we are about to pass represents a "significant reform". As I said earlier, I believe that it is a significant progressive reform. It will undoubtedly result in a real change in the make-up of health boards and a shift in the balance of power in health boards. That is the intention of the bill, and rightly so. It will ensure that there is locally mandated representation on health boards while, crucially, retaining the strength of many of those who currently sit around the table.

Direct elections represent a significant step towards ensuring that the public voice is heard loudly and listened to at the heart of NHS decision making. I agree with Jackson Carlaw that that is an exciting prospect. As Ian McKee rightly said, the bill that we are about to pass begins to bring to life the concepts of mutuality and public ownership. I am delighted that there is a further benefit to the bill. In addition to the benefits for the running of the health service and ultimately for the quality of care that patients receive, it will allow 16 and 17-year-olds to participate in elections for the first time in the UK. That is a great step forward, and I hope that it is only the first step on the road to allowing 16 and 17-year-olds to vote in all elections.

I thank all members for their contributions. I hope that the Parliament votes unanimously to pass the bill. I believe that communities throughout Scotland will be grateful to us for doing so.

The Presiding Officer (Alex Fergusson): That was a noble effort, cabinet secretary, but I have no choice other than to suspend the meeting for 30 seconds.

16:59

Meeting suspended.

17:00

On resuming—

Decision Time

The Presiding Officer (Alex Fergusson):

There are eight questions to be put as a result of today's business. Members should note that if amendment S3M-3674.3, in the name of Stewart Stevenson, on the Aberdeen crossrail is agreed to, amendment S3M-3674.2, in the name of Alex Johnstone, will fall. Similarly, if amendment S3M-3675.3, in the name of Fiona Hyslop, on a minimum income guarantee for students, is agreed to, amendment S3M-3675.1, in the name of Claire Baker, will fall.

The first question is, that amendment S3M-3674.3, in the name of Stewart Stevenson, which seeks to amend motion S3M-3674, in the name of Alison McInnes, on the Aberdeen crossrail, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

FOR

Adam, Brian (Aberdeen North) (SNP)
 Allan, Alasdair (Western Isles) (SNP)
 Brown, Keith (Ochil) (SNP)
 Campbell, Aileen (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP)
 Constance, Angela (Livingston) (SNP)
 Crawford, Bruce (Stirling) (SNP)
 Cunningham, Roseanna (Perth) (SNP)
 Don, Nigel (North East Scotland) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness East, Nairn and Lochaber) (SNP)
 Fabiani, Linda (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee West) (SNP)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Gibson, Rob (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Grahame, Christine (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Harvie, Christopher (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Lothians) (SNP)
 Ingram, Adam (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 MacAskill, Kenny (Edinburgh East and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Marwick, Tricia (Central Fife) (SNP)
 Mather, Jim (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 McKee, Ian (Lothians) (SNP)
 McKelvie, Christina (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 McLaughlin, Anne (Glasgow) (SNP)
 McMillan, Stuart (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 Morgan, Alasdair (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Neil, Alex (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Paterson, Gil (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee East) (SNP)
 Russell, Michael (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Salmond, Alex (Gordon) (SNP)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Lothians) (SNP)
 Stevenson, Stewart (Banff and Buchan) (SNP)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Govan) (SNP)
 Swinney, John (North Tayside) (SNP)

Thompson, Dave (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Watt, Maureen (North East Scotland) (SNP)
 Welsh, Andrew (Angus) (SNP)
 White, Sandra (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Wilson, Bill (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 Wilson, John (Central Scotland) (SNP)

AGAINST

Aitken, Bill (Glasgow) (Con)
 Alexander, Ms Wendy (Paisley North) (Lab)
 Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Baker, Richard (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Edinburgh Central) (Lab)
 Brankin, Rhona (Midlothian) (Lab)
 Brocklebank, Ted (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Brown, Gavin (Lothians) (Con)
 Brown, Robert (Glasgow) (LD)
 Brownlee, Derek (South of Scotland) (Con)
 Butler, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (Lab)
 Carlaw, Jackson (West of Scotland) (Con)
 Chisholm, Malcolm (Edinburgh North and Leith) (Lab)
 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)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Godman, Trish (West Renfrewshire) (Lab)
 Goldie, Annabel (West of Scotland) (Con)
 Gordon, Charlie (Glasgow Cathcart) (Lab)
 Gray, Iain (East Lothian) (Lab)
 Harper, Robin (Lothians) (Green)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Henry, Hugh (Paisley South) (Lab)
 Hume, Jim (South of Scotland) (LD)
 Jamieson, Cathy (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (Lab)
 Johnstone, Alex (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Kelly, James (Glasgow Rutherglen) (Lab)
 Lamont, Johann (Glasgow Pollok) (Lab)
 Lamont, John (Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 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)
 McGrigor, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 McInnes, Alison (North East Scotland) (LD)
 McLetchie, David (Edinburgh Pentlands) (Con)
 McMahon, Michael (Hamilton North and Bellshill) (Lab)
 McNeil, Duncan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (Lab)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow Kelvin) (Lab)
 McNulty, Des (Clydebank and Milngavie) (Lab)
 Milne, Nanette (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Mitchell, Margaret (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Mulligan, Mary (Linlithgow) (Lab)
 Munro, John Farquhar (Ross, Skye and Inverness West) (LD)
 Murray, Elaine (Dumfries) (Lab)
 O'Donnell, Hugh (Central Scotland) (LD)
 Oldfather, Irene (Cunninghame South) (Lab)
 Park, John (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Peattie, Cathy (Falkirk East) (Lab)
 Pringle, Mike (Edinburgh South) (LD)
 Purvis, Jeremy (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD)
 Rumbles, Mike (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (LD)
 Scanlon, Mary (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Scott, John (Ayr) (Con)

Scott, Tavish (Shetland) (LD)
 Simpson, Dr Richard (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Smith, Elaine (Coatbridge and Chryston) (Lab)
 Smith, Elizabeth (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Smith, Iain (North East Fife) (LD)
 Smith, Margaret (Edinburgh West) (LD)
 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)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 46, Against 72, Abstentions 0.

