

# **MEETING OF THE PARLIAMENT**

Thursday 14 May 2009

Session 3

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# Scottish Parliament

Thursday 14 May 2009

[THE PRESIDING OFFICER *opened the meeting at 09:00*]

## Influenza A(H1N1)

**The Presiding Officer (Alex Fergusson):** Good morning. We have a great deal of business to get through today, so I emphasise that brevity would be a useful watchword for members around the chamber.

The first item of business is a statement by Nicola Sturgeon on influenza A(H1N1). The cabinet secretary will take questions at the end of her 10-minute statement, so there should be no interruptions or interventions.

09:00

**The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Health and Wellbeing (Nicola Sturgeon):** I am very grateful for this further opportunity to update Parliament on the current situation in relation to the influenza A(H1N1) virus.

As of this morning, the World Health Organization reports that 5,251 cases of the virus have been officially reported across 33 countries. There have been 56 reported deaths in Mexico, three in the United States of America and one each in Canada and Costa Rica. The WHO's pandemic alert remains at level 5, which means that we need to be ready to implement our pandemic plans, should they be needed.

A total of 71 cases have so far been confirmed across the United Kingdom. Here in Scotland, we have five confirmed cases. A further four cases are considered probable, which means that they have tested positive for influenza A, although further testing is required to confirm the strain. There are also 12 possible cases, seven of which are travel related, who are undergoing testing in four national health service boards. All those cases are being treated and investigated on a precautionary basis. They are not confirmed as influenza A, let alone as the specific H1N1 strain.

Since a 19-year-old man in Greenock with family connections to Mexico was confirmed as having tested positive, much of the focus in the past few days has been on further cases in the Greenock area. All four probable cases and many of the possible cases are in, or are connected to, Greenock. As I reported yesterday, the four probables are a three-year-old child, a five-year-old child, the five-year-old child's mother and a 16-year-old girl who is not—as far as we know at this

stage—connected to any of the other confirmed or probable cases. Final test results for all four cases are still awaited from the laboratory in London.

Members are aware that the cases of the five-year-old and the three-year-old have resulted in the closure of Ravenscraig primary school and the Ladybird Pre 5 Centre in Greenock. The decisions to close the school and the nursery, in both cases for seven days, were not taken lightly. They are precautionary decisions that have been taken on the basis of expert advice from Health Protection Scotland and Greater Glasgow and Clyde NHS Board, with input from the Health Protection Agency. The close contacts of those two children at the nursery and the school have also been given Tamiflu, and parents have been offered appropriate advice and reassurance. The five-year-old child also attended an after-school club around the time he became symptomatic. The 17 children who attended with him and the staff who were there at the time have also been given Tamiflu. Parents of those children have been asked to keep them off school and away from the after-school club for seven days.

I understand how concerning and, indeed, inconvenient school and nursery closures are for parents. However, I know that parents will understand the reasons for those actions and I take the opportunity to thank them for their patience and understanding. I also thank Inverclyde Council and Greater Glasgow and Clyde NHS Board for their sterling efforts in communicating with everyone concerned and in offering appropriate advice and reassurance.

I stress that these are not precedent-setting cases. If similar situations occur in other schools in Scotland—we obviously hope that that will not happen—they will all be risk assessed case by case. However, there is evidence from England that suggests that very early precautionary closure of that kind—as happened at the school in Paignton—can be effective in disrupting further spread of the virus.

I said last week that our focus at this stage is on containing the virus and minimising further spread. That strategy has been successful so far; we therefore intend to continue with it for as long as we believe it will be effective in reducing spread of the virus. However, as I also said last week, at some stage over the coming weeks we might well require to move from a containment strategy to a mitigation strategy. That is most likely to happen when there is sustained community transmission. We are not yet at that stage, but we are of course monitoring the situation closely.

Our scientific advisers also continue to examine emerging evidence from worldwide and UK cases of H1N1. Although we still do not know enough about the virus to be able to draw definite

conclusions, the science is beginning—albeit very tentatively—to point in certain directions. For example, emerging evidence suggests that healthy young adults and children are being proportionately more affected than other groups in the population. Early estimates also suggest an attack rate of around 20 per cent. That compares to seasonal flu attack rates of between 5 and 15 per cent, although I stress that in recent years seasonal flu attack rates have been lower than that, at around 2 to 4 per cent.

Early experience also points to its being an illness with relatively mild symptoms although, of course, we have to be very clear that even mild flu can be unpleasant and debilitating and that, in exceptional cases, flu can cause deaths. All in all, we have to be prepared for an illness that might affect large numbers of people with symptoms that, although mild, might see them bedridden for a few days. Members will appreciate that the impact of that, should it come to pass, on our national health service, our economy and wider society, could be very significant. Even in a normal flu season, the demands on the NHS can put severe pressure on services.

As I have said before, there is also the risk that the virus might mutate and become more virulent during the autumn and winter months. That is why, in parallel with our efforts to contain the virus, we are also working hard with our colleagues throughout the UK to prepare for further developments in its spread and severity, and to seek to reduce and mitigate its impact on the population and our economy as much as we can. Discussions on a web-based and phone-based system to facilitate distribution of antivirals to large numbers of people are very well advanced.

Another key issue that is under active discussion is a vaccine. An important development in recent days has been the identification by scientists of the genetic fingerprint of the European strain of the virus, which is a crucial first step in the production of a vaccine. Obviously, of key concern to all four Administrations in the UK is how best we can secure supplies of an effective vaccine as soon as one becomes available. Our clear and shared objective is to secure sufficient supplies to allow vaccination of the whole population, which is in line with the approach that is recommended by scientific advice, including that of the scientific advisory group on emergencies, which has advised that universal vaccination is the preferred approach.

As members are aware, the UK has advance supply contracts in place for a pandemic vaccine. Although those contracts guarantee a supply of vaccine, they can be triggered only in certain circumstances—for example, when the World Health Organization declares a pandemic by

moving to alert phase 6. Obviously, we do not know at this stage when or whether those triggers will be reached. However, we do know that if we simply wait until then we risk losing the capacity that manufacturers have available now, which would allow us to build up a stockpile and to get a vaccination programme under way before the winter.

I can therefore advise Parliament that I have decided, after discussion with my colleagues the health ministers in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, to secure and purchase early supplies of vaccine. Negotiations with manufacturers are on-going and I hope that agreement on a contract and a delivery schedule will be reached very soon.

It is important to understand that by the time a pandemic is declared, global demand for a vaccine will outstrip the capacity to supply it. Under any scenario, and even after our sleeping contracts kick in, it will be a number of months before we can get sufficient supplies to vaccinate 100 per cent of the population. The decision that we have taken now to utilise spare manufacturing capacity is therefore very important in seeking to secure an early supply in order to allow a vaccination programme that is focused initially on priority groups to get under way as quickly as possible.

I hope that I have, in this brief update, managed to assure members that we remain focused on containing the virus for as long as we can, and that we are equally focused on preparing for the possibility of its further spread.

I will, of course, continue to keep Parliament updated on developments.

**The Presiding Officer:** As always, the cabinet secretary will take questions on the issues that have been raised in the statement. We have around 20 minutes for those questions, after which I will have to move on to the next item of business.

**Cathy Jamieson (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (Lab):** I am mindful of your request for brevity, Presiding Officer.

I thank the cabinet secretary for her statement and I will go straight to asking questions. Will she confirm that antivirals have now been transferred to health boards and that that part of the process is complete?

The cabinet secretary talked about securing enough vaccine supplies to treat 100 per cent of the population. I understand that treatment of 45 per cent of the population was being aimed at in discussion with the UK Government. Has the policy changed? Given that coverage will depend to an extent not only on the supply of the vaccine but on international markets, is she confident that 45 per cent can be treated in the first instance and

that she will be able to secure the 100 per cent coverage that she aims for?

**Nicola Sturgeon:** Stocks of antivirals are available with health boards. For obvious reasons that Cathy Jamieson will understand, our larger stockpiles of antivirals are in undisclosed locations around the country. The plans to ensure that adequate supplies of antivirals reach areas as quickly as possible are well developed and well in hand. In partnership with the web-based and phone-based system that I spoke about, health boards and NHS 24 will be instrumental in ensuring that antivirals are available quickly—within 24 or 48 hours of patients becoming symptomatic.

Cathy Jamieson is right to draw our attention to the question whether the aim is 45 per cent or 100 per cent coverage. I will try to make the position clear. The scientific advice and pandemic planning have always made it clear that we should aim for 100 per cent vaccination of the population. That is my and my colleague health ministers' clear objective and policy. Discussions in recent days about 45 per cent coverage have related to the amount of vaccine that we might be able to secure through pre-pandemic contracts. Our objective is to secure as much vaccine as possible before a pandemic kicks in, but how much that will be will depend on manufacturing capacity and on when that point is reached. We do not know whether the World Health Organization will move to alert phase 6 next week or several months from now; that is uncertain. Obtaining sufficient vaccine supplies to vaccinate 100 per cent of the population will take time. Our clear objective is to obtain early supplies as quickly as possible in order to get a vaccination programme under way.

**Mary Scanlon (Highlands and Islands) (Con):** I thank the cabinet secretary for keeping Parliament updated. Will the vaccination for swine flu be contained in the winter flu vaccination programme? If not, will those who regularly receive the winter flu vaccine be given two vaccines this year?

The Westminster Secretary of State for Health has said that producing the vaccine would take six months to a year, whereas the cabinet secretary says that it will be available in months. Will she update us on that? Universal vaccination is recommended. What will be the approach to people who resist vaccination?

The flu strain currently affects young adults. Could any conditions make some people more vulnerable to it?

**Nicola Sturgeon:** The advice is that the vaccine for the H1N1 strain will not be included in the seasonal flu vaccine and, as ministers, we must be guided by the expert advice. A separate

vaccine is expected, which we would aim to administer as easily and effectively as possible. If it can be administered at the same time as the seasonal flu vaccine, we would seek to do that, but that would depend on the expert advice.

Mary Scanlon asked about timescales. As I said in response to Cathy Jamieson, obtaining sufficient vaccine supplies for 100 per cent coverage will take a lengthy time, but we are focused on securing a flow of supply as quickly as possible. I cannot say definitively when the first supplies would arrive, but I hope that it would happen before the winter months, because that would allow us to get a vaccination programme under way.

An early priority will be to deal with vulnerable groups. We know the vulnerable groups for the seasonal flu vaccination programme. As we are still learning about the new virus, our thinking about the priority groups for its vaccination programme might change over time. However, the priority will be to obtain the vaccine in order to enable us to start the programme as quickly as possible.

Mary Scanlon's final question was about people resisting vaccination. All vaccination programmes are voluntary. However, as with the seasonal flu campaign, we will work hard to persuade people of the benefits of vaccination.

**Ross Finnie (West of Scotland) (LD):** I thank the cabinet secretary for the advance copy of her statement and for continuing to keep Parliament updated on the outbreak. I hope that she will understand if I concentrate on the four probable cases, as they are in the home town of me and two other members who are in the chamber this morning.

The cabinet secretary will understand that although only four probable cases exist, many people are anxious. They include all the pupils at Ravenscraig primary school, their parents and their teachers, and all those who attend the Ladybird Pre 5 Centre. Some of them—but not all—are the same people who attend the Enterprise after-school club. A fair degree of anxiety is felt. I associate myself with the cabinet secretary's gracious thanks to Inverclyde Council and Greater Glasgow and Clyde NHS Board for the effective action that they have taken, and particularly for dealing effectively with parents and pupils at Ravenscraig primary school and for making Tamiflu available. Anyone who saw the interviews with parents on television last night, or who read the newspapers this morning, will know that their calm and measured response is not only a credit to the people of Inverclyde but enormously helpful to the people of Scotland. In the face of such an outbreak, they understand that

precautionary measures are being taken and that this is not a time for panic.

Can the cabinet secretary assist in any way with the timescale for giving more certainty to the Inverclyde community? She says that that will happen as soon as possible, but can she talk about days or weeks? I do not expect absolute precision on when the test results will be known, but a little more precision might help.

**Nicola Sturgeon:** I agree absolutely with Ross Finnie that the closure of a nursery and a school at short notice is a difficult situation for anybody to find themselves in. That the closures were so smooth yesterday morning is a credit to everybody who was involved—parents, staff, the health board and the council. I repeat my thanks and congratulations to them all.

It is clear that the situation is worrying for people in Greenock. From what I have seen, I think that they are behaving extremely responsibly and in a measured fashion. We are acting to contain any spread as much as we can and we will continue to focus on that.

Ross Finnie is right to ask me about the timescale, but I cannot be definitive. As I have explained, we depend on the laboratory in Colindale in London—the UK reference laboratory for flu—to confirm cases, so that is not entirely within our control. I hope that the final test results of at least some of the four probable cases will be with us today. It is important to have as much certainty as possible, as quickly as possible, so I assure him that we will press as much as we can for quick results for all the cases.

**The Presiding Officer:** We come to open questions. I stress that there is one question per member.

**Stuart McMillan (West of Scotland) (SNP):** I thank the cabinet secretary for her statement. I was content to hear the positive remarks about Inverclyde Council, but what impact has the suspension last Friday of the council's corporate director of education and social care had on communications and activities between the council and the Government?

**Nicola Sturgeon:** The suspension of the Inverclyde Council director is completely unrelated to the swine flu situation. As members would expect, I do not know all the ins and outs of that.