Amendment disagreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that amendment S3M-3674.1, in the name of Des McNulty, which seeks to amend motion S3M-3674, in the name of Alison McInnes, on the Aberdeen crossrail, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

FOR

Aitken, Bill (Glasgow) (Con)
 Alexander, Ms Wendy (Paisley North) (Lab)
 Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Baker, Richard (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Edinburgh Central) (Lab)
 Brankin, Rhona (Midlothian) (Lab)
 Brocklebank, Ted (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Brown, Gavin (Lothians) (Con)
 Brown, Robert (Glasgow) (LD)
 Brownlee, Derek (South of Scotland) (Con)
 Butler, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (Lab)
 Carlaw, Jackson (West of Scotland) (Con)
 Chisholm, Malcolm (Edinburgh North and Leith) (Lab)
 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)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Godman, Trish (West Renfrewshire) (Lab)
 Goldie, Annabel (West of Scotland) (Con)
 Gordon, Charlie (Glasgow Cathcart) (Lab)
 Gray, Iain (East Lothian) (Lab)
 Harper, Robin (Lothians) (Green)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Henry, Hugh (Paisley South) (Lab)
 Hume, Jim (South of Scotland) (LD)
 Jamieson, Cathy (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (Lab)
 Johnstone, Alex (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Kelly, James (Glasgow Rutherglen) (Lab)
 Lamont, Johann (Glasgow Pollok) (Lab)
 Lamont, John (Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 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)
 McGrigor, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 McInnes, Alison (North East Scotland) (LD)

McLetchie, David (Edinburgh Pentlands) (Con)
 McMahon, Michael (Hamilton North and Bellshill) (Lab)
 McNeil, Duncan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (Lab)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow Kelvin) (Lab)
 McNulty, Des (Clydebank and Milngavie) (Lab)
 Milne, Nanette (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Mitchell, Margaret (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Mulligan, Mary (Linlithgow) (Lab)
 Munro, John Farquhar (Ross, Skye and Inverness West) (LD)
 Murray, Elaine (Dumfries) (Lab)
 O'Donnell, Hugh (Central Scotland) (LD)
 Oldfather, Irene (Cunninghame South) (Lab)
 Park, John (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Peattie, Cathy (Falkirk East) (Lab)
 Pringle, Mike (Edinburgh South) (LD)
 Purvis, Jeremy (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD)
 Rumbles, Mike (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (LD)
 Scanlon, Mary (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Scott, John (Ayr) (Con)
 Scott, Tavish (Shetland) (LD)
 Simpson, Dr Richard (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Smith, Elaine (Coatbridge and Chryston) (Lab)
 Smith, Elizabeth (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Smith, Iain (North East Fife) (LD)
 Smith, Margaret (Edinburgh West) (LD)
 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)
 Allan, Alasdair (Western Isles) (SNP)
 Brown, Keith (Ochil) (SNP)
 Campbell, Aileen (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP)
 Constance, Angela (Livingston) (SNP)
 Crawford, Bruce (Stirling) (SNP)
 Cunningham, Roseanna (Perth) (SNP)
 Don, Nigel (North East Scotland) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness East, Nairn and Lochaber) (SNP)
 Fabiani, Linda (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee West) (SNP)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Gibson, Rob (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Grahame, Christine (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Harvie, Christopher (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Lothians) (SNP)
 Ingram, Adam (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 MacAskill, Kenny (Edinburgh East and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Marwick, Tricia (Central Fife) (SNP)
 Mather, Jim (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 McKee, Ian (Lothians) (SNP)
 McKelvie, Christina (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 McLaughlin, Anne (Glasgow) (SNP)
 McMillan, Stuart (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 Morgan, Alasdair (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Neil, Alex (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Paterson, Gil (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee East) (SNP)
 Russell, Michael (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Salmond, Alex (Gordon) (SNP)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Lothians) (SNP)
 Stevenson, Stewart (Banff and Buchan) (SNP)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Govan) (SNP)

Swinney, John (North Tayside) (SNP)
 Thompson, Dave (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Watt, Maureen (North East Scotland) (SNP)
 Welsh, Andrew (Angus) (SNP)
 White, Sandra (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Wilson, Bill (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 Wilson, John (Central Scotland) (SNP)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 72, Against 46, Abstentions 0.

Amendment agreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that amendment S3M-3674.2, in the name of Alex Johnstone, which seeks to amend motion S3M-3674, in the name of Alison McInnes, on the Aberdeen crossrail, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

FOR

Adam, Brian (Aberdeen North) (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)
 Marwick, Tricia (Central Fife) (SNP)
 Mather, Jim (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 McGrigor, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 McKee, Ian (Lothians) (SNP)
 McKelvie, Christina (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 McLaughlin, Anne (Glasgow) (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)

AGAINST

Alexander, Ms Wendy (Paisley North) (Lab)
 Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Baker, Richard (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Edinburgh Central) (Lab)
 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)
 Godman, Trish (West Renfrewshire) (Lab)
 Gordon, Charlie (Glasgow Cathcart) (Lab)
 Gray, Iain (East Lothian) (Lab)
 Harper, Robin (Lothians) (Green)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Henry, Hugh (Paisley South) (Lab)
 Hume, Jim (South of Scotland) (LD)
 Jamieson, Cathy (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (Lab)
 Kelly, James (Glasgow Rutherglen) (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)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow Kelvin) (Lab)
 McNulty, Des (Clydebank and Milngavie) (Lab)
 Mulligan, Mary (Linlithgow) (Lab)
 Munro, John Farquhar (Ross, Skye and Inverness West) (LD)
 Murray, Elaine (Dumfries) (Lab)
 O'Donnell, Hugh (Central Scotland) (LD)
 Oldfather, Irene (Cunninghame South) (Lab)
 Park, John (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 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, Elaine (Coatbridge and Chryston) (Lab)
 Smith, Iain (North East Fife) (LD)
 Smith, Margaret (Edinburgh West) (LD)
 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)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 62, Against 56, Abstentions 0.

Amendment agreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that motion S3M-3674, in the name of Alison McInnes, on the Aberdeen crossrail, as amended, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

FOR

Adam, Brian (Aberdeen North) (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)
 Marwick, Tricia (Central Fife) (SNP)
 Mather, Jim (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 McGrigor, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 McKee, Ian (Lothians) (SNP)
 McKelvie, Christina (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 McLaughlin, Anne (Glasgow) (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)

AGAINST

Alexander, Ms Wendy (Paisley North) (Lab)
 Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Baker, Richard (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Edinburgh Central) (Lab)
 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)
 Godman, Trish (West Renfrewshire) (Lab)
 Gordon, Charlie (Glasgow Cathcart) (Lab)
 Gray, Iain (East Lothian) (Lab)
 Harper, Robin (Lothians) (Green)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Henry, Hugh (Paisley South) (Lab)
 Hume, Jim (South of Scotland) (LD)
 Jamieson, Cathy (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (Lab)
 Kelly, James (Glasgow Rutherglen) (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)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow Kelvin) (Lab)
 McNulty, Des (Clydebank and Milngavie) (Lab)
 Mulligan, Mary (Linlithgow) (Lab)
 Munro, John Farquhar (Ross, Skye and Inverness West) (LD)
 Murray, Elaine (Dumfries) (Lab)
 O'Donnell, Hugh (Central Scotland) (LD)
 Oldfather, Irene (Cunningham South) (Lab)
 Park, John (Mid Scotland and Fife) (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, Elaine (Coatbridge and Chryston) (Lab)
 Smith, Iain (North East Fife) (LD)
 Smith, Margaret (Edinburgh West) (LD)
 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)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 62, Against 56, Abstentions 0.

Motion, as amended, agreed to,

That the Parliament affirms its support for the Aberdeen Crossrail project, a vital infrastructure link for the region and for the wider national transport network in Scotland, which would provide a frequent cross-city rail service; notes the comments of NESTRANS, previously chaired by Alison McInnes MSP, in its regional transport strategy, that “it is clear that improved rail services can only realistically be delivered on an incremental basis and in a way that capitalises on existing planned investment”; welcomes the recent improvements to the timetable, meaning that there is now a significantly better service north of Aberdeen than was the case when Nicol Stephen MSP and Tavish Scott MSP were ministers for transport; considers that proposals contained in the Strategic Transport Projects Review to improve services north and south of Aberdeen must be progressed as a priority as a key means of securing better crossrail services; welcomes the forthcoming opening of Laurencekirk station and considers that plans to open Kintore station should now be taken forward; further considers that local agencies should work together to build strong cases for the opening of stations at Newtonhill and Altness; notes with regret the very poor stewardship of rail projects under successive Liberal Democrat transport ministers, notably the significant cost overruns and delays that blighted the Stirling-Alloa-Kincardine line and the managerial paralysis at the heart of the Edinburgh Airport Rail Link, and regrets the additional investment for projects such as Aberdeen Crossrail that has been lost as a result of this mismanagement.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that amendment S3M-3675.3, in the name of Fiona Hyslop, which seeks to amend motion S3M-3675, in the name of Margaret Smith, on a minimum income guarantee for students, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

FOR

Adam, Brian (Aberdeen North) (SNP)
 Allan, Alasdair (Western Isles) (SNP)
 Brown, Keith (Ochil) (SNP)
 Campbell, Aileen (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP)
 Constance, Angela (Livingston) (SNP)
 Crawford, Bruce (Stirling) (SNP)
 Cunningham, Roseanna (Perth) (SNP)
 Don, Nigel (North East Scotland) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness East, Nairn and Lochaber) (SNP)
 Fabiani, Linda (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee West) (SNP)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Gibson, Rob (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Grahame, Christine (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Harvie, Christopher (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Lothians) (SNP)
 Ingram, Adam (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 MacAskill, Kenny (Edinburgh East and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Marwick, Tricia (Central Fife) (SNP)
 Mather, Jim (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 McKee, Ian (Lothians) (SNP)
 McKelvie, Christina (Central Scotland) (SNP)

McLaughlin, Anne (Glasgow) (SNP)
 McMillan, Stuart (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 Morgan, Alasdair (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Neil, Alex (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Paterson, Gil (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee East) (SNP)
 Russell, Michael (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Salmond, Alex (Gordon) (SNP)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Lothians) (SNP)
 Stevenson, Stewart (Banff and Buchan) (SNP)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Govan) (SNP)
 Swinney, John (North Tayside) (SNP)
 Thompson, Dave (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Watt, Maureen (North East Scotland) (SNP)
 Welsh, Andrew (Angus) (SNP)
 White, Sandra (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Wilson, Bill (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 Wilson, John (Central Scotland) (SNP)

AGAINST

Aitken, Bill (Glasgow) (Con)
 Alexander, Ms Wendy (Paisley North) (Lab)
 Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Baker, Richard (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Edinburgh Central) (Lab)
 Brankin, Rhona (Midlothian) (Lab)
 Brocklebank, Ted (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Brown, Gavin (Lothians) (Con)
 Brown, Robert (Glasgow) (LD)
 Brownlee, Derek (South of Scotland) (Con)
 Butler, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (Lab)
 Carlaw, Jackson (West of Scotland) (Con)
 Chisholm, Malcolm (Edinburgh North and Leith) (Lab)
 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)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Godman, Trish (West Renfrewshire) (Lab)
 Goldie, Annabel (West of Scotland) (Con)
 Gordon, Charlie (Glasgow Cathcart) (Lab)
 Gray, Iain (East Lothian) (Lab)
 Harper, Robin (Lothians) (Green)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Henry, Hugh (Paisley South) (Lab)
 Hume, Jim (South of Scotland) (LD)
 Jamieson, Cathy (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (Lab)
 Johnstone, Alex (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Kelly, James (Glasgow Rutherglen) (Lab)
 Lamont, Johann (Glasgow Pollok) (Lab)
 Lamont, John (Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 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)
 McGrigor, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 McInnes, Alison (North East Scotland) (LD)
 McLetchie, David (Edinburgh Pentlands) (Con)
 McMahon, Michael (Hamilton North and Bellshill) (Lab)
 McNeil, Duncan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (Lab)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow Kelvin) (Lab)
 McNulty, Des (Clydebank and Milngavie) (Lab)
 Milne, Nanette (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Mitchell, Margaret (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Mulligan, Mary (Linlithgow) (Lab)

Munro, John Farquhar (Ross, Skye and Inverness West) (LD)
 Murray, Elaine (Dumfries) (Lab)
 O'Donnell, Hugh (Central Scotland) (LD)
 Oldfather, Irene (Cunninghame South) (Lab)
 Park, John (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Peattie, Cathy (Falkirk East) (Lab)
 Pringle, Mike (Edinburgh South) (LD)
 Purvis, Jeremy (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD)
 Rumbles, Mike (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (LD)
 Scanlon, Mary (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Scott, John (Ayr) (Con)
 Scott, Tavish (Shetland) (LD)
 Simpson, Dr Richard (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Smith, Elaine (Coatbridge and Chryston) (Lab)
 Smith, Elizabeth (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Smith, Iain (North East Fife) (LD)
 Smith, Margaret (Edinburgh West) (LD)
 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)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 46, Against 72, Abstentions 0.