Notwithstanding that, communication with Inverclyde Council has been excellent. The acting director of education has been fully engaged and I spoke with the council's chief executive on Tuesday evening, before we announced the school closure. As members would expect, dialogue has been good. I repeat my thanks to the council for its tremendous work in the past few

days to keep parents fully informed of the developing situation.

**Dr Richard Simpson (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab):** I congratulate the cabinet secretary on the continuing measured approach that the Government is taking to this problem. We must not allow a situation in which people become alarmed to develop. We have not reached that point, as yet.

First, could I have an answer to the question on registered retirees that I put in week 1? I have not had that as yet. As we prepare to move from containment and disruption to mitigation and a general situation, the issue is important.

Secondly, when I did my report—

**The Presiding Officer:** Dr Simpson, I stressed that each member had one question.

**Dr Simpson:** That was a previous question.

**The Presiding Officer:** That is one question, Dr Simpson.

**Nicola Sturgeon:** The point that Richard Simpson raised in his question is important. I followed up on the matter the first time he put the question. I will ensure that he gets a full written response on the measures that health boards are taking to act on that helpful suggestion.

**Alasdair Allan (Western Isles) (SNP):** In the light of what has been said about the necessity for those who normally receive the seasonal vaccine to obtain the new one, what information campaigns are likely to be put in place to explain the effect of the H1N1 vaccine on the seasonal flu vaccine?

**Nicola Sturgeon:** That is an important point. Obviously, our focus at the moment in our information campaigns is on advising people of the developing situation around this virus, and on giving them commonsense advice on how to protect themselves and the people close to them from it. That is the focus of the information leaflet that has been put through—or is in the process of being put through—every door not only in Scotland but across the United Kingdom.

Obviously, as the situation develops—and, certainly, as we approach a vaccination programme—we will need to ensure that the public are well informed on the matter and, of course, on the relationship between the H1N1 vaccine and the seasonal flu vaccination programme. I give Alasdair Allan an undertaking that that will be done. Even now, we should be sending out a very strong message that the seasonal flu campaign is important and that people should take up that vaccine, notwithstanding any developments around H1N1.



**Duncan McNeil (Greenock and Inverclyde)**

**(Lab):** I thank the cabinet secretary for her statement and for keeping me up to date personally with developments. I echo the thanks that have been extended to NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde and to Inverclyde Council's education services.

I am sure that the cabinet secretary would agree that special praise should go to Mrs Lind, the headteacher of Ravenscraig primary school, Mrs Allan, the school secretary, and Julie Douglas for their performance and their confident leadership which have given a great deal of confidence and reassurance to parents and it has been recognised by them.

Given that we now have a case involving a teenager, what discussions has the cabinet secretary had with the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning on further school closures in the secondary sector and on the possible impact on exams? Will she make it clear that appropriate transfer of antivirals has taken place in recognition of the developing situation in the Inverclyde area?

**Nicola Sturgeon:** I join Duncan McNeil in thanking very warmly the staff of the Ravenscraig primary school, the Ladybird Pre 5 Centre nursery and the Enterprise after-school club, all of whom behaved very professionally in difficult circumstances. Their contribution was in no small measure responsible for the smooth way in which all this has been handled.

I assure Duncan McNeil that contingency arrangements for exams in secondary schools are all in hand. It is not appropriate for me to go into detail on the personal circumstances of the 16-year-old girl. However, as we understand more about the case, any action that has to be taken will be taken. As has been the case over the past fortnight, our focus is on containing the virus as much as possible. We are in dialogue with all the relevant people with whom the member would expect us to be in dialogue on all the cases.

**The Presiding Officer:** Before I call Dave Thompson, I say that I will on this occasion allow Dr Simpson to put his second question because the people who are necessary for the next item are not yet in the chamber.

**Dave Thompson (Highlands and Islands) (SNP):** I thank the cabinet secretary for her statement. I welcome the sensible precautionary action that she and the relevant authorities have taken over the past few weeks. We must ensure that we minimise the risk of the flu being passed on. Has any guidance been issued to parents on contact between children outside school?

**Nicola Sturgeon:** Parents will be given appropriate advice, including on restrictions that

require to be put on children. As we have said, the risk of passing on the infection tends to be when people are symptomatic. That said, there is some evidence that children can become infectious slightly before they become symptomatic, so the guidance on dealing with suspected child cases is being revised to take account of that. Where their child is symptomatic, parents will be advised to keep them at home and away from other children. That advice is being given more generally. In all cases, it is led by the expert opinion of Health Protection Scotland and the public health teams in the various health boards.

**Dr Simpson:** Thank you for your courtesy in allowing me in again, Presiding Officer.

My question is on the sleeping contracts. One of the things that I put into my report of 1999 was that there might be a bottleneck in respect of egg supply. I was laughed at in one cartoon for even suggesting that. Clearly, if we are trying to produce 45 per cent cover, we will need a vast vaccine production. Can the cabinet secretary assure Parliament that the sleeping contracts include adequate egg supply for production? Will production be in the UK or are we reliant on European supply sources?

**Nicola Sturgeon:** I ask Richard Simpson to bear with me—I will come back to him on that question. I can, however, say that the sleeping contracts guarantee us, and other countries that are party to those contracts, a share of the vaccine supply as it becomes available. Not all countries are party to sleeping contracts. Having such contracts puts us in a very advantageous position. Because they kick in only in certain circumstances—for example, a level 6 pandemic alert being triggered—if we simply wait for them to kick in, we would miss an opportunity to use the spare capacity that we know exists at the moment.

I ask Richard Simpson and others not to get too hung up on the 45 per cent figure. In this pre-pandemic phase, we are determined to get as much vaccine as we can. If that is more than 45 per cent, we will not be limited by that. Obviously, we cannot guarantee that the figure will be as high as 45 per cent. We do not know when we will get to alert level 6, and therefore to the point at which our sleeping contracts kick in. That said, the clear objective is as much as possible, as early as possible.

## Community Courts

**The Presiding Officer (Alex Fergusson):** The next item of business is a statement by Kenny MacAskill, the Cabinet Secretary for Justice, on community courts. As always, the cabinet secretary will take questions at the end of his statement and there should therefore be no interventions or interruptions. I remind members that we are very tight for time today; we have a lot of business to fit in. Brevity in both questions and answers should be the watchword of the day.

09:27

**The Cabinet Secretary for Justice (Kenny MacAskill):** I am grateful for this opportunity to set out my response to last Thursday's vote. First, I will deal with the factual information in relation to the community justice centre, after which I will address the broader issue of the Government's commitment to replace short prison sentences, where appropriate, with tough and effective community sentences.

I turn to the community justice centre project. There are lessons to be learned from community courts such as those in Midtown in New York and elsewhere. There are clear advantages to having a strong focus on top quality criminal justice services in the most disadvantaged areas that are often the most blighted by offending, which is why we worked constructively with Glasgow City Council and other partners through the Glasgow community justice centre project board on a feasibility study into the costs of building and running a community justice centre, as well as the benefits that such a centre could bring.

The project initiation document, which we will shortly arrange to place in the Scottish Parliament information centre, pulled together the conclusions of the work and highlighted a number of issues. It set out the aims of the court, which are: improved community safety; improved community involvement in the justice system as a whole; taking a problem-solving approach; tackling the underlying causes as well as the actions of offenders; speeding up the delivery of justice in the local area; and more effective payback to the community that has been blighted or damaged.

All those aims are important, but delivering them is not dependent on the creation of a new building. The community court would have dealt, at most, with a couple of thousand cases a year. In 2007-2008, over 79,000 people had a charge proved in the sheriff summary court and a further 47,000 were convicted by justices of the peace.

The cost of the new building, and the running costs thereof, were substantial. What caused us to support the project board's decision was the scale

of the revenue commitment just to keep the building open, staffed, resourced and safe. The Glasgow stakeholders considered—as the final programme initiation document highlights—that the final costs would likely be considerably higher than the consultant's estimate of £750,000 per year. The document also said that there would be no cash-releasing benefits or offsetting savings. In the current financial climate, that does not seem to offer best value for money. The project board concluded that the project, at this stage, should not be progressed in its current form.

The chair of the project board wrote to the chief executive of Glasgow City Council to intimate the board's conclusion. The chief executive's response was positive and realistic. He said:

"I appreciate the Board's practical and informed approach to taking the difficult decision not to progress this project further. I note that the Board had some early discussions on how the principles of the Centre could be introduced into mainstream services in Glasgow and that your staff intend to continue that work. I would support further work with the Council and other partners to explore how this could be delivered in the context of the local and national aspirations for reducing reoffending".

We have not abandoned our commitment to better justice-system delivery for the citizens of the east end of Glasgow. We will work further with the council to explore how some of the benefits that have been identified—particularly quicker delivery of community payback, with visible reinvestment in the neediest communities—can be delivered through better joining up of services using existing premises. My officials will have a first meeting with Glasgow City Council on that next week. We will work together to find a practical and affordable solution.

I want to deal more widely with our stated commitment to move from routine short prison sentences that provide free bed and board, to tough and effective community sentences. Our strategy is clear and coherent, and is based on the independent work of the Scottish Prisons Commission. We published it in December, in "Protecting Scotland's Communities: Fair, Fast and Flexible Justice". It has two main strands: a robust regime of community penalties, and strong and proportionate management of offenders whose crimes merit prison.

A coherent penal policy is needed. We remain committed to the provision of a modern and fit-for-purpose prison and we are investing a record £120 million in prison capacity each year. Public protection is the Government's first goal. Protecting the public effectively needs prisons that are not overcrowded and which can undertake the necessary work to rehabilitate serious offenders who need to be locked up and detained.

In 2007-08, 76 per cent of sentences were for six months or less. On average, individuals who are given such sentences spend only three weeks in prison. There is no time for the Scottish Prison Service to work with them to tackle underlying drug or alcohol problems; the service can only contain them. The greater the overcrowding, the greater the challenge for the service. The prison population is still rising. There are more than 8,000 people in our prisons, although recorded crime is at a 25-year low.

In terms of long-term public protection, we need to develop alternatives to prison that are robust, that take effect quickly and which offer real payback to communities. That is what we are doing, through the Criminal Justice and Licensing (Scotland) Bill, which will create the new community payback order, and through work in partnership with local authorities to improve the standard of delivery on the ground. We are investing an additional £2 million per year in community service and, in conjunction with the Association of Directors of Social Work, we have drawn up revised operational guidance and have carried out training events throughout the country for community service staff. The Criminal Justice and Licensing (Scotland) Bill includes provisions for more flexible sentences, which can be kept under review by the sentencer. It also provides a significant new sanction to support tough action on breach: electronic tagging. We are also investing extra cash to improve delivery this year.

We have to prioritise. We need a visible police presence, which reassures good citizens and deters bad ones. That is why the Government took the decision to increase police numbers by 1,000. We need a coherent penal policy and a system that improves management of offenders, Scotland wide.

Resources are not infinite and we are in a recession. We are aware of the financial situation and the pressures that £500 million of cuts from Westminster will bring. We therefore need to target our resources. Sometimes that will mean that desirable extras, such as the community court building, do not proceed. If we fund Glasgow community court, we must make cuts in other areas—£1 million is not petty cash. Last week, the Justice Committee voted to retain Annan justice of the peace court. That decision is not cost free, as committee members are aware, and might cost up to £800,000.

Our priority is safer communities, with a visible police presence and more robust and immediate community sentences, which communities can see and believe in. We need to invest in front-line services, not in new buildings.

I recognise and share members' view that key elements of the community court model,

particularly the clustering of support services and the closer links with communities, are eminently worth pursuing. I have asked my officials to work with Glasgow City Council to do just that, in a way that suits local circumstances. I expect that work to generate lessons for wider application. Moreover, when the financial situation improves and pressures are less severe, matters can be reviewed.

I understand local members' desire for investment in the east end of Glasgow and I am happy to reiterate that the Government has shown unprecedented commitment to the east end. However, in the current economic circumstances, the development of the community court building does not offer the best value for money, given the available resources. The building could be delivered only by making cuts in vital police or community justice services.

**The Presiding Officer:** I say for the benefit of members who arrived slightly late that we are short of time this morning, so questions and answers should be as brief as possible.

**Richard Baker (North East Scotland) (Lab):** I thank the cabinet secretary for the advance copy of his statement but is not the statement an insult to the Parliament? After the Parliament clearly expressed its will that a community court be established in Glasgow, why has the cabinet secretary not reflected on his position but simply trotted out the same arguments against the court that we heard from the Scottish National Party last week?

We all recognise the financial pressures that exist. However, despite the pressures, Glasgow City Council made it clear that it was ready to invest millions in the court, because it thought that the approach would work. Given the cabinet secretary's wider sentencing strategy, the court is surely far more than a desirable extra—it is an essential part of the strategy. If the Scottish Prison Service's £4 million in VAT savings is not to be invested in the court, what will it be invested in? When will the cabinet secretary's target for community sentences to start within seven days be met, if the court does not go ahead?

The cabinet secretary talked about a coherent strategy. Does not his decision show how incoherent his strategy is? How can his plans to treble the number of community sentences have credibility, when the current system is creaking at the seams and he refuses to invest in proposals that are proven to deliver tough and effective community payback?

The Parliament and the Government's own research support the establishment of the community court, so why are ministers standing in its way? Is this not the clearest illustration of the

fact that the Scottish Government's justice strategy is not just soft touch, but out of touch?

**Kenny MacAskill:** The Scottish Prison Service would not need to make savings here, there and everywhere if we had got the Barnett consequential to follow on from the Carter review south of the border. If we had been given what was our right and entitlement, the Prison Service would have an additional £120 million per annum, but nothing is said by Labour members about ensuring that Scotland gets its right and entitlement.