Amendment disagreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that amendment S3M-3675.1, in the name of Claire Baker, which seeks to amend motion S3M-3675, in the name of Margaret Smith, on a minimum income guarantee for students, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

FOR

Adam, Brian (Aberdeen North) (SNP)
 Aitken, Bill (Glasgow) (Con)
 Alexander, Ms Wendy (Paisley North) (Lab)
 Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Baker, Richard (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Edinburgh Central) (Lab)
 Brankin, Rhona (Midlothian) (Lab)
 Brocklebank, Ted (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Brown, Gavin (Lothians) (Con)
 Brownlee, Derek (South of Scotland) (Con)
 Butler, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (Lab)
 Carlaw, Jackson (West of Scotland) (Con)
 Chisholm, Malcolm (Edinburgh North and Leith) (Lab)
 Curran, Margaret (Glasgow Baillieston) (Lab)
 Eadie, Helen (Dunfermline East) (Lab)
 Ferguson, Patricia (Glasgow Maryhill) (Lab)
 Foulkes, George (Lothians) (Lab)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Godman, Trish (West Renfrewshire) (Lab)
 Goldie, Annabel (West of Scotland) (Con)
 Gordon, Charlie (Glasgow Cathcart) (Lab)
 Gray, Iain (East Lothian) (Lab)
 Henry, Hugh (Paisley South) (Lab)
 Jamieson, Cathy (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (Lab)
 Johnstone, Alex (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Kelly, James (Glasgow Rutherglen) (Lab)
 Lamont, Johann (Glasgow Pollok) (Lab)
 Lamont, John (Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 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)
 McGrigor, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 McLetchie, David (Edinburgh Pentlands) (Con)
 McMahon, Michael (Hamilton North and Bellshill) (Lab)
 McNeil, Duncan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (Lab)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow Kelvin) (Lab)
 McNulty, Des (Clydebank and Milngavie) (Lab)
 Milne, Nanette (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Mitchell, Margaret (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Mulligan, Mary (Linlithgow) (Lab)
 Murray, Elaine (Dumfries) (Lab)
 Oldfather, Irene (Cunninghame South) (Lab)
 Park, John (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Peattie, Cathy (Falkirk East) (Lab)
 Scanlon, Mary (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Scott, John (Ayr) (Con)
 Simpson, Dr Richard (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Smith, Elaine (Coatbridge and Chryston) (Lab)
 Smith, Elizabeth (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Whitefield, Karen (Airdrie and Shotts) (Lab)
 Whitton, David (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (Lab)

AGAINST

Allan, Alasdair (Western Isles) (SNP)
 Brown, Keith (Ochil) (SNP)
 Campbell, Aileen (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP)
 Constance, Angela (Livingston) (SNP)
 Crawford, Bruce (Stirling) (SNP)
 Cunningham, Roseanna (Perth) (SNP)
 Don, Nigel (North East Scotland) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness East, Nairn and Lochaber) (SNP)
 Fabiani, Linda (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee West) (SNP)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Gibson, Rob (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Grahame, Christine (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Harper, Robin (Lothians) (Green)
 Harvie, Christopher (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Lothians) (SNP)
 Ingram, Adam (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 MacAskill, Kenny (Edinburgh East and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Marwick, Tricia (Central Fife) (SNP)
 Mather, Jim (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 McKee, Ian (Lothians) (SNP)
 McKelvie, Christina (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 McLaughlin, Anne (Glasgow) (SNP)
 McMillan, Stuart (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 Morgan, Alasdair (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Neil, Alex (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Paterson, Gil (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee East) (SNP)
 Russell, Michael (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Salmond, Alex (Gordon) (SNP)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Lothians) (SNP)
 Stevenson, Stewart (Banff and Buchan) (SNP)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Govan) (SNP)
 Swinney, John (North Tayside) (SNP)
 Thompson, Dave (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Watt, Maureen (North East Scotland) (SNP)
 Welsh, Andrew (Angus) (SNP)

White, Sandra (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Wilson, Bill (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 Wilson, John (Central Scotland) (SNP)

ABSTENTIONS

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)
 Stone, Jamie (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD)
 Tolson, Jim (Dunfermline West) (LD)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 56, Against 47, Abstentions 15.

Amendment agreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that motion S3M-3675, in the name of Margaret Smith, on a minimum income guarantee for students, as amended, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

FOR

Aitken, Bill (Glasgow) (Con)
 Alexander, Ms Wendy (Paisley North) (Lab)
 Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Baker, Richard (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Edinburgh Central) (Lab)
 Brankin, Rhona (Midlothian) (Lab)
 Brocklebank, Ted (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Brown, Gavin (Lothians) (Con)
 Brown, Robert (Glasgow) (LD)
 Brownlee, Derek (South of Scotland) (Con)
 Butler, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (Lab)
 Carlaw, Jackson (West of Scotland) (Con)
 Chisholm, Malcolm (Edinburgh North and Leith) (Lab)
 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)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Godman, Trish (West Renfrewshire) (Lab)
 Goldie, Annabel (West of Scotland) (Con)
 Gordon, Charlie (Glasgow Cathcart) (Lab)
 Gray, Iain (East Lothian) (Lab)
 Henry, Hugh (Paisley South) (Lab)
 Hume, Jim (South of Scotland) (LD)
 Jamieson, Cathy (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (Lab)
 Johnstone, Alex (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Kelly, James (Glasgow Rutherglen) (Lab)
 Lamont, Johann (Glasgow Pollok) (Lab)
 Lamont, John (Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 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)
 McGrigor, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 McInnes, Alison (North East Scotland) (LD)
 McLetchie, David (Edinburgh Pentlands) (Con)
 McMahon, Michael (Hamilton North and Bellshill) (Lab)
 McNeil, Duncan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (Lab)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow Kelvin) (Lab)
 McNulty, Des (Clydebank and Milngavie) (Lab)
 Milne, Nanette (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Mitchell, Margaret (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Mulligan, Mary (Linlithgow) (Lab)
 Munro, John Farquhar (Ross, Skye and Inverness West) (LD)
 Murray, Elaine (Dumfries) (Lab)
 O'Donnell, Hugh (Central Scotland) (LD)
 Oldfather, Irene (Cunninghame South) (Lab)
 Park, John (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Peattie, Cathy (Falkirk East) (Lab)
 Pringle, Mike (Edinburgh South) (LD)
 Purvis, Jeremy (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD)
 Rumbles, Mike (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (LD)
 Scanlon, Mary (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Scott, John (Ayr) (Con)
 Scott, Tavish (Shetland) (LD)
 Simpson, Dr Richard (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Smith, Elaine (Coatbridge and Chryston) (Lab)
 Smith, Elizabeth (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Smith, Iain (North East Fife) (LD)
 Smith, Margaret (Edinburgh West) (LD)
 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)
 Allan, Alasdair (Western Isles) (SNP)
 Brown, Keith (Ochil) (SNP)
 Campbell, Aileen (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP)
 Constance, Angela (Livingston) (SNP)
 Crawford, Bruce (Stirling) (SNP)
 Cunningham, Roseanna (Perth) (SNP)
 Don, Nigel (North East Scotland) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness East, Nairn and Lochaber) (SNP)
 Fabiani, Linda (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee West) (SNP)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Gibson, Rob (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Grahame, Christine (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Harper, Robin (Lothians) (Green)
 Harvie, Christopher (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Lothians) (SNP)
 Ingram, Adam (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 MacAskill, Kenny (Edinburgh East and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Marwick, Tricia (Central Fife) (SNP)
 Mather, Jim (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 McKee, Ian (Lothians) (SNP)
 McKelvie, Christina (Central Scotland) (SNP)

McLaughlin, Anne (Glasgow) (SNP)
 McMillan, Stuart (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 Morgan, Alasdair (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Neil, Alex (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Paterson, Gil (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee East) (SNP)
 Russell, Michael (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Salmond, Alex (Gordon) (SNP)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Lothians) (SNP)
 Stevenson, Stewart (Banff and Buchan) (SNP)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Govan) (SNP)
 Swinney, John (North Tayside) (SNP)
 Thompson, Dave (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Watt, Maureen (North East Scotland) (SNP)
 Welsh, Andrew (Angus) (SNP)
 White, Sandra (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Wilson, Bill (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 Wilson, John (Central Scotland) (SNP)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 70, Against 48, Abstentions 0.

Motion, as amended, agreed to,

That the Parliament recognises the importance of the higher and further education sector; notes the outcome of the *New Horizons: responding to the challenges of the 21st century* report and the need to involve key stakeholders in discussions about the funding of the university sector; believes that Scotland's students have been let down by the SNP government's failure to deliver on its manifesto pledge to dump student debt; notes the *Supporting a Smarter Scotland* consultation on student support and rejects all of its proposals for not adequately addressing student hardship; expresses serious concern at reports of childcare and hardship funds being stretched to breaking point across colleges and universities in Scotland; recognises the calls of the NUS and other student representatives for a £7,000 minimum income guarantee but believes that a £7,000 minimum income for all students in Scotland is unachievable with the funds allocated for student support by the Scottish Government in this spending review period, and calls on the Scottish Government to come forward with new proposals that focus the available resources at the poorest students to genuinely address student hardship in Scotland.

The Presiding Officer: The final question is, that motion S3M-3543, in the name of Nicola Sturgeon, on the Health Boards (Membership and Elections) (Scotland) Bill, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament agrees that the Health Boards (Membership and Elections) (Scotland) Bill be passed.

Pressured Area Status (North Lanarkshire)

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Trish Godman): The final item of business is a members' business debate on motion S3M-3399, in the name of John Wilson, on pressurised area status in North Lanarkshire. The debate will be concluded without any question being put.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament welcomes the decision by the Scottish Government to grant pressurised area status to the North Lanarkshire Council areas of Cumbernauld and Moodiesburn, which enables the council to suspend the right to buy to tenants who started their tenancies after 30 September 2002, and considers that the action by the government and council could stop the decline of housing stock lost through right to buy and ensure that the council can maintain control over existing housing stock.

17:09

John Wilson (Central Scotland) (SNP): I thank the members who signed my motion and who have enabled this members' business debate on pressurised area status to go ahead.

In evaluating why the Scottish Government granted pressurised area status to the North Lanarkshire Council areas of Cumbernauld and Moodiesburn, it is important to realise how we got to the current situation and why those areas were proposed.

The Cumbernauld and Moodiesburn areas are quite different. Cumbernauld is very much a new town, whereas the Moodiesburn area includes the settlements of Stepps, Chryston, Muirhead, Auchinloch, Cardowan and Gartcosh. The two designated areas have different needs, but a recurring theme is the requirement for affordable housing for rent, especially in the current economic climate. However, the need to stop the decline in the availability of affordable housing stock is fundamental in both areas.

An identified objective in North Lanarkshire Council's local housing strategy for the years 2004 to 2009 was to consider applying for pressurised area status. Under the Housing (Scotland) Act 2001, certain criteria must be met before the Scottish ministers can agree to designate an area as a pressurised area. The most important of those is the need for social rented housing.

The level of right to buy varies in the different areas of North Lanarkshire. In Moodiesburn, approximately half of all North Lanarkshire Council's stock has been sold under the right to buy. In Cumbernauld, well over 70 per cent of the stock has been sold, through a combination of right-to-buy sales, stock transfers and the sales to

private companies that were undertaken by the Cumbernauld Development Corporation.

North Lanarkshire Council identified the two local housing market areas of Cumbernauld and Moodiesburn as being particularly pressurised. The local authority estimates that the number of tenancies that will be affected by the granting of pressurised area status will increase from 1,020 in 2007 to 1,916 by 2012.

After undertaking a consultation process, the local authority issued a letter on 10 November 2008 to all council tenants to advise them of the application for pressurised area status, which would suspend the right to buy. On 30 January 2009, the Scottish Government wrote to North Lanarkshire Council's head of housing services to advise her that the local authority's request had been granted and would be effective from 2 February 2009. As other members are only too well aware, in an area with pressurised area status, the right to buy is temporarily suspended for new tenancies and for tenancies that began on or after the introduction of the Scottish secure tenancy on 30 September 2002.

I am aware that one of the local authority's main reasons for proposing Cumbernauld and Moodiesburn for pressurised area status was to highlight to a national audience the local social rented housing stock shortfall. The feeling in some quarters was that North Lanarkshire might lose out on potential future investment in affordable housing because research that was undertaken by Professor Glen Bramley had concluded that there was no requirement to provide more affordable housing in the area. It is worth reinforcing the point that the North Lanarkshire Council area faces competing demands for funding from its towns and other settlements. I believe that, by granting the approval, the Scottish Government will greatly strengthen the case to provide increased levels of investment in affordable housing in the designated areas and beyond.

Any elected member who has had dealings with constituents—whether at council level or at Scottish Parliament level—will have dealt with his or her fair share of housing issues. With the economic maelstrom that is currently enveloping us all, it is clear that such problems will increase significantly over the coming months and years. I remember dealing with such issues as a member of Falkirk Council as far back as 1980. When the right-to-buy legislation was introduced, it had severe implications for local authorities even then. As a result of the legislation, what is often considered to be the best council housing stock is sold. In my experience, houses are even bought by family members in partnership with the existing council tenants.

Since its introduction, the right-to-buy legislation has meant increased waiting lists for council housing. That clearly impacts on the homelessness targets that have been set for local authorities under more recent housing legislation. The burden of responsibility lies with the local authorities to house the homeless, which has serious implications for people who are on local authority housing waiting lists. One elected member in the area has told me of a constituent who has been on the housing waiting list for over 18 years, but who has not as yet been made a good housing offer. That person's aspiration for better housing has been stymied. In terms of basic economic analysis, an opportunity cost is associated with the right to buy and the resources that are allocated thereafter.

As I stated at the outset of my speech, we all have to be aware of the demands that are placed on the social housing sector to provide affordable rented property. I look forward to the opportunities that are being created that will allow local authorities to build housing for rent, thereby alleviating the existing problems in areas such as Cumbernauld and Moodiesburn. I commend the motion to Parliament.