The targets are not dependent on a court building. They are not just being rolled out through what would have been the Glasgow community court; they are going nationwide. They concern better systems, not simply new structures. The fundamental point is that, if other parties want to persist with the court building, they should tell us how many officers they want to be taken off the streets, which areas they want to be deprived of a visible police presence, which prison building they want to close, or which construction they want us to delay.

The project is not cost free—it comes at a cost. All the Opposition parties should be mindful that the last time they came to the chamber to force us to do something, they forced the citizens of Edinburgh to have £500 million spent on a tram scheme—£500 million that the country could have spent without the mess that the scheme has created for the citizens of this city. Members should beware of what they are asking for—cuts in front-line services in order to build a community court building.

**Bill Aitken (Glasgow) (Con):** I am grateful to the cabinet secretary for an advance copy of the statement.

There is a unanimous view in the chamber, even following the statement, that the project is desirable. Last week, there was a clear majority in the Parliament for proceeding and the failure to proceed is a negation of parliamentary democracy. The Conservative group has little confidence in the cabinet secretary on a range of issues. Does he not accept that the defiance of Parliament on this issue raises real doubts over his ability to satisfy the Parliament as to his competence and suitability for office?

**Kenny MacAskill:** This is not just the position of the Government. When Clive Fairweather, the former chief inspector of prisons, was asked about the matter, he said that the position was understandable, with money being tight these days. He went on to say that one or two of the details have not quite been worked out. I hope that, rather than simply being put on the shelf, the project could be put to one side to be worked on,

so that when a bit more money becomes available we could come back to it. That is what the Government has said. We have not said no; we have said that, as and when the financial climate is better, we will be happy to revisit the matter.

In the interim, if Mr Aitken wants money to be spent on the project, that cannot be done out of VAT, which is non-recurring; it must be done by cutting funds for something else. The choice is simple. If Labour, the Tories and the Lib Dems wish to build the community court in Glasgow, they do so at the expense of a visible police presence and the circumstances that are essential for community justice.

**David McLetchie (Edinburgh Pentlands) (Con):** Rubbish.

**The Presiding Officer:** Order.

**Kenny MacAskill:** They cannot just produce the money out of their back pockets. That is the reality of life.

**David McLetchie:** He is talking absolute nonsense.

**Kenny MacAskill:** Irrespective of what Mr McLetchie might shout from a sedentary position—

**David McLetchie:** I will stand up and say it: it is nonsense.

**The Presiding Officer:** Order.

**Kenny MacAskill:** We are in a recession, and we have to make these decisions.

**Robert Brown (Glasgow) (LD):** I, too, thank the cabinet secretary for the advance copy of the statement.

This morning, we have seen the sorry spectacle of the cabinet secretary coming before the Parliament with weasel words, saying that the Scottish National Party Government intends to defy the will of Parliament. He does so with the aid of the ludicrously entitled project initiation document, which is what he has based his decision on. That is notwithstanding the release of some £50 million and the action that has been taken, with the unanimous support of the Parliament, with regard to the slopping-out cases. Is the cabinet secretary seriously telling us that the Government cannot find the necessary £750,000 to £1 million for the Glasgow community court?

The cabinet secretary told us that the Government strategy was clear, consistent and based on the work of the Scottish Prisons Commission. Why does he pick out only parts of the Prisons Commission report? Does he no longer accept the commission's conclusion that

“we first need up-front investment in better services in and for Scotland’s communities”

if we are to take crime and punishment seriously?

Is the cabinet secretary not seriously embarrassed to tell the Parliament that the Government holds those considered views in contempt? If the Government is not prepared to reconsider its position, should the cabinet secretary not reconsider his position? Is the Government’s strategy on justice not now rather a shambles?

**Kenny MacAskill:** We accept the conclusions of the McLeish report, and we are delivering record funding. We have put in an additional £2 million to ensure that our community justice front-line services—not simply buildings—can be properly resourced. Clearly, however, we must make hard choices during difficult times.

I recall that Mr Brown opposed the closure not only of Annan justice of the peace court, with a price tag of up to £800,000, but of Rutherglen justice of the peace court. He is keen to ensure that the Government increases expenditure on buildings, but he will not tell us which front-line services we have to take the funding from. We live in a world in which resources are not infinite. Thankfully, we do not have to make up the £800 million of cuts that Mr Purvis would have imposed upon us—and which the Lib Dems have rolled back from.

If members wish to proceed with buildings, they must cut the funding from other budgets. Be under no illusion: those budgets will be for front-line services, and it is police and prisons that we require to fund. We will not cut front-line services simply for a building that we cannot fund at present—but, along with Clive Fairweather, we will work to see whether we can deliver the concept when better financial times come.

**The Presiding Officer:** We come to open questions. We should have only one question per member, please. I will stick rigorously to that.

**Anne McLaughlin (Glasgow) (SNP):** I apologise for being a little late, Presiding Officer—my sprint from the garden lobby might just teach me a lesson.

I thank the cabinet secretary for his statement. The community court is only one part of the fight against crime in Glasgow. As the cabinet secretary said, the Government has shown unprecedented commitment to the east end of Glasgow. Will the cabinet secretary outline some of the other measures that are being taken in Glasgow to make our streets safer?

**Kenny MacAskill:** Absolutely. We recognise the particular problems that the east end of Glasgow has. That is why our commitment to 1,000

additional officers, and indeed the splendid work that is being done by Strathclyde police authority and the chief constable of Strathclyde, have resulted in a record police presence in the city of Glasgow. Of course, that could be jeopardised if we have to replace police officers with a building.

We have supported the community initiative to reduce violence in the east end, through the violence reduction unit. We recognise that specific areas have particular problems, not simply criminal justice problems but problems with drink, drugs and deprivation. We seek to work using a holistic approach, and that is what we are doing.

We will have a visible police presence to enforce the law firmly. We will continue to invest in the prison estate to ensure that those who need to be behind bars are put there. That investment is not just for the prisoners; it is to ensure the safety of our hard-pressed officers. We are investing a record amount in front-line delivery services for criminal justice and for tackling alcohol and drug abuse.

If members want to spend money on a building, they should be under no illusion: they cannot also spend that money on other services. What they make us spend on some areas—as with the Edinburgh trams—must come out of other areas. On their heads be it.

**Paul Martin (Glasgow Springburn) (Lab):** On accepting his nomination as First Minister, Alex Salmond lectured the Parliament, saying:

“The days of Scottish Government imposing its will on the Parliament are behind us, although I daresay that there might be days in the near future when I come to lament their passing.”—[*Official Report*, 16 May 2007; c 25.]

Does the cabinet secretary agree that the First Minister should regret having made that statement?

**Kenny MacAskill:** No. If other parties want us to spend money on something, they must tell us what money should be used. That is the point that I have been making throughout. I am happy to make a deal with Mr Martin: if he wants me to tally up how many officers we will have to take off the streets, I will be more than happy to make him an offer. Then, he can make the decision. In the interim, if all that he is prepared to do is to parrot demands for us to spend more on this and that, without telling us where the money is to come from, he will get the answer that he got.

**Nigel Don (North East Scotland) (SNP):** I can tell members that the answer is about 20 police officers. What other steps are being taken by the police to speed up justice?

**Kenny MacAskill:** It is about being fast, fair and flexible. The issue is not simply one of buildings; it is one of procedures and ensuring that the police

and the Crown are locked on and understand the issues. This is not done deliberately, but there have been instances of people appearing in court for something when it is clear that there are other, outstanding offences that will be rolled up.

When people are sentenced to community service, we must ensure that it is not weeks or months down the line but immediate and speedy. That is one of the lessons that we learned from the Midtown system. We pick up on those lessons, but one does not need a building to be able to deliver them; one does that by having a better policing system, by improving technology and by ensuring that matters move swiftly. Lessons are learned by ensuring that not simply the police, but courts, prosecution and social work move smarter and work together. However, the building is not necessary.

**John Lamont (Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con):** The cabinet secretary has made much of the anticipated costs and why the Government cannot afford to proceed with community courts in Glasgow. However, the Minister for Community Safety has told Parliament in the past that the Government believes that there are costs associated with doing the right thing. Therefore, does the cabinet secretary think that community courts are not the right way to cut crime and reoffending rates?

**Kenny MacAskill:** Costs are involved in doing the right thing and that is why we made the substantial investment to ensure that we have 1,000 additional officers on our streets. However, if one makes an investment there, one cannot make it elsewhere. I refer once again to Clive Fairweather—a person with huge experience and, with all respect to Mr Lamont, more experience than him—who recognises the position that the Government is in. He also recognises that matters require to be worked out.

I suggest that Mr Lamont considers and reflects upon Clive Fairweather's views. We realise that the project is not in a position to proceed at present because we do not have the financial culture and climate. That may change. We can continue to work with Glasgow to see what we can do immediately. We can look at the project in due course as money may free up. In the interim, I repeat that if Mr Martin and Mr Baker want to spend money on that, they must tell us which police officers they want us to take off our streets.

**Angela Constance (Livingston) (SNP):** The cabinet secretary mentioned the Barnett formula. Would the decision on community courts have been any different had Scotland received the Barnett consequential of the money that was released from the reserve to support investment in English prisons?

**Kenny MacAskill:** Absolutely. In England and Wales, following the Carter review, £1.2 billion was transferred from reserve to the Ministry of Justice to be allocated for the prison estate. That is a reserve claim—the Scottish Government does not automatically receive equivalent funding through Barnett consequential. The justification for that procedure and emergency funding south of the border was pressure upon the prison estate. However, lo and behold, at the same time as people are living with the problem south of the border, we in Scotland have problems and pressures in our prison estate, as Conservative members are never shy in coming forward to tell us.

We did not get our Barnett consequential from the £1.2 billion. Had we done so, the £120 million could probably have delivered not just the community court in Glasgow, but a community court in every jurisdiction in Scotland. However, until such time as Mr Baker is prepared to stand up to his colleagues south of the border and fight the cause for Scotland, we will continue as a Government to be short changed and to face £500 million-worth of public expenditure cuts.

**Cathy Jamieson (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (Lab):** I have listened with some incredulity to the cabinet secretary's claim that proceeding with the community court would take police officers off the street. Is he seriously telling the Parliament that he did not budget for the 1,000 additional police officers? Is he also telling the Parliament that, in light of the vote taken last week, providing community-based justice is not a front-line service?

The cabinet secretary referred to the Annan court in his statement, but the Justice Committee also made reference to Girvan and Cumnock justice of the peace courts. Will the cabinet secretary assure me—

**The Presiding Officer:** That is three questions.

**Cathy Jamieson:** —that he will not come back and try to push through measures to close those courts? I apologise to the Presiding Officer.

**Kenny MacAskill:** Robert Brown wanted to save Rutherglen as well as Annan, and Cathy Jamieson wants to save Cumnock and Girvan. None of those is cost free and all of them have a tag. Mr Baker wants to spend the money on the community court and we also have calls to spend on Rutherglen, Cumnock, Girvan and Annan. On and on the price tag goes, but it cannot be done.

Do we budget? Yes, and I will tell the chamber where we budgeted. We budgeted for police officers' pay and when the police officers' settlement was received the Government honoured the pay deal and did not seek to short

change our police officers as was done by a Labour Government south of the border.

We did not budget for the problem with police pensions—we inherited that from previous Administrations—but as well as recognising the obligation that we have to pay our hard-working police officers what they are entitled to, we met our obligations as a Government on behalf of the people of Scotland to meet the pension rights of our police officers. They had to be met: does Mr Baker want us to renege on them?

**Sandra White (Glasgow) (SNP):** I thank the cabinet secretary for his statement and for his continuing support for community courts. *[Laughter.]*

**The Presiding Officer:** Order.

**Sandra White:** As someone who speaks to the people of the east end of Glasgow, I know that they want action. Does the cabinet secretary agree that what is needed for the people of the east end of Glasgow is swiftness of delivery and not necessarily a building?

**Kenny MacAskill:** Absolutely. I am glad that Sandra White, at least, has been listening to what I have been saying. What I have stated is not simply the Government's position, but the position of learned and respected people such as Clive Fairweather. We must get on and do something, and that is what we are doing. As Sandra White correctly said, this is not all about a building. It is about working smarter, changing systems, moving faster and ensuring that the system is fair and flexible. Those can be done and they will be done. However, we acknowledge that if and when money is freed up in due course, we will be more than happy to consider the expense of a building. In the interim, whatever Mr McLetchie may say, our priority is police officers in our communities.

**David McLetchie:** Not after the election—the cabinet secretary reneged on it.

**The Presiding Officer:** Order, Mr McLetchie.

**Mr Frank McAveety (Glasgow Shettleston) (Lab):** I thank the cabinet secretary for the copy of his statement, but not for the quality of his responses to legitimate questions that have been raised by parliamentarians regarding an issue on which the Parliament voted decisively last week.

The cabinet secretary said that £1 million is not petty cash. I agree. Is that the revenue cost that his department assumes for the community court? Is that not £500,000 or £1 million less than anything that was initially budgeted for by the Government? It is one thirty-thousandth of our budget, so I am not prepared to take lectures on fiscal prudence from the cabinet secretary.

Finally—

**The Presiding Officer:** I am sorry, but members must ask one question only. I ruled against one member on that point, and I must be fair to all members.