17:16

Elaine Smith (Coatbridge and Chryston) (Lab): I congratulate John Wilson on securing what I think is his first members' business debate on this important issue. Having written my honours degree thesis on public housing and worked as a homelessness officer, I have a long-term interest in housing and commitment to the cause of council housing. I am therefore particularly pleased to speak in the debate because of my passionate hatred of the so-called right to buy. Indeed, in the debate on the Housing (Scotland) Bill on 13 June 2001, I had a major disagreement with my colleagues and voted with the Opposition to try to stop an extension of the right to buy.

That said, we need to recognise that the Labour-led Executive's Housing (Scotland) Act 2001 brought positive change. One such change was pressured area status, which should be helpful in stopping the selling off of housing stock. I am pleased that North Lanarkshire Council is applying pressured area status to areas including Moodiesburn in my constituency. More desperately-needed properties should, as a result, be made available for rent in an area that has, as John Wilson said, a significant lack of affordable social housing.

Of course, for many years, councils have been unable to build new housing. There are various reasons for that, one of which has been the fear that, if the houses that they had built were snapped up at massive discounts, they would be

left with a big debt and nothing to show for their investment. I am pleased to note that North Lanarkshire Council has indicated its intention to build new housing. The council should also be commended on the quality of its housing stock; it has kept up the quality of its stock through difficult times. Our social rented sector now has to rely heavily on housing associations rather than councils to provide homes. For that reason, the Government's decision to cut the housing association grant was not a particularly wise one. Perhaps the new Minister for Housing and Communities might review that decision.

We must never forget that privatising council housing via the right to buy was a Thatcherite plan. The plan was to encourage universal home ownership and then to bind the working class in the chains of mortgages. Indeed, the Tories said in the 1950s that a nation of home owners would be a nation of Tory voters. That was their aim.

The term "right to buy" is a complete misnomer. It was never a right; it was a right-wing housing policy and it was sleight of hand to privatise a key public service. Council housing belongs to everyone: it belongs to society, but Margaret Thatcher stripped us of that social asset. No wonder the right to buy policy is so abhorred by socialists.

It is understandable that many tenants decided to buy. Some individuals may have got a good deal, but it was a bad deal for society. It was not a good deal for the thousands whose right to rent was ruined by the right to buy. I am talking of people who are some of the most vulnerable in our society. As John Wilson said, many are on homelessness waiting lists. There are also abused women and children who are desperate to escape from their attackers, and there are rough sleepers begging on our streets. We now see the calamitous consequences of this right-wing policy: we have a dire shortage of social rented housing and huge waiting lists. Families also face the possibility of losing their homes because of mortgage arrears.

As John Wilson said, housing is an issue that fills the mailbag of every member—certainly, it fills mine. I hear harrowing stories of homelessness and the family trauma that goes with it. It was therefore a good day when the Labour-led Executive introduced the most progressive homelessness legislation in Europe. However, in order to meet those requirements, more council housing is needed.

It is blatantly obvious that the market is not a device that can adjust to social need, which means that the state must supply housing. In my opinion, that should be done not through third parties at a distance, but through supporting local authorities to build houses.

The Scottish Government could massively boost the economy by initiating the

"building of ... houses with no 'right to buy'",

which was a point that Grahame Smith made in the *Morning Star* last week.

I note that £25 million of funding has been made available to councils, so I would be pleased if we could have some information on that. I also look forward to the consultation exercise and review of the right to buy, which I believe is coming soon.

The Scottish people's charter, which was launched recently, demands, among other things, "Decent homes for all", which is to be advanced by creating

"250,000 new publicly owned homes in Scotland over the next five years. Stop the repossessions. Control rents."

All socialists should support that call.

I join John Wilson in welcoming the news that North Lanarkshire Council has been granted pressured area status for Moodiesburn and the northern corridor, and that it can suspend its selling of council housing. I urge more urgent action by the Government to meet the basic human right to a home and to give people a right to rent.

17:21

Margaret Mitchell (Central Scotland) (Con): I congratulate John Wilson on bringing the debate to the Parliament, in so far as it allows discussion of the important issues that are covered in the motion. They include the granting of pressurised area status, which suspends the right to buy—in this case, in the Moodiesburn and Cumbernauld area of North Lanarkshire. The motion also discusses the possibility of ensuring

"that the council can maintain control over existing housing stock."

I will take those two issues in turn.

It is interesting to note that the provision for granting pressurised area status was first introduced by the previous UK Conservative Government under section 61(1) of the Housing (Scotland) Act 1987, which is continued in section 45 of the 2001 act. Essentially, that provision was introduced to cover situations where the needs exceed, or are likely to exceed, the amount of housing in an area, and where tenants' exercise of the right to buy is likely to increase the extent by which the needs exceed the amount of such housing accommodation.

The provision was typically intended for Highland and rural areas where there was a limited provision of social rented accommodation, whether it was owned by the local authority or

registered social landlords. In those circumstances, it would seem sensible to suspend the right to buy in an effort to secure adequate public sector rented houses.

Perversely, however, suspending right to buy does not in itself guarantee more affordable housing for rent as, without it, existing tenants merely continue as tenants—they do not become owners. The Chartered Institute of Housing in Scotland's "Right to Buy in Scotland: Impacts of the Current Policy Framework and Options for Reform", which was published in October 2005, concluded on the question whether the right to buy has reduced the amount of housing available that there has been no

"examination of the operation of local housing systems and specific local mismatches between the social rented housing supply and demand over time".

In other words, we need more work to be done to discover where the problems lie.

Jamie Hepburn (Central Scotland) (SNP): Will the member take an intervention?

Margaret Mitchell: I am sorry, but I am pressed for time and am not going to be able to take an intervention. Given that probably only I am presenting an alternative view, I will keep going.

There is no doubt that right to buy provides valuable mechanisms to create mixed communities, together with an affordable route to home ownership. Furthermore, it has enabled large amounts of private investment to improve people's homes to be made at a faster rate than would have been the case if they had remained in the public sector. The new investment has enabled house owners to make significant improvements to their homes, including the installation of double glazing and central heating to improve home energy efficiency and warmth.

Given all that and the fact that home ownership remains a clear aspiration for the vast majority of Scots, right to buy has an important part to play. With or without the right to buy, the main problem that the Government has to face is the shortage of affordable and appropriate housing for all, and it is a great pity that the motion does not highlight that point. These are difficult economic times and, in the wake of the credit crunch, a variety of different housing tenures is desperately required to address this very real and pressing problem.

The issue was tackled under the previous Tory Government when, as part of the community ownership programme, the Treasury agreed to write off existing capital housing debt if a council decided to transfer its stock to a housing association. Through stock transfer, housing associations have been able to lever in private finance in addition to the Scottish Government's housing association grant to fund improvements

and build new stock. Currently, 26 councils have not taken up the £2 billion from the Treasury that is available to wipe out their accumulated housing debt and access further funding. To its shame, North Lanarkshire Council, which boasts about being the largest local authority landlord in Scotland, is one of them.