**Kenny MacAskill:** We provided £1.6 million to support the £5 million community initiative to reduce violence in the east end of Glasgow, targeting 55 gangs and 700 young men. If Parliament makes us spend £750,000, £1 million or whatever on a yearly basis, projects such as that will be jeopardised. We believe that they—and not simply having a building—will tackle the root causes of crime.

## Scottish Local Government (Elections) Bill: Stage 1

**The Presiding Officer (Alex Fergusson):** The next item of business is a debate on motion S3M-3964, in the name of Bruce Crawford, on the Scottish Local Government (Elections) Bill. I remind members that time is extremely tight, so they must stick rigorously to their allocated time.

09:58

**The Minister for Parliamentary Business (Bruce Crawford):** I thank the Local Government and Communities Committee for its work in considering the bill and preparing the stage 1 report, and I thank those who gave evidence to the committee. The bill is based largely on proposals that were contained in two Government consultations; therefore, I also thank those who responded to the consultations.

It is now two years since the 2007 combined elections. If time has eased the memories of the events of 3 May 2007, as far as the administration of elections is concerned, it takes only a brief look at Ron Gould's comprehensive 120-page report to bring it all back. The Gould report identified complicated systems and structures, as well as complex legislation and a fragmentation of roles and responsibilities, as a critical barrier to the smooth administration of elections. The Local Government and Communities Committee has considered the Government's response to the Gould report to date. The bill takes our response a stage further, and implements a key recommendation of the report.

The bill will decouple local government elections in Scotland from elections to the Scottish Parliament by moving local government elections to the mid-point of the Scottish parliamentary session. We will achieve that by extending the current local government term of office—and the subsequent term—to five years, which will mean that the next two local government elections in Scotland will now take place in 2012 and 2017. After that, local government terms of office will revert to four years.

The bill will make post-election voter information available in greater detail. It will require returning officers to release information at polling station level, rather than at ward level as happens at present. Decoupling will simplify the election process and reduce the scope for confusion among voters. We owe it to the electorate to do that much; we owe it to our colleagues in local government to ensure that local elections are given the prominence that they deserve and are not diminished by being held on the same day as elections to the Parliament.

Local government is perhaps the level of government that has the most impact on the quality of life for ordinary people in Scotland. The services that councils provide are vital to people in their everyday lives, and those who are responsible for the delivery of those services must be properly accountable. That is why the Government believes that local elections should be held in a position of prominence, separately from other elections.

Local elections should focus on local issues such as schools and services rather than being overshadowed by national politics. Separating elections in that way will strengthen local government's mandate. Unison, in its written evidence to the Local Government and Communities Committee, stated:

"Stand alone local elections will allow the focus of the election campaign to centre on local issues, so creating a real debate on local priorities that really matter to people".

We are aware of concerns that decoupling could lead to a lower turnout in local elections, and that the focus and motivation of those who vote could still be on national or United Kingdom-wide issues. Concern about voter turnout is not new: in the 1974 regional elections in Scotland, 35 years ago, there was a turnout of 50 per cent. The next 11 sets of local government elections failed to reach that figure.

In 1999, the local government elections were combined with elections to the Scottish Parliament, and the turnout rose to 58 per cent. That figure fell back to 50 per cent in 2003, and rose to 52 per cent in 2007. I have used that figure of 50 per cent as a comparison, but I am certainly not suggesting that it should be a target. The maths is simple: even if we hit 50 per cent, it means that half of those who are entitled to vote have not voted. There is, however, no simple answer to that—improving turnout is a fundamental issue that must be viewed beyond the context of decoupled elections.

It falls on all of us—politicians, political parties, local authorities and civic society—to focus on the reasons for low turnout and to give people a reason to turn out in local elections. We need to encourage a greater level of public participation across the board; to raise the profile of local government issues and candidates; and to increase voter interest and the general understanding of the democratic process. We must consider the way in which we use voter education material and campaigns to explain the aims of elections and to motivate individuals to register to vote and use their vote.

The issue is also about access and inclusion. We need to ensure that as many people as possible have access to the democratic process and that they feel motivated to take part and be



included in that process. We must identify the groups in our society that are harder to reach, and find new ways to engage with them. In a strong democracy, groups that are less motivated to vote, and so are less likely to vote, deserve to be included in the democratic process as much as the rest of us. I look forward to working with the committee on examining ways in which the turnout for local government elections can be increased.

I have mentioned the importance of information campaigns, and I share the committee's view that improving voter information and raising awareness about elections are vital. In 2007, the vote Scotland campaign was run jointly by the then Scottish Executive and the Electoral Commission. It cost £1.25 million, and was funded by the Executive. The information campaign ahead of the 2012 local government elections will be important—we will work with the Electoral Commission and local authorities to develop an effective campaign.

As part of that, we will need to consider the balance between national and local information campaigns; the committee considered that issue when it took evidence on the bill. Witnesses, including the Electoral Commission and the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives and Senior Managers, argued strongly and convincingly that it was important that local authorities and returning officers should promote local information campaigns. If we are promoting local democracy and local government, local authorities should share the responsibility for driving that forward.

The committee heard that there is a local dimension to voter information that justifies allowing a returning officer the discretion to use a set of messages that reflect the community in which the officer lives and works. Funding for local authority campaigns will form an important part of those discussions at the right time.

The committee heard evidence about the role of the Electoral Commission, which I discussed with members when I appeared before them. The Scottish Government has a constructive relationship with the commission, and, as I told the committee, I would be happy to consider formally extending the commission's role to cover local government elections in Scotland. However, before I sought to bring any necessary proposals to the Parliament, I would want to be convinced that doing so would improve the current situation.

The former Scottish Executive worked closely with the commission on the preparations for the 2003 and 2007 combined elections, in areas such as joint information campaigns and the preparation of training material for returning officers and their staff. I am willing to examine the issue further, but I do not believe that we should legislate for the

sake of it if the same effect can be achieved through informal and co-operative means.

With regard to the bill's provisions on increasing the availability of voter information, I am pleased that the committee welcomed the Government's proposals to publish voter information at polling station level. The introduction of the single transferable vote system and the use of e-counting have increased the amount of voting information that is available. The bill provides for the publication in the future of information on the number of preference votes that are cast and transferred at each stage between candidates at polling station level rather than at ward level.

I hope that it goes without saying, but I assure Parliament that we will do all that we can to ensure that the secrecy of the ballot is maintained. Our proposals are designed to increase the transparency of the electoral process; they are not intended to, and nor will they, affect the right of the individual to a secret vote.

Regulations will provide, in a situation in which there is even a slight possibility that a particular polling station is so small that there is a risk that an individual voter could be identified, for the voter information to be amalgamated with that from a neighbouring polling station until the number of votes reaches a minimum threshold. The threshold that we have in mind is 200, which is the level that is used for Scottish parliamentary elections.

The bill is a further important step towards improving the administration of elections in Scotland, and it will implement a key recommendation of the Gould report. It is part of a programme that involves working with others towards the common aim of giving voters the electoral system that they deserve. The bill removes a source of potential confusion for voters and should make the voting process easier for the voter, which must be our aim. Separating local government elections from elections to the Parliament will give those local elections the prominence that they deserve.

It is right that, as we debate the bill at stage 1, we put the voter at the centre of our thoughts as far as the whole process is concerned. All of us have regrets about the 2007 elections, and I am glad that the Parliament now has the chance to begin to put right some of the problems that existed at that time.

It is with pleasure that I move,

That the Parliament agrees to the general principles of the Scottish Local Government (Elections) Bill.

10:09

**Duncan McNeil (Greenock and Inverclyde)**  
**(Lab):** As the convener of the lead committee on

the bill, I am pleased to be taking part in the debate. I thank all those who gave us written and oral evidence and I thank the clerks, the Scottish Parliament information centre researchers and my colleagues on the committee.

Whether to decouple the local government and Scottish Parliament elections, and the debacle of the 2007 elections, are issues that the committee has considered in great detail. Ron Gould produced a comprehensive report and, following its publication, we conducted our own inquiry into the issues, on which we reported to Parliament in June 2008.

Among our many recommendations, we endorsed the view that the Scottish Parliament and local government elections should be decoupled. It was clear from the evidence that we took that, although there have been differing views over the years, there is now broad agreement that the elections should be separated.

However, some concerns were raised with us, which we have highlighted in our report. The first of those is about turnout, which is an issue that we also considered as part of our inquiry into the 2007 elections. People were concerned that if the local government elections were held separately, turnout would fall. However, we recognise that the issue of turnout is broader than just the decoupling of elections. In evidence, Dave Watson from Unison said:

"All of us—civic society, politicians, political parties and local authorities—need to focus on the reasons for the low turnout by doing much more work to make people want to turn out in local elections."—[*Official Report, Local Government and Communities Committee*, 25 March 2009; c 1884.]

We welcome the indication from the Minister for Parliamentary Business that he would be happy to engage with the committee on that, and we look forward to working with the Scottish Government on the issue. I hope to hear—today or soon—how we can take that work forward.

Our report shows that we are concerned about voter registration. Of course, that is a reserved issue, so we are calling on the Scottish Government to continue to work with the UK Government to increase levels of registration.

As we are all painfully aware, there was a lot of voter confusion during the 2007 elections. In our inquiry into those elections, we pointed out that the high level of rejected ballots in the Scottish Parliament election should not eclipse the high level of rejected ballots in the local government elections. It is clear that there needs to be further information about how the STV system works.

Ron Gould said in his report:

"In essence, the local government elections are not simply about ensuring a reasonable number of voters show

up at the polls on polling day. More important is that they engage with the campaign in a meaningful manner and make a knowledgeable decision on their ballot paper."

There is a consensus that there needs to be an information campaign to raise awareness about the importance of local government elections and to educate people on the method of voting.

We have asked the Scottish Government to consider the role that the Electoral Commission can play in any information campaign, given that it does not have a statutory role in relation to local government elections in Scotland. Given the need for a good information campaign, it is also important that there is sufficient funding. Tom Aitchison, the chief executive of and returning officer for the City of Edinburgh Council, told the committee that he remembered being allocated somewhere in the region of £15,000 to promote public awareness in 2007, which does not seem sufficient funding for a city the size of Edinburgh. He told us that he would

"strongly support any move towards making more resources available generally for election management in Scotland and specifically for public awareness to encourage people to vote and so get a better turnout."—[*Official Report, Local Government and Communities Committee*, 25 March 2009; c 1865-66.]

Given how vital public information campaigns will be in helping people to engage with the process and educating them about the STV system, the committee has recommended that there should be a meaningful discussion with local authorities over the funding that would be required, and that that funding should be reflected in the next Scottish Government spending review.

Funding is also an issue when it comes to e-counting. After 2007, the word "e-counting" should send a shudder through most of us in the Parliament. However, we need e-counting for local government elections because of the counting method that is used for STV elections. Again, that raises the issue of costs.

The Association of Electoral Administrators was concerned about that, given that the Scotland Office will not be contributing as it did in 2007. William Pollock from the association said:

"It is likely that the costs would increase because the economies of scale that are achieved with a combined election would not be achieved with decoupling. Under the current arrangement, the costs will fall on the local authority if the matter is not addressed."—[*Official Report, Local Government and Communities Committee*, 25 March 2009; c 1868-69.]

The minister told the committee that a cost cannot be put on an e-counting system yet because the Scottish Government has to go through a competitive tendering process. As with the other costs of the bill, it is not clear how much

local government will have to find on its own and what money it will get from central Government.

**Bruce Crawford:** Will the member take an intervention?

**Duncan McNeil:** I ask the minister to respond when he sums up. Sorry—I am pressed for time.

The costs of the bill have been a general concern for the committee throughout its scrutiny of the bill. The committee expects that the Scottish Government will provide information on how the costs will be split between the Government and local authorities as soon as possible.

The other main provision in the bill is to allow voting information down to polling station level to be published. I am sure that we all agree that it will be helpful to us to have information such as the number of preferences cast and the votes transferred between candidates at each stage. Equally, I am sure that we all agree with the minister that a secret ballot is fundamental to democracy and that any changes must protect that fundamental right. We agree with the minister that this is a balancing act that we have to get right. The Electoral Commission appears to agree that using a threshold of 200 votes will help to protect a voter's anonymity. As we say in our report, it is clear that the proposal in the bill to publish voter information at polling station level is welcome, provided that adequate measures are put in place to ensure the secrecy of the ballot.

I have spoken about the potential costs of public information campaigns and the e-counting system, and I return to the issue of costs. I thank the Finance Committee for its report to us on the financial memorandum to the bill. We raised a number of issues arising from that report with the minister.

The main issue is the uncertainty over what the split of costs will be between central and local government. Although the minister has promised to nail down the costs for e-counting as soon as possible, and to try to pre-commit that money before the next spending review, we have not received the same commitment for other costs. We are aware of concerns about the need for all of this to be adequately funded, and we have recommended that the Scottish Government should take account of those concerns in determining local government funding requirements for the next spending review.

I have spoken about the concerns that we have highlighted in our report. We have made a number of recommendations, particularly with regard to the important area of funding. I hope that the Scottish Government will address that issue.

However, as I have said, there is broad agreement with the aims of the bill. The committee

recommends that Parliament should agree to the general principles of the bill.

**The Presiding Officer:** I have been informed that one speaker will not be taking part in the debate, so we are not quite as tight for time as we were. Nonetheless, we do not have a lot of time available.