I do not share John Wilson's enthusiasm—which is implicit in his motion—for the fact that North Lanarkshire Council maintains control over existing housing stock when, by doing so, it denies its tenants access to finance for much-needed housing repairs and affordable housing throughout the local authority area. Consequently, I have not signed and cannot support the motion.

17:25

Hugh O'Donnell (Central Scotland) (LD): It is interesting to hear the Conservatives exemplify the role that they played in social housing. The most significant exemplar that we have is probably Dame Shirley Porter and her colleagues in Westminster City Council.

Let us move on to more serious matters. John Wilson is to be congratulated on securing the debate because it is significant. I declare a personal interest in that I live in Cumbernauld. As a resident, I have watched the town be castigated over many years by those who feel that it is not a pleasant place. That is an interesting contrast to the fact that we have a high demand for housing, which demonstrates that it clearly cannot be that bad a place.

I have a more critical point, which is primarily a request for the new minister. North Lanarkshire Council has been fortunate to achieve pressured area status. I spoke to the official involved yesterday morning and discovered that, even with the expertise that the council has at its disposal, it took almost 18 months to achieve that result, largely because officials within the relevant Government department batted the application form back and forward to dot i's and cross t's. I have it on reasonably good authority that another local authority spent close to three years trying to secure ministerial approval for such an application. Admittedly, that was during the term of the previous Administration, but I have no doubt that the officials were similar.

My limited contribution to the debate is to ask whether, in his closing speech, the minister will assure us that he will consider the process. Elaine Smith made the point that there is an undoubted need for social rented housing throughout the country—it was refreshing to hear a member on the new Labour benches giving an honest socialist perspective, which is unique in many ways these days. Anything that we can do to expedite the

process and enable local authorities to achieve pressured area status must be done and done quickly. I am sure that the new minister would endear himself to everybody who works in housing if he could ensure that local authorities have a smoother path in achieving that end.

17:28

Jamie Hepburn (Central Scotland) (SNP): I join my colleagues in congratulating John Wilson on securing tonight's debate. The supply of social rented housing is an important issue in Cumbernauld and Moodiesburn, and it is to the Parliament's credit that it is debating it.

I also congratulate Margaret Mitchell on presenting the only alternative view tonight. She did so valiantly but, if I may say so, somewhat unconvincingly. I would never, as Hugh O'Donnell did, describe Elaine Smith as being on the new Labour benches, but I look forward to hearing what my friend and old boss Alex Neil has to say when he closes the debate.

There are long waiting lists for homes for social rent in Cumbernauld and Moodiesburn, so I was pleased that the Scottish Government has taken action to ease the pressures on social housing in those areas, particularly given the massive demand for rented accommodation. The move will allow a long-overdue start to tackling the problem of affordable accommodation for local people. I think that I am right in saying that the move affects 1,596 tenancies, which means that nearly 1,600 homes are now protected for social let in Cumbernauld and Moodiesburn. That is good news indeed.

I will quote article 25 of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights—the UDHR—which people perhaps did not expect me to do in the debate. Article 25 states:

"Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing, and medical care and necessary social services".

We are therefore born with the innate right to a roof over our heads. The UDHR sets out that housing is a human right, but all too often it is not fulfilled. That is certainly the case in Cumbernauld and Moodiesburn—too many people there cannot get a home, and the housing list for social lets is too long.

Like Hugh O'Donnell, I live in Cumbernauld, so I suppose that I should declare an interest too. I certainly agree with his sentiments about those who malign Cumbernauld: the fact that it is a growth area where demand for housing often outstrips supply gives the lie to those who talk down the town of Cumbernauld.

I quote Councillor Barry McCulloch, convener of North Lanarkshire Council's housing and social work services committee, with reference to the decision to grant pressurised area status to Cumbernauld and Moodiesburn:

"The demand for rented housing in these areas is very high and this decision will go some way to addressing the issue of providing affordable accommodation to local people."

I do not always agree with Barry McCulloch—in fact, more often than not I disagree with him—but I agree with those words entirely.

The new policy is hugely popular in Cumbernauld and Kilsyth. Even those who bought their council house many years ago now recognise the limitations of the right to buy because they see their children and grandchildren caught in a trap and unable to get on the housing ladder. They cannot buy or rent a home because, as I said, demand outstrips supply. I have not had a single complaint about the new policy from any local constituents.

The move to pressurised area status is not the only aspect that I welcome in relation to local housing in Cumbernauld, Moodiesburn and North Lanarkshire as a whole. I was delighted that the Minister for Housing and Communities was able to announce this week £17.6 million of investment in affordable housing across North Lanarkshire in the next year. It is therefore clear that pressurised area status is not the only good news for housing in Cumbernauld and Moodiesburn. Indeed, we have already seen some of the benefits of the new investment because 76 new and improved homes for rent will be built in Carbrain, which points to a better future for housing in Cumbernauld, Moodiesburn and North Lanarkshire as a whole.

I do not have much time left, but I will say a little about the philosophy behind the introduction of the right to buy. I think that it led to the private ownership of housing being not only a fashion but a fetish. I sympathised with Elaine Smith's assessment of the philosophy behind the right to buy. We should not criticise those who choose to own their own home, but let us not pretend that it is the be all and end all.

I am probably running out of time, so I will close by saying that I look forward to hearing what the minister has to say. I watched an interesting programme the other night on the life of Nye Bevan. When he was the health and housing minister, he had plans to build a million homes in two years after the second world war. I do not expect the same from Alex Neil, but I am keen to hear his plans on housing, especially any further moves the Scottish Government might make on the right to buy.

17:33

Mary Mulligan (Linlithgow) (Lab): I congratulate John Wilson on achieving this debate. I feel somewhat of an interloper among all these North Lanarkshire people. However, I assure them that I have the blessing of my colleague Cathie Craigie, the MSP for Cumbernauld, so I shall relax and get into the debate.

I am pleased that, in his motion, John Wilson recognises the benefit of the previous Labour-led Scottish Executive's inclusion in the Housing (Scotland) Act 2001 of a provision to allow for pressured area status designations. Labour recognised that, in particular areas throughout Scotland, the number of houses being sold under the right to buy was causing serious problems for some local authorities when it came to meeting demand for council housing.

The Scottish Executive put forward a number of proposals to modernise the right-to-buy scheme, one of which was the introduction of pressured area status. One of the advantages of proceeding on an area-by-area basis, as that scheme does, is that it enables local pressures to be responded to. As the motion shows, Cumbernauld and Moodiesburn, which are in North Lanarkshire, have been designated as pressured areas, but other parts of North Lanarkshire do not need to be. Perhaps John Wilson will acknowledge that the creation of pressured area status gave local authorities power and influence without the need for a historic concordat.