10:18

**Andy Kerr (East Kilbride) (Lab):** I speak in support of the bill on behalf of the Scottish Labour Party. I thank the Local Government and Communities Committee for the report, and the minister for his opening remarks and the constructive style that he adopted. Although Labour believes that it is not always necessary to hold elections on separate days, we recognise that voters found the use of different voting systems on the same day in the May 2007 elections confusing. That is why we support the basic principle of decoupling the elections to local councils and the Scottish Parliament.

As the minister reminded us—those painful memories—there was so much wrong with the conduct of the previous set of elections to both bodies that it would be wrong to argue that the sole or main cause of the voter confusion was the fact that the elections were conjoined. There were other matters at stake, too.

As many reports have highlighted, and as many people have commented, we are all responsible for many aspects of what is now largely regarded as a debacle of an election. There was much wrong with what happened on that day, such as the different electoral systems at play, the party descriptions, the construct of the ballot paper and the failure of the electronic voting systems. That is why we had an independent review of the elections by Professor Gould. One of the outcomes of the review is that we are now debating a mechanism that will decouple the two elections, with effect from May 2011.

Like others, I believe that a price will be paid for decoupling in terms of voter turnout. In 2001, the Scottish Executive introduced the Scottish Local Government (Elections) Bill, which provided that council elections should coincide with Scottish Parliament elections. The coupling of the elections in 1999 and 2003 did not seem to produce problems; as we all know, the electorate did not have much to say about the coupling of those elections in 1999 and 2003.

The decision that was taken then was correct, in the prevailing circumstances, before the introduction of proportional representation to local government and barely halfway through the first session of the Parliament. The decision had one of the desired effects, which was to increase turnout

for the local government elections in subsequent years. The minister has already mentioned that.

**Tricia Marwick (Central Fife) (SNP):** The member talks about accepting the independent Gould report, but why did the Labour and Liberal Executive, when it introduced the bill to couple the elections, ignore both the McIntosh report and the Kerley report, which had recommended decoupling?

**Andy Kerr:** Because we thought that the bill that we introduced offered a better way in which to hold elections. It increased voter turnout, attention and participation and was therefore beneficial. As I was trying to say earlier, the introduction of different electoral systems, among many other reasons and difficulties, led to the debacle in 2007. Had that not happened, I do not believe that we would be here today trying to decouple the elections.

Let us consider the statistics—and the minister was quite right to point out some of these issues. In the non-combined elections held between 1974 and 1995, turnout was 7 per cent lower than the average for combined elections held since 1999. The average turnout was 45.9 per cent in the non-combined elections but 53.3 per cent for the combined elections held since 1999.

The first elections, I would argue, were undoubtedly better days for our fledgling democracy than today. However, we might therefore expect to see a considerable—and perhaps more than would be commensurate—fall in voter turnout as a consequence of decoupling. That is not a prospect that we should dismiss lightly.

Earlier speakers have addressed the imperative that voters should be confident in the electoral system. We must all encourage greater voter turnout. In Labour, we believe that that is a matter of social justice and basic enfranchisement. We must address it. The highest turnout at the previous election was in the affluent Eastwood constituency, with a turnout of 63.38 per cent, and the lowest was in Glasgow Shettleston, which has well-documented levels of social deprivation, where the turnout dropped to 33.43 per cent. That is why we must target our efforts at increasing voter involvement; there should be a comprehensive information and education programme. As others have suggested, that should be a priority and it must be undertaken by the Electoral Commission on our behalf.

We also support the proposal that the next council elections should be held in 2012 and 2017. After that, we agree that local government elections should revert to a four-year electoral cycle, with elections taking place halfway through a session of the Scottish Parliament.

We also believe that the Parliament should consider listing or grouping candidates by party alphabetical order, as opposed to the present system of arranging surnames alphabetically. There is strong anecdotal evidence that candidates at the top of the alphabetically arranged list on the ballot paper fared better than those at the bottom of the list. We support many of the measures in the bill, but I throw that idea into the discussion.

As we know, significant changes have already taken place: there have been separate ballot papers; there will be a longer period between the close of nominations and the date of the election; and changes in the law governing the conduct of elections will come into force at least six months before the date of the election.

I will close now as I am running short of time. We need a clear commitment from the Scottish Government, which Duncan McNeil has asked for, to meet the costs that are involved in holding the elections separately.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer (Alasdair Morgan):** I call Jim Tolson.

10:24

**Jim Tolson (Dunfermline West) (LD):** This is a difficult—

**David McLetchie (Edinburgh Pentlands) (Con):** But—

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** Carry on, Mr Tolson.

**Jim Tolson:** I did wonder, but the order of speakers is in your hands, Presiding Officer.

This is a difficult debate, not because there will be much argument between the parties in the chamber but rather because there is so much consensus. I welcome that consensus, and the fact that Mr McLetchie has allowed me to carry on in his place; however, that does not make me a Tory—thank God.

Whether or not we come from a background in local government, as I do, I am sure that the first point on which we can all agree is that the credibility of local government in Scotland is essential if the wide range of services that it delivers is to be respected by all Scotland's people. The principal issue in the bill is the decoupling of the Scottish local government elections from the parliamentary elections. I am long enough in the tooth, at least in my local government experience, to recall the concerns that arose in 1999 when the first elections to the Scottish Parliament were held on the same day as those for Scottish local government. People were concerned that that would be damaging to local

government. Arguments similar to those that we are having today raged about the loss of focus on local government issues when the focus of the electorate and the press would be on elections to the new Parliament. And so it proved.

Now, three elections to the Scottish Parliament later, it is virtually unanimously accepted that having the Scottish Parliament and local authority elections on the same day is just not working. Local government issues are not getting the press profile that they deserve, and the coupling is causing some confusion because of the different voting systems. It is also diminishing the respect that people have for local government.

However, it is fair to say that the views on decoupling are not all one-sided, and Liberal Democrats have been among those who have expressed concerns about the move at various stages. Those concerns include concerns over voter turnout. Some respondents to the Scottish Government's consultation on decoupling were concerned about a range of electoral administration issues, but their most notable concern was that lower voter turnout was a likely result.

**Gavin Brown (Lothians) (Con):** Will the member give way?

**Jim Tolson:** I am sorry, but I am rather tight for time. I beg Mr Brown's pardon.

Voter turnout was not the only concern that many people had over a decoupled election; they also had concerns over the cost of decoupling to the public purse. Some respondents to the Scottish Government's consultation on decoupling raised concerns about the cost. The financial memorandum to the bill outlines two options to estimate the total additional costs of decoupling to all local authorities combined. The estimate is between £4.5 million and £5 million. I raised concerns at the Local Government and Communities Committee that the cost could be more like £8 million. I guess that time will tell.

Liberal Democrats were the only respondents to oppose the concept on the basis of issues surrounding voter turnout, cost and the burden on local authorities. However, at our spring conference 2009, the Scottish Liberal Democrats voted in favour of decoupling. The tight vote at our conference showed that, contrary to some opinion, councillors were not going to vote automatically for a longer term simply to keep themselves in office. Rather, feedback that I have received from many of my Lib Dem councillor friends is that they shared many of the concerns that I mentioned a few minutes ago.

Decoupling is not the only aim of the bill. It will also make provision for the publication of electoral data down to polling-station level. That will provide

interesting and useful information—not just for political geeks like me, but for other agencies and individual members of the public, so that they can gain a better understanding of how the votes were cast in their area. However, as Duncan McNeil and others have said in relation to secrecy, that is not to say that any individual's vote, or small group of people's votes, should be identifiable. The Liberal Democrats accept the premise that voter information should not be released if the polling station has had fewer than 200 votes cast.

I turn now to the Government's role. The Government does not respect the autonomy and accountability of local government. The SNP has tied local authorities into unrealistic manifesto promises, complicated single outcome agreements, and, worst of all, its greatly discredited so-called historic concordat. The decision-making abilities and spending priorities of local authorities have been continually constrained by the Government's impositions.

We are cautious not to burden local authorities further with unachievable or impractical responsibilities. Again and again, we hear Mr Swinney say that, no matter what extra burdens he places on local government, local government signed up to a financial deal in the concordat that gives no extra money to meet those extra commitments. Well, for Mr Swinney and for the Scottish Government, that just does not wash.

**Bruce Crawford:** Will Mr Tolson please give way?

**Jim Tolson:** I am tight for time, but the minister will have a chance to respond when he sums up.

**Bruce Crawford:** I wish that he would give way—

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** Order. Mr Tolson, you should address the motion.

**Jim Tolson:** Liberal Democrats have long fought for the autonomy of local government and for recognition of the importance and significance of governance at that level.

The SNP claims that it devolves responsibility to local authorities, providing them with the appropriate means and powers. Last year, Brian Adam claimed:

"The historic concordat is about respect, not central control."—[*Official Report*, 11 December 2008; c 13392.]

**Bruce Crawford:** On a point of order, Presiding Officer. A moment ago, you ruled that the member should stick to the motion that is under debate. He is straying from that and obviously did not hear you. Perhaps you could remind him.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** I take the point of order. I was going to tell the member that he

must address the motion to agree the first principles of the bill and link his remarks to the bill.

**Jim Tolson:** I will move on, if it is your wish that I do so.

The Liberal Democrats will support the bill at stage 1 in today's vote. However, the Government must consider carefully the genuine concerns that have been raised by many people in evidence to the committee, in the chamber and elsewhere. Only by providing genuine support, including financial support to local authorities, will the bill achieve its true aim of returning to local government the respect that it deserves.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** Now—I am sure that it will have been worth waiting for—I call David McLetchie.

10:31

**David McLetchie (Edinburgh Pentlands) (Con):** Thank you, Presiding Officer. The voice of the righteous cannot be silenced for long in Scotland's Parliament.

"I told you so," is often a rather smug and self-serving comment that is neither endearing nor charitable. However, there are rare occasions on which it is fully justified, and this is one of them. Those of us who have long supported the decoupling of Scottish Parliament and local government elections are entitled to say, "I told you so," to the dispossessed parties of the ancien régime. The Conservatives are entitled to say it because the decoupling of the elections has been a commitment in our two most recent manifestos and because, in the previous session, the measure was promoted in a member's bill by a Conservative MSP that had the support of the SNP. In respect of that, I acknowledge and pay tribute to the work of Tricia Marwick, who will speak later in the debate.

All of that pre-dates the 2007 elections fiasco, the recommendations of the Gould report and now the unanimous recommendation of the Local Government and Communities Committee on the bill. Moreover, it was not just the Conservatives and the SNP who "told you so". The previous Scottish Executive was told by no fewer than three independent committees during its eight years in office that decoupling was a sensible measure to put into effect.

First, we had the report of the commission that was chaired by Sir Neil McIntosh on local government and the Scottish Parliament, which was published in 1999. It recommended that

"the local government elections should be timed to take place at the mid-point of the Parliament."

It said that combining the two elections would

"mean that the local elections would tend always to be held under the shadow ... of the parliamentary election and that national issues will dominate local elections even more than they tend to do ... The result is to weaken the democratic mandate of local government."

Next up, only a year later, came the report of the renewing local democracy working group, which was chaired by Richard Kerley. It said:

"coincident elections would tend to reduce the electorate's focus on local government issues. Conversely, separate elections would ensure that local government issues are at the heart of local government elections: this seems to us an essential part of democracy and democratic renewal".

**Andy Kerr** rose—

**David McLetchie:** Here comes the old regime.

**Andy Kerr:** Attacking the smugness of the new partnership in the Scottish Parliament between the Tories and the SNP.

Does the member believe that every local councillor who lost his or her seat under Thatcher lost it as a direct result of his or her local ability, the fact that they were not a good councillor or the conduct of the council? Was it not simply the case that national issues prevailed in those local elections?

**David McLetchie:** In those days, the results of local elections were undoubtedly down to a mixture of the two—I fully acknowledge that—and we all know the consequences. That was recognised in the reports that the previous Scottish Executive received from the independent committees. The last one to which I referred was even chaired by a former Labour member of the City of Edinburgh Council.

That excellent advice was received from those two committees—so what happened? The advice was promptly ignored by Labour and the Liberal Democrats. Even then, that was not the end of the matter. Six years later, we had the report of the Arbuthnott commission, entitled "Putting Citizens First: Boundaries, Voting and Representation in Scotland". Yet again, after a thorough examination of the issues, the report recommended a decoupling of the Scottish Parliament and local government elections. In a remarkably prescient section of the report, given what was to come the following year, the Arbuthnott commission stated:

"decoupling the elections would reduce the complexity of voting, potentially reduce voter confusion and help keep the numbers of invalid votes to a minimum. It would also reduce administrative complexity in the planning, management and counting of the elections, and enhance the transparency of the electoral process, especially allowing attention to be focused on local issues."

Nevertheless, the report's recommendations were in vain. Still, Labour and the Liberal

Democrats would not listen. No matter how many independent committees told them to do otherwise, they persisted in the view that coincidental elections were desirable. For them, it was a case of putting citizens last. We then had the experience of 2007 and the Gould report, and—miracle of miracles—they changed their minds. We are therefore very much entitled to say, “We told you so.” In fact, just about everybody told them so. It is a pity that it took the 2007 fiasco to change their opinion.

Some of the same closed minds have tried to perpetuate the myth that there was nothing wrong with the single transferable vote system at the conjoined elections in 2007 and that all the failings were to do with how the Scottish Parliament elections were organised and the design of the ballot paper. That is totally untrue, as Duncan McNeil pointed out, given the unprecedented number of rejected ballot papers in the council elections.