Members will be aware that 10 other local authorities have already taken advantage of pressured area status by conferring it on various areas within their boundaries. I hope that the minister will mention those authorities when he closes the debate and that he will update us on what progress has been made in the areas in question. Given that two of them received pressured area status as far back as 2005, there should be some information on that.

We know that pressured area status is applied for when local authorities are having difficulty meeting the demand for housing in a given area. I wonder whether more applications will be made by local authorities as the 2012 homelessness target approaches; that might even happen after local authorities have reported on the interim position, which they must do at the end of this month.

The other side of demand is supply. As I have done on a number of occasions over the past month, I ask the minister to step up the Government's efforts to build new homes. Earlier this week, at the CIH conference, Mr Neil trumpeted his hope—I am sure that I was not alone in noting the minister's use of language—

that 6,500 approvals would be achieved next year. I acknowledge that the money that the Government is to invest will help him to realise that hope, but a number of points must be borne in mind.

The minister must acknowledge that the number of completions of affordable homes fell by 29 per cent in the first three quarters of 2008, and he must take action to reverse that trend. A new study by CIH provided further evidence that housing associations across Scotland are finding it more difficult to build new homes following the Scottish Government's cut in subsidy levels, given that private finance has become more difficult to find. I ask the minister to consider going the whole way and reversing the cut in subsidy to housing associations.

Problems are being experienced in finding funding for infrastructure, as has been highlighted to all of us by everyone who is involved in house building, whether in the public or the private sector. As I suggested in a recent meeting of the Local Government and Communities Committee, the minister should consider establishing a national infrastructure fund that would allow those hurdles to be overcome. Jamie Hepburn mentioned that £17.6 million has been allocated to North Lanarkshire Council for affordable housing, but that is less than the sum of almost £24 million that it was allocated back in 2007-08. Although the amount of money that is being put into the building of new houses has increased, that is not the case everywhere.

I hope that there will be an increase in house building. If the minister were to deal with the supply problems, fewer areas would need to apply for pressured area status.

17:38

The Minister for Housing and Communities (Alex Neil): I join other members in congratulating John Wilson on raising such an important issue. What has happened in North Lanarkshire is a good example of what can be done. I will try to deal with all the points that members have made, but I do not promise to repeat the promise of Nye Bevan, who Jamie Hepburn might be surprised to learn was the health and housing minister before I was born.

Since my appointment as Minister for Housing and Communities, I have made it clear that affordable homes and fuel poverty are my two immediate policy priorities. Within the affordable homes priority, increasing the number of new-build affordable homes, both for rent and to buy, is my number 1 priority. I will deal in some detail with the points that Mary Mulligan made about the programme for building affordable housing.

However, I will deal first with the issue of pressured status—and it is “pressured” rather than “pressurised”; I have to correct people on that. It is clear that pressured area designations provide a useful function in safeguarding social rented accommodation from right-to-buy sales. That is especially relevant at this time of economic uncertainty. It will be important to have a plentiful supply of affordable stock for rent.

As members know, the designation process involves councils applying to ministers for pressured status to be granted. The application will be based on the need for local housing and, in particular, on the need for more rented accommodation. At present, designations are in force in 13 areas across 11 local authorities. Three of those designations have been approved in recent months. I am happy to read out the list, because Mary Mulligan asked about the areas. They are in East Renfrewshire, Highland, South Ayrshire, Moray, Fife, Dumfries and Galloway, Fife again, Perth and Kinross, Aberdeen City, North Ayrshire, Aberdeenshire, North Lanarkshire and Moray again. Another area under consideration is in Stirling. We expect further applications from East Dunbartonshire, Argyll and Bute, Falkirk and East Renfrewshire. As we consider the proposals, I will be happy to keep Parliament updated through answers to written or oral questions, as required.

I encourage councils that wish to apply for a new pressured area designation, or to renew an existing designation, to make early contact with our officials, because we are conscious of the pressures on councils in some areas.

North Lanarkshire Council made a successful application to secure pressured area designations for Cumbernauld and Moodiesburn. I say to Hugh O'Donnell that I am happy to double-check the point he raised about the turnaround time from application to approval. My briefing note states that the assessment process, which was undertaken by the housing investment division, west region, followed receipt of the application from North Lanarkshire Council on 12 November 2008. As members know, we have published a target of three months for turning round applications. We gave North Lanarkshire Council a decision on 27 January 2009, well within the three-month period. I therefore do not know where the idea came from that we took 18 months to make a decision.

Hugh O'Donnell: I was thinking about the whole process; I was not questioning the efficiency of officials. I had heard anecdotally that the initial process and the form filling for council officials started way back in the previous February. The process is complex and detailed. I acknowledge that the minister was well within the timescales in

relation to North Lanarkshire, but, as I have said, there have been instances in which things did not happen so quickly. I want to be sure that we keep a tight grip on things.

Alex Neil: I will certainly be keeping a tight grip, to ensure that we meet our target of turning round applications within three months. If any problems arise in future, I would welcome members bringing them to my attention. I am happy to intervene to ensure that we do indeed turn applications round fairly speedily.

In North Lanarkshire, there are approximately 2,500 modernised tenancies in the areas affected by the designation. That figure represents 48 per cent of the total social housing stock in those areas. We believe that, in those areas, the designation should safeguard around 300 properties from right-to-buy sales over the five-year period of the designation.

The figures demonstrate that, yes, pressured status for designated areas is important in helping us to deal with the problem, but it is no substitute for building new houses. In any area, the best and most effective way of dealing with outstanding demand and the need for new housing for rent is to build more houses.

That brings me neatly to the points raised by Mary Mulligan. In the forthcoming financial year, the Scottish Government will invest £644 million in our affordable housing investment programme. That is a record investment—by far—in the 10 years of the Scottish Parliament.

I take the point that Mary Mulligan makes repeatedly about the nine-month figures. I say to her that she should wait until she gets the full-year figures, when she will find that we have achieved a record number of completions in the current financial year. Next year, as well as record investment, we will have a record number of approvals, a record number of starts and a record number of completions.

I will conclude on the point that has been raised about the housing association grant. There is a misunderstanding. If we consider the HAG as a percentage of total costs, it is as generous today as it has been in recent times. We have not cut back on the HAG. Because construction costs have been falling during the recession, the HAG makes as great a contribution to total costs as it has made in recent times.

I am proud of the Government's record, but we need to do more. I have outlined our target of achieving at least 6,500 new starts next year. I hope to exceed that figure, and I am sure that everybody will congratulate the Government when we do so.

Meeting closed at 17:46.

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