All of that underlines the importance of ensuring that we do not stop simply at decoupling. It is important that we have proper voter education campaigns to ensure that, as far as possible, everyone understands how to cast a valid vote in accordance with his or her preferences. We also need an imaginative public information campaign to inform voters of the functions of local government and the importance of the services that our councils provide to communities and individuals, in an endeavour to encourage more focus on local issues in local elections. As the committee’s report makes clear, however, that is not being adequately addressed at present.

The bill has had a long gestation period, but we are finally about to do what we should have done 10 years ago. If the bill is passed, it will be another three years before we re-elect our councils. That is three years in which—finally—to get it right, to do our utmost to maximise voter participation and to give local government in Scotland its due place in the sun. I support the motion.

10:37

**Tricia Marwick (Central Fife) (SNP):** It is a personal pleasure to speak in this stage 1 debate on the decoupling of local government and Scottish Parliament elections. As David McLetchie has said, for eight long years the Labour Party and the Liberal Democrats set their faces against reason and democracy in refusing to decouple the elections. However, today we have heard no apology or admission that they were wrong, nor an admission that the coincidence of the elections contributed to the debacle of the elections in 2007.

The decoupling of the two sets of elections is a long-standing commitment of the Conservatives as

well as the Scottish National Party—I freely acknowledge that. However, it has taken an SNP Government to produce the bill, just as it took an SNP Government to abolish the tolls on the Forth and Tay bridges, to provide free school meals and to provide free prescriptions by 2011. Those are all measures that were proposed by the SNP in opposition and opposed by the previous Labour and Liberal Democrat Executive.

I never understood the stubborn refusal of Labour and the Liberal Democrats to decouple the two sets of elections. There seemed no logic to that refusal, which flew in the face of all the evidence. In 2001, I spoke in the debate when Labour and the Liberal Democrats brought to Parliament the bill to combine the two sets of elections. I said then:

“The Executive believes that the bill will increase the turnout at local elections. That is no doubt true, as parliamentary elections currently attract larger turnouts. However, such turnouts will not confer any additional democratic legitimacy on local government. ... The serious flaw in the Executive’s argument is its naive suggestion that an artificially inflated turnout provides an increased mandate for local government. It is quite clear that the reverse is true, and that will have a cost in the form of a democratic loss for the very local authorities for whom the bill is intended. The local agenda will be overshadowed and overtaken by the coverage of national elections. No member of this chamber could seriously argue that local authority issues will even surface, far less be given a decent hearing, in the press mêlée of the parliamentary election campaign. Councillors will not be able to make their case for election or re-election as they will be completely displaced from the agenda by MSPs seeking to make their case.”—[*Official Report*, 20 December 2001; c 5031.]

That was the argument for not having coincident elections, but it was rejected.

Had it only been the Opposition parties that opposed coincident elections, I might have understood the refusal of Labour and the Liberal Democrats to decouple the elections, but that was not the case. In 1999, the report of the McIntosh commission recommended that the two sets of elections should be separated and that local government elections should be held at the mid-point of the parliamentary session. The report of the renewing local democracy working group that was set up by Wendy Alexander and chaired by Richard Kerley recommended in 2000 that the two elections should be separated. In the face of all that evidence, the Executive announced that it would legislate to bring the two elections together.

In 2006, the Arbutnott commission recommended decoupling—I was going to use a quote from the commission’s report about the potential for confusion, but David McLetchie has already put it on the record.

During the passage of the Executive’s Local Governance (Scotland) Bill, which introduced

single transferable vote proportional representation, my reasoned stage 3 amendment to decouple the elections was defeated. David Mundell's proposed local government elections (Scotland) bill, which sought to decouple the elections, found support among the Scottish National Party but went no further.

Labour and the Liberal Democrats ensured that, in 2003 and 2007, the local government elections and the Scottish Parliament elections were held on the same day. The debacle of the 2007 election was, in part, caused by the insistence of Labour and the Liberal Democrats on introducing a new form of voting for the local government elections even though those elections were to be held on the same day as the Scottish Parliament elections. Everyone told them that there would be difficulties in introducing a new form of local government elections in that manner, as little information about the changes would get through to the voters, which would lead to confusion. As David McLetchie so eloquently said, they were telt.

As the Gould report made clear, separating the two elections will minimise the potential for voter confusion. We are convinced that combined elections are a disservice not only to local councils and candidates but to the electorate. The disservice that Labour and the Liberal Democrats did to local government over the eight years deserves at least an apology, although I notice that the Liberal Democrats have put forward as speakers in this debate two members who were not even in the Parliament from 1999 to 2007.

**Alison McInnes (North East Scotland) (LD):** I should point out that the two Liberal Democrat members who are present today are the party's local government spokespeople.

**Tricia Marwick:** I have no doubt that that is the case, but Iain Smith was the local government spokesperson who set his face against the decoupling of the local and parliamentary elections, and I would have loved to have heard him say in today's debate, "I am sorry, Mrs Marwick. I am sorry, Mr McLetchie. All of the arguments you made were absolutely right and I was wrong." It would have been nice to have heard that apology, but it is no surprise that he is not here to offer it.

It is important that we go forward, but there should be an admission of guilt on the part of the guilty people. I am delighted that an SNP Government has introduced this bill, and it goes without saying that the minister will have my whole-hearted support at 5 o'clock.

10:44

**James Kelly (Glasgow Rutherglen) (Lab):** I welcome the opportunity to take part in this

debate, and I support the general principles of the bill. It is important that we learn the lessons of 2007, but we should also look to the future rather than rehearse the arguments that were made in the run-up to the 2007 elections, as some other speakers have done.

There is no doubt that elections are very much at the heart of politics and close to politicians. I participated in my first election campaign in 1982, and I have always enjoyed elections. I enjoy the process of engaging with voters, competing with the other political parties and the build-up to election day itself, which is the climax of the process, when people turn out and vote and the results are declared.

It was, therefore, a matter of great pride to me when I stood for the first time as a constituency candidate in the Scottish Parliament elections in 2007. That pride diminished somewhat as I witnessed the events of the day. I stood in polling stations and watched voters being confused by the number of ballot papers that they had to complete and the different electoral systems that they had to deal with, and I saw them leaving the voting booths and being horrified when they were told that they had not completed their ballot papers correctly. As the day and the night unfolded, it became clear that there were thousands of uncounted ballot papers in the Scottish Parliament elections and that, as others have said, there was an unusually high proportion of spoiled ballot papers in the local government elections.

Clearly, lessons had to be learned. From that point of view, I think that decoupling the elections is the right thing to do, as that will allow voters to be clear about the elections that they are participating in. Following on from that, it is logical that we will have to introduce a new cycle of elections, and it is correct that the next local government elections should be in 2012 and 2017 and that, thereafter, they should revert to a traditional four-year cycle.

There has been a great deal of discussion about voter turnout. One risk of decoupling the elections concerns the impact on voter turnout in 2012. We should remember that 2012 will be the third year in a row that the public will have participated in elections: this year, we have the European elections; next year, we will probably have a UK general election; and the following year, we will have Scottish Parliament elections. I should correct myself—that means that the elections in 2012 will be the fourth time in a row that people will have been asked to vote, but that just strengthens my point.

It is therefore important that we address the issue of voter education and try to increase voter turnout. Having witnessed the STV system at work in 2007 and in subsequent council by-elections, I



am clear that there is still some confusion about the system. I have seen voters appearing at the polling station a bit worried about the process of casting their vote in this new system. We have to overcome those fears by embarking on a proper programme of voter education.

There are also important issues about the differences in turnout across the country. I recently watched on BBC Parliament some of the rerun of the coverage of the 1979 general election—

**David McLetchie:** One of the best.

**James Kelly:** I know, it was a really disappointing day.

One fascinating fact about that election is that, in some constituencies, the turnout was close to 80 per cent. I will resist the temptation to make a comment about Margaret Thatcher but, over the past 30 years, turnouts have decreased somewhat. In some areas of the country, particularly those areas that have high rates of social deprivation, there are extremely low turnouts. That means that only certain groups of people are participating and having their voices heard. We have to make sure that we reach out to the silent minority.

We must address the issue of the ordering of names on the ballot paper, which Andy Kerr talked about. There is statistical and anecdotal evidence that those who appeared higher up the ballot paper had an advantage over someone with whom they were running on a joint party ticket but whose name appeared lower down the list. For example, if a party had a Crawford/Whitton ticket, the Crawford candidate would be favoured. As we approach 2012, we do not want there to be a rush of people changing their name to “Anderson”, say, in order to appear further up the ballot paper. That is a serious issue, and I ask the minister to say in his summing-up speech whether it will be dealt with in the bill or in further legislation.

Important issues are at stake, at the heart of which is the enhancement of the democratic process. I support the general principles of the bill.

10:50

**John Wilson (Central Scotland) (SNP):** Every member will have their own experiences of the Scottish Parliament and local government elections of May 2007. Many people might assume that, by definition, because they were elected and as a result hold a place in their respective chambers, everything was fine in those elections. To make such an assumption is to do the voting public a gross disservice.

The Local Government and Communities Committee’s report on the bill states clearly that the elections that were held on 3 May 2007 gave

serious cause for concern because of their creation of fault lines in engagement with voters. The number of rejected ballot papers in the 2007 local government elections was significantly higher in comparison with the corresponding numbers in the 2003 and 1999 elections, although we must bear in mind that the 2007 local government elections were held under an STV system.

The responses to the Scottish Government’s consultation show that there is a high level of support for decoupling local government and Scottish Parliament elections to address apparent voter confusion. As other speakers have said, there is a crossover between the conclusions of the Gould report and the research that was conducted by other organisations. The Gould report was quite clear in advocating that Scottish Parliament and local government elections be separated. The high number of rejected ballot papers in 2007 caused much concern about the integrity of the process. That issue is dealt with in studies by the Electoral Reform Society, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation and the Scotland Office, and in the Scottish Government’s response to the Gould report.

The important principle as far as the electoral process is concerned is that the two sets of elections should not be held on the same day. In a vote on 10 January 2008, the Parliament expressed its will that local government and Scottish Parliament elections should be decoupled.

As was stated when the Parliament debated the Gould report on 9 October 2008, if we wish to provide some background to the debate, we need only examine “Scottish Council Elections 2007: Results and Analysis” by Bochel and Denver, published by the University of Lincoln in 2007. That research states that there was an increase in the number of rejected ballot papers in the 2007 local government elections compared with previous local government elections, although the increase was not as great as that in the 2007 Scottish Parliament election. In the opinion of Bochel and Denver, given that most people were unfamiliar with the use of an STV system in multimember wards, a rejected ballot paper rate of 1.83 per cent did not seem unreasonable.

The fact that the evidence that was given to the committee centred on turnout is reflected in its report. In his evidence, Tom Aitchison of SOLACE noted that pre-2007 returning officers were split down the middle: some believed that decoupling would allow local issues to be focused on at local government elections, whereas others argued that the two sets of elections should continue to be held on the same day.

The committee’s key recommendation is that the UK and Scottish Governments should continue

with their efforts to improve levels of voter registration. I note that a public campaign is under way to get voters to register. In his evidence to the committee, Tom Aitchison said that between 3 and 5 per cent of potential voters do not register to vote. In paragraph 48 on page 10 of its report, the committee mentions the need

“to educate voters about the STV voting system and that such campaigns should be adequately funded”.

I will not go into detail on the weighted inclusive Gregory method of calculating the distribution of seats or votes—I thought that Mr McLetchie would deal with that.

**Bruce Crawford:** Can the member clarify whether he is referring to the non-specific or the specific Gregory proposal?

**John Wilson:** I will leave that to the minister to decide.

The committee's report refers to the clear linkages between voter information at polling stations and e-counting. I welcome the fact that the committee broadly agrees with the Scottish Government's intention to decouple the elections, even though it provides a few caveats about the associated financial costs falling to local authorities.

I welcome the committee's report and the broad principles that it contains. I record my thanks to committee members, clerks and those who provided evidence for their efforts to ensure that we have a robust voting system for future local government elections. I welcome the opportunity to scrutinise the bill, and I urge all members to support its general principles at decision time. I look forward to future local government elections in Scotland being stand-alone elections.

10:56

**Mary Mulligan (Linlithgow) (Lab):** As we have heard, the bill has two policy objectives: to decouple Scottish Parliament and local government elections by moving local government elections to midway between Scottish Parliament elections; and to make post-election voter information available in greater detail. Like many other members, I will mainly address the first objective, but I put on record my support for the second—although I echo the minister's caution about the need to retain voter confidentiality.

As many members have said, the Parliament has already debated decoupling, and I readily admit that I did not support it then. I still do not believe that having two elections on the same day need be a disaster. In fact, some local authorities that support decoupling are nevertheless seeking to hold by-elections on the same day as this year's European elections. As the committee discussed,

future council elections could coincide with Westminster or European Parliament elections. As we heard in evidence, even in cases in which such elections are a few weeks apart, problems could be caused, both for the organisation of the elections and for voters. However, I was pleased to hear that witnesses from SOLACE, the Society of Local Authority Lawyers and Administrators in Scotland and the Association of Electoral Administrators are already considering such eventualities.

Although I might still not be convinced that decoupling is a good move, I am convinced that it is now unavoidable. I do not need to go back over the debacle that occurred in 2007, to which references have already been made, as I am sure that no member will ever forget it. The fact that some voters went to the polling station, cast their vote and then found that it was not counted resulted in a huge loss of confidence in the electoral system. The risk that voter turnout would fall further as a result of that lack of confidence had to be addressed. The proposed change shows the electorate that we are taking their concerns seriously and, most important, that we have acted.

Once I had accepted that decoupling should go ahead, my next concern was that the bill should address any problems that might be associated with it. I have mentioned the possibility of other elections occurring at the same time as local government elections, and I appreciate that that issue is being considered. However, I am also concerned about the funding of a separate set of elections. It is clear that savings could be made when the two sets of elections were held on the same day. The minister has presented to Parliament a financial memorandum that puts the cost of holding separate elections at between £4.5 million and £5 million, but I would appreciate it if he could confirm my understanding—which I expect is that of other committee members—that that figure does not include the cost of the e-counting system.

**Bruce Crawford:** I can confirm that that figure does not include the cost of the e-counting system. I can also confirm that, after discussions with local authority representatives and people who are involved in electoral administration, they have accepted the argument that local government's baseline already includes £1.9 million for that, although it falls into the next spending review period. We are committed to funding the e-counting system.

**Mary Mulligan:** I thank the minister for that intervention.

The committee was clear that the cost of e-counting cannot be discussed in detail at this stage because of commercial confidentiality

issues, particularly if there is likely to be a bidding process. I accept that up to a point, but I am pleased that the minister recognises that the issue still has to be discussed.

I agreed with the minister when he told the committee that the STV system requires e-counting. However, we should not forget that 2012—which is when local government elections will take place if the bill is passed—is also the year of the Greater London Authority elections, and it would be unfortunate if they were used to inflate the cost of e-counting or if they created problems in the right equipment and personnel being put in place. Committee witnesses had obviously considered those issues, but I hope that the minister provides more reassurance in that respect.

It is essential that the Scottish Government clarifies how the costs of local government elections will be apportioned between it and local authorities. The Finance Committee was right to raise concerns about talk of savings. After all, if we are to restore voters' confidence in the electoral process, we have to get things right in 2012, and any attempt to make some inconsequential savings risks sending out the wrong message.

As for the issue of voter information, which has been mentioned, it is vital that voters understand the STV system. As other members have pointed out, mistakes were clearly made on ballot papers in 2007, and some votes were counted only after a certain amount of flexibility was allowed. People need more information, and I hope that the proposal to introduce information staff at polling stations, which I think is a good move, will be supported.

I have acknowledged that decoupling is one way of being seen to respond to the problems of 2007. Asking people to come out and vote more often will require electoral registration officers and the political parties to put in more work; after all, we all have a responsibility to guard against further falls in turnout at elections. Although I must stress that the proposal needs to be properly resourced, I support the bill's general principles.

11:02

**Alasdair Allan (Western Isles) (SNP):** People's faith in individual politicians can be undermined by many things—indeed, the potential in that respect is almost limitless—but their faith in the whole democratic process can be undermined by only a relatively small number of doubts. One fear is that all politicians are on the take, and the other is that their vote has not been counted. As far as the first fear is concerned, I do not need to elaborate on the disaster movie that is unfolding elsewhere. As

for the second, the experience of 2007 is certainly instructive.

We have rehearsed many times both here and in committee the huge organisational problems that occurred in May 2007, when the local government elections took place on the same day as the Scottish Parliament elections. The bill seeks to restore public confidence in the electoral system by making the crucial simplification of decoupling local and national elections and ensuring that they take place on different days.

Although the bill's primary concern is local government elections, I believe that, given what happened on May 2007, it will have a significant impact on the running of parliamentary elections. For example, in my Western Isles constituency, 446 of the more than 13,000 parliamentary votes that were cast were spoiled; in other words, 3.27 per cent of those who tried to vote had their votes disallowed. For the local government elections, the figure was 310. As in other areas, the amount of votes rejected in 2003 was, in comparison, tiny. For example, in 2003, only 74 ballot papers were rejected in the Scottish Parliament elections and only 78 in the council elections.

The Local Government and Communities Committee took a lot of evidence on the very significant discrepancy between the 2003 and 2007 elections. Although the coincidence of council and national elections on the same day does not explain the whole problem, it certainly explains part of it. In 2007, many votes were disallowed because those who were casting them simply did not understand the difference between the two voting systems. That said, it is interesting to note that the 4.25 per cent figure for rejected constituency parliamentary ballot papers in Scotland as a whole was significantly greater than the percentage in the Western Isles, which perhaps confirms that, as many of us already knew, the people of the Western Isles constitute an unusually politically sophisticated electorate. I am therefore happy to support these moves to decouple local and parliamentary elections and to move back local elections until, eventually, they are held at the midpoint of the parliamentary term.

To those who fear that, cut loose from national elections, council elections will suffer from low turnout, I have to say that I do not accept the argument that election turnout should be boosted at all costs. We desperately need to revive our local economy, and that cannot be achieved without a genuine public debate about local rather than merely national political issues. Holding elections on the same day simply to inflate turnout artificially creates a democratic deficit as local issues are crowded out by the coverage of parliamentary elections. I believe that there is a consensus on that view; indeed, I am glad to see

that Mr Tolson has become part of that happy consensus, no matter which tortuous and convoluted route he has taken to get there. The current coupling of local and Scottish parliamentary elections means that local elections receive almost no media coverage in their own right and the record of local councils goes almost undiscussed.

I welcome proposals to publish voting information from local government elections in more detail. Under the proposed measure, individual votes will remain anonymous and extremely useful information will be made public.

I hope that members will endorse the bill's principles in order to simplify the process and make Scotland's local government elections more transparent. If the experience of 2007 is not enough of a reason for decoupling elections, I do not know what is. However, it should be said that the picture in 2007 was not one of universal chaos. In fact, the greatest immediate problem that arose in the Western Isles as the votes were being counted was that the helicopter that was due to pick up the ballot boxes from Barra and Uist did not leave Inverness because of erroneous reports of fog, delaying the result by 12 hours. We can and should constantly strive for the perfect electoral system—and we shall have reached perfection if we can devise a system that also provides accurate weather forecasts. Until then, the bill provides a very valuable start; I support its principles.

11:08

**Alison McInnes (North East Scotland) (LD):** This interesting debate has highlighted a number of issues that need to be addressed. First of all, though, I thank the Local Government and Communities Committee for its report.

As Jim Tolson made clear, the Liberal Democrats will support the bill's general principles. Last year, I said that, on balance, we did not support decoupling, but following a debate and a change in policy at our most recent party conference, and primarily in response to the clear view of the majority of our councillors, we will not oppose the bill's principles.

I acknowledge that, between them, Arbuthnott, Kerley, McIntosh and Gould have provided a body of evidence to support the view that, in the words of the Gould report,

"combined elections are ... a disservice to the local councils and candidates"

and

"to the electorate"

and that they should be decoupled. Unison and the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities also

believe that a greater focus on local issues would be advantageous in increasing the scrutiny of local government and advancing the understanding of its role. However, as Mary Mulligan made clear in her thoughtful speech, the choice between combined or stand-alone elections is far more finely balanced than some members have suggested this morning.

Having been a councillor for 15 years, I can say that I was happy to have combined elections, because national and local elections are, after all, intertwined. Indeed, when I was canvassing, it was always clear that council issues were at the forefront of people's minds when they were considering how to vote. What is equally clear is that any move towards decoupling involves a trade-off, which, in this case, is most likely to be a decline in voter turnout.

The Liberal Democrats are proud of the electoral reform that introduced STV, which has resulted in a number of welcome changes, and we feel that any additional changes must strengthen and advance the modernisation of Scotland's local democracy. The electoral process must be credible, fair and transparent.

I would like to hear the minister say more about what he proposes to do to ensure that the decline in voter turnout is not simply accepted as inevitable.

**Bruce Crawford:** Will Alison McInnes give us some of the Liberals' ideas for increasing voter turnout?

**Alison McInnes:** I am sure that there will be plenty of opportunities to do that at another point.

The Scottish Government

"recognises that moving the local government elections will mean more needs to be invested in improving turnout, and there are a range of options to explore which could have a positive affect, including for example increased voter awareness campaigns and examining alternative methods of voting."

I hope that gimmicky new ways of voting will not be considered, because that would risk further confusion. I am not persuaded of their merits.

In responding to the consultation on decoupling, Fife Council said:

"The Council are particularly concerned at the possible impact on turnout arising from a decoupling of the elections"

and

"are keen to ensure along with the Scottish Government that there is an investment in improving turnout and a range of options be explored".

The bill does not address that at all, which is surely a significant shortcoming.

Paragraph 25 of the committee's report says:

"The Committee looks forward to ... examining ways in which voter turnout can be increased."

The minister has outlined some ideas on that. I hope that those ideas will be thoroughly scrutinised and that conclusions will be reached well in advance of the elections. That work is urgent.

The Liberal Democrats are concerned that additional costs could be forced on local authorities as a result of the bill. That must not be allowed to happen. The minister has said:

"there will inevitably need to be a centrally-funded awareness campaign from the Scottish Government in 2012."

However, he stopped short of quantifying the funding for that. He went on to say:

"We will need to discuss with local authorities what amounts they are prepared to commit to the 2012 elections."—[*Official Report, Local Government and Communities Committee*, 1 April 2009; c 1894.]

It is wholly inadequate to propose decoupling the elections without guaranteeing that the extra costs will be met.

SOLACE raised concerns about the ability of the printing and e-counting industries to deliver technical support, given the number of elections that will be held in May 2012, when there will be the London mayoral elections and the local government elections in England as well as the proposed local government elections in Scotland. I therefore strongly support the committee's recommendation in paragraph 48 of its report.

The electoral process must be strong, fair and transparent. Liberal Democrats want to see strong, effective and efficient local councils with clear mandates. We do not want to burden local authorities with extra costs, so adequate funding for the running of the elections and awareness-raising campaigns must be provided up front.

11:12

**Gavin Brown (Lothians) (Con):** The bill is vital. I do not think that the Parliament will get great credit for introducing it or for getting things right, but there would be catastrophic consequences for all of us if we got things wrong and the elections were not decoupled.

Decoupling the local government elections and Scottish Parliament elections has long been dearly held Conservative party policy. However, I will not dwell on that, as my friend David McLetchie probably used up the entire gloating quota not just for today but probably for next week and the week after that as well.

**Andy Kerr:** We will remind the Conservatives of that.

**Gavin Brown:** There are things that we can remind Mr Kerr about, too. We will come to them later.

There is overwhelming support for decoupling. I understand that there was no division in the committee on supporting the general principles of the bill. We have heard about recommendations from the McIntosh report, the Kerley report, the Arbuthnott commission and, obviously, the Gould report. Individual local authorities, COSLA and Unison want the elections to be decoupled. Some 32 of the 33 submissions to the Scottish Government's consultation said that the move would be good and should happen.

The Liberal Democrats' submission was, of course, the only submission that said that decoupling should not happen. However, I am pleased to hear that they now support the general principles of the bill; indeed, they voted in favour of it at their spring conference. The Minister for Parliamentary Business may wish to get the bill to stage 3 as quickly as possible, so that we can pass it before the Liberal Democrats' summer conference, in case they take a different view at it. It would be nice to pass the bill with support from everyone in the Parliament.

We have heard about the benefits of decoupling. It will mean less voter confusion. We have heard the figures. Some 146,000 ballot papers were rejected in the Scottish Parliament elections, and more than 40,000 ballot papers were rejected in the local government elections. Let us not forget that, although the figure for the local government elections was not as disastrous as that for the Scottish Parliament elections, those 40,000 papers represented a three-fold increase in the number of rejected ballot papers.

Gould was clear about less voter confusion being a benefit of decoupling the elections. On page 36 of his report, he stated:

"The combination of elections in Scotland added complexity to the voting process."

He also said:

"Another problem with combining these elections has to do with the confusion it creates among the electorate ... it is clear that some voters were confused by the combined elections using two electoral systems and two ballot paper marking requirements."

It is clear that we can reduce voter confusion by decoupling the elections.

Several members have touched on another benefit of decoupling the elections—it would give local government greater prominence. The local government elections have been overshadowed by the Scottish Parliament elections. I would not want to be a local government candidate in Kirkintilloch, for example, when David Whitton is running the show. There is no chance of getting

any coverage when somebody like that is running their campaign. Similarly, I would not want to be a council candidate in the Edinburgh Pentlands constituency trying to compete with David McLetchie for headlines.

In all seriousness, it is critical that local issues are raised in local election campaigns. To pick up on a comment that Alasdair Allan made, the council administration's record has to be discussed during a local election campaign. I suspect that the national press will still focus on national issues—that point was reasonably made by Andy Kerr—but local newspapers in Edinburgh and Glasgow, for example, are more likely to focus on council administrations in those places if only local government elections are taking place. The profiles of candidates and councillors will be raised and the electorate will be engaged on a deeper level. Ultimately, our councils will be made more accountable.

Some disadvantages of decoupling have been pointed out. Of course, voter turnout is the potential Achilles' heel of decoupling. Most members have quite reasonably raised that issue. However, it is important not to focus only on the overall voter turnout figures. Gould made a point well when he said:

"In essence, the local government elections are not simply about ensuring a reasonable number of voters show up at the polls on polling day. More important is that they engage with the campaign in a meaningful manner and make a knowledgeable decision on their ballot paper."

That is important. It is also worth noting that voter confidence in the system is low, and if we do not go ahead with decoupling, we will risk a far bigger drop in voter turnout at the local government elections.

Decoupling the elections has been a Scottish Conservative policy for some time, and it has gained momentum. After 2007, the elections simply have to be decoupled. I am pleased that all the parties have indicated that that will happen. We need to decouple the elections as soon as possible, so that we can get the education systems in place well in advance of 2012 and so that the elections in 2011 and 2012 are a big success.

11:18

**David Whitton (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (Lab):** It is clear that we are talking about democracy in action. The "Oxford English Dictionary" says that democracy is

"Government by the people; that form of government in which the sovereign power resides in the people as a whole, and is exercised either directly by them ... or by officers elected by them".

Others take a slightly different view. The English playwright and philosopher Bertrand Russell said:

"Democracy is the process by which people choose the person who'll get the blame."

The former American President Woodrow Wilson said:

"I believe in democracy, because it releases the energies of every human being."

However, Winston Churchill, who was never short of an acerbic comment or two, said:

"The best argument against democracy is a five minute conversation with the average voter."

I find myself disagreeing, not for the first time, with a former Conservative Prime Minister.

In preparing for today's debate, I typed words to do with voting into an internet search. The results were remarkable. For example, 57.7 million results were listed under "voting register", 14 million under "voting UK", 12 million under "voting systems" and 8 million under "voting age". I also found an intriguing list of voting methods. John Wilson referred to that issue, but I found more than two. I found Copeland's method, the Kemeny-Young method, the Schulze method and even the Bucklin voting system, which is named after an American senator from Colorado. Those are of no concern to us today, as we are considering the voting method in the Scottish Parliament and local government elections, which might come to be known as the Crawford method—who knows?

**Bruce Crawford:** That is giving me ideas.

**David Whitton:** As long as it has not given Mrs Crawford ideas, the minister will be okay.

The minister called for improved administration of the elections, which was a key part of the Gould report. Nobody would disagree with that. Duncan McNeil, the convener of the Local Government and Communities Committee, pointed out the cost implications of decoupling, which is an important point that must be borne in mind. We need a clear commitment from Mr Crawford on that. In response to Mary Mulligan, he said that there is already £1.9 million, but the financial memorandum estimates the cost of decoupling to be almost £5 million. I see that the minister disagrees—he will have his chance to sum up in a moment. The Scottish Government provides money to local authorities. The cost of running each decoupled election will be the same as the cost of running a combined election, so a clear commitment on cash is necessary. Mr Tolson made that point, too.

Like Gavin Brown, I note that, although the Liberals were opposed to decoupling, we now hear from Mr Tolson that their party conference has changed the party's view. That is a bit like the

Liberals' income tax policy—it is all over the place, but a late conversion is always welcome. Mr McLetchie boasted of having the gift of second sight—"I told you so," he said. However, the people of Scotland told the Tories not to introduce the poll tax to Scotland, but they did not listen. I distinctly remember the same Mr McLetchie stating 10 years ago that he wished that devolution and the creation of the Scottish Parliament had not happened, yet only last week the same Mr McLetchie—an MSP these past 10 years—appeared on television saying that devolution had given back to the Tories their electoral credibility.

Tricia Marwick can always be relied on to launch an attack against the Labour Party, and she did so again today. She demanded apologies from the Labour and Liberal parties, yet there was no hint of an apology for the SNP's role in the confusion on polling day 2007. The Gould report specifically commented on misleading party descriptions, so perhaps the minister or Mrs Marwick will apologise for the use of the description "Alex Salmond for First Minister" on ballot papers, which was blatant manipulation.

I do not agree entirely with Mrs Marwick that local issues got lost in the joint elections of 2007. A Liberal plan to impose fortnightly bin collections in East Dunbartonshire was a major issue in my constituency—sad to report to Mr Tolson and Alison McInnes that the result was nine Liberal seats lost. I understand that the SNP-led administration in Fife is proposing a similar plan. Mrs Marwick has been warned.

**Jim Tolson:** Will the member take an intervention?

**Tricia Marwick:** Will the member give way?

**David Whitton:** They are queuing up to make interventions. I will take Mrs Marwick.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** I do not want to get into bin collections.

**Tricia Marwick:** On the issue of bin collections, David Whitton's remark is totally and absolutely untrue, and I would appreciate it if he withdrew it.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** Mr Whitton, carry on speaking about the bill, please.

**David Whitton:** If the allegation is untrue, of course I withdraw it. Clearly, the SNP has learned lessons from East Dunbartonshire.

In case SNP members think that I always attack them, I say that Alasdair Allan gave a thoughtful speech on the reasons why we had so many spoiled ballot papers. That issue probably warrants further investigation.

Labour supports the decoupling of the elections as proposed in the bill. We support the move to

hold the next two council elections in 2012 and 2017, and we agree that ministers should have the power to make orders to allow the publication of electoral data to polling station level. However, if fewer than 200 votes are cast, the district should be exempt.

11:25

**Bruce Crawford:** I thank Duncan McNeil and the other members of the Local Government and Communities Committee for their positive approach. I am glad that Duncan McNeil repeated some of the key themes that I addressed in my opening speech. Andy Kerr was his usual consensual and thoughtful self. Mr McLetchie and Mrs Marwick gave an accurate historical perspective, particularly in relation to the road to Damascus that former members of the Scottish Executive have travelled. Jim Tolson was Jim Tolson. Mr Whitton was stuck in his wheelie bin and, perhaps after his speech, that is the best place for him.

Mr McLetchie and Mr Kerr raised issues to do with turnout, although from slightly different perspectives. David McLetchie talked about the number of spoiled papers in the local government elections. The figure was 1.83 per cent, but if we compare that with Northern Ireland, where the figure was 2.1 per cent, we might think that the situation was better in Scotland. However, the Local Government and Communities Committee was right to comment that the figure masks the point that some papers were marked with a single X. It is important that we consider those issues in the work that we do during the summer. The Government will issue a further consultation in the summer on information campaigns and ballot designs.

Andy Kerr was concerned about the ballot paper. I can tell him that the Electoral Commission is working on proposals for ballot paper design. We will take that into account in our consultation in the summer, along with any other administrative recommendations that arise.

**Alison McInnes:** Will the minister include the Royal National Institute of Blind People in any discussions about the design of ballot papers?

**Bruce Crawford:** To be fair to the previous Executive, the RNIB and other groups representing disabled people or communities that are challenged in accessing the voting process were consulted previously. We will do exactly the same.

E-counting was mentioned several times during the debate. STV elections require e-counting if the results of a full-scale election are to be delivered in an acceptable timescale. It would not be appropriate to wait for a week for the results from

a manual counting system, as happens in some parts of Ireland. In 2012, e-counting will therefore be necessary. In fact, we will have to use that method whether or not the elections are decoupled.

Strictly speaking, the e-counting proposals are not related directly to the bill, but I will make a couple of points on the issue. We will not know the cost of the e-counting system until we know the outcome of the tender process. The cost will fall in the next spending review period, but we are committed to funding e-counting for STV local elections. Details of where the money will come from must be left to the next spending review, when the issue will be the subject of discussions between the Government and COSLA at the appropriate time. We will provide information on the costs of e-counting as soon as possible after the procurement process, including information on the split between local authorities and the Government.

We have started discussions with the electoral management board for Scotland and we are planning the e-counting process. There will be a joint process at every stage, from planning through procurement and on to implementation. I met the convener of the board, Tom Aitchison, last week to discuss e-counting and a range of other election issues. As I am sure all members are aware, the e-counting system must be tested thoroughly—perhaps to destruction—before the next election.

**David Whitton:** So that we are absolutely clear, are you saying that the Government will meet the costs of e-counting for local elections, even though the bill says that it might cost £5 million? We know that we are going into the next spending review, but are you giving a commitment to provide local authorities with what it costs to carry out electronic counting?

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** Remarks should be made through the chair.

**David Whitton:** Sorry.

**Bruce Crawford:** Let me be clear on costs: the £4.5 million to £5 million relates to the cost of decoupling; the e-counting process is separate from that. As I said, the Government is committed to funding e-counting for local STV elections. I could not be plainer about our position.

Several issues were raised about the wider costs. The financial memorandum identifies areas of additional cost that will fall to local authorities as a result of the provisions of the bill—not including e-counting—and estimates those costs to be between £4.5 million and £5 million, of which £1.9 million is assumed already in local authority budgets. The estimates have been agreed with the electoral management board for Scotland, which includes members of COSLA. The Finance

Committee called for evidence on estimates, and the local authorities that responded all confirmed that the estimates were reasonable. However, expenditure on the 2012 local government elections will fall in the next spending review period. The estimates will form the basis of discussions with local authorities when the time comes to consider the next spending round. The Government is committed to funding the additional cost of decoupling, but I cannot say any more on that at this stage, because the funding details must be left to the spending review.

**Cathie Craigie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (Lab):** Unlike other members who have spoken this morning, I am not wholly convinced that decoupling the elections is the right way to proceed. However, I am prepared to support the general principles of the bill to allow further discussions. Will the minister assure the chamber that, before stage 3, we will have full details of the financial implications for local and national Government should the bill be passed?

**Bruce Crawford:** I do not know where Cathie Craigie was during the earlier part of the debate, but I cannot make it plainer than I have done already.

**Cathie Craigie:** I was here.

**Bruce Crawford:** If she was here, it is obvious that she was not listening—I am not going to repeat the information yet again.

As the convener of the Local Government and Communities Committee and John Wilson commented, today's debate has focused in great detail on voter turnout. As I stressed in my opening speech, we recognise the importance of improving turnout—we all have a role in that. Voter turnout figures compare the number of people who vote with the number who registered to vote. I say to Mr McNeil that I share the committee's concern that not all of those who are eligible to vote are on the voting register, and so the real turnout figures are likely to be worse than recorded at present.

It is important to know the true position before we move on to improve overall turnout. I agree with the committee that increasing the number of people who are registered to vote is important. Registration is reserved to the Westminster Government, but we will work with it to find ways to improve levels of voter registration. That will cost money, and we will need to consider the funding of registration work with local authorities and Westminster. Funding for electoral registration makes up part of the Scottish Government's budget allocation from Westminster; the element to cover registration is passed on to local authorities as part of their settlement, but it is not ring fenced. That was one of the questions raised with me during discussion of the bill in committee.



All members have spoken about turnout. As I have outlined, the Government will work with the committee to try to improve turnout. We also need to work with the electoral management board, the Parliament and the Electoral Commission. Voter turnout is a problem for everyone, and we all have a role to play. Alison McInnes said that we should not use gimmicky ideas. I say to her that that does not prevent us from using our imaginations to improve turnout. Perhaps members on the Liberal front bench would like to think about that. For example, we could suggest to employers that they put reminders to vote in employees' pay slips or put messages on screen savers that say, "Today is voting day." With imagination, lots of different methods could be used. Although they might be a wee bit gimmicky, they could make a difference to turnout. I am not saying that we will definitely do the things that I mentioned, but we need to chuck into the basket everything that we possibly can to try to make a difference.

**Duncan McNeil:** The committee and the minister agree that we need to use imagination to maximise voter turnout. Has he applied his imagination to how he can work with the committee to examine what happens in other countries, which might have better systems to engage young people, for example? What other examples can he share with us? How does he see the Government and the committee working on the issue in the coming weeks and months?

**Bruce Crawford:** That is a good question that I am more than happy to address. The Government and the committee can do a great deal jointly, whether it is holding joint seminars or offering people opportunities to speak to us in joint evidence-taking sessions. There is no reason why a parliamentary committee and the Government cannot work together.

When I read about Denmark's voting systems, I was struck by how it regularly gets its turnout as high as 85 per cent. I looked into why that happens, and found that Denmark involves its young people at a much earlier stage, not just in politics but in civic life and volunteering. We have to start from an early base when trying to change voter turnout in this country, although it might take a generation before we get there. The most interesting statistic about Denmark in that context is about the level of support for political parties. Denmark is about the same size as Scotland, and its biggest political party has a membership of 65,000. The Labour Party in Scotland and the SNP together cannot manage such a membership. In fact, I doubt whether all of us in this Parliament could manage it together, although we might not be far off. As Duncan McNeil said, we can take a lesson from other countries in how to drive up voter turnout.

**David Whitton:** Just to help the minister with his imagination, I tell him that we have a good voter education programme in this Parliament, with primary and secondary school pupils visiting practically every day. Perhaps an element could be included in that programme to encourage visiting pupils to cast their vote at 18.

**Bruce Crawford:** We should try to bring on to the menu everything that we possibly can to see what works—there is no question about that.

**Tricia Marwick:** Will the minister give way?

**Bruce Crawford:** Certainly, but I have some closing remarks to make, so I will have to watch my time.

**Tricia Marwick:** Does the minister agree that if we want to engage youngsters at school, one way would be to reduce the voting age to 16, thereby engaging young people in civic education when it actually matters, rather than waiting until they leave school before giving them the vote?

**David McLetchie:** No.

**Bruce Crawford:** Unlike Mr McLetchie, whom I hear grumbling about voting at 16, the Scottish National Party has been wholly committed to voting at 16 for a very long time. Indeed, had we the right to debate the franchise and voting age in this Parliament, we would have been able to introduce as part of the bill reducing the voting age to 16. I am grateful to Tricia Marwick for her intervention.

This morning's debate has shown that there is general support for the bill. That reflects the supportive comments that we received in response to the two Government consultations on decoupling and voter information. The events of 2007 were a cause for concern for all of us who believe in democracy and the right of the electorate to participate in elections, safe in the knowledge that their vote will be counted. It is right that we learn from the problems of two years ago, but it is also right that we move on. The bill and this morning's debate demonstrate that we are moving on.

Decoupling will remove the potential for confusion in the polling booth, and will make it clear to the voter who and what they are voting for. It should also give prominence to local elections, which should matter to local people and be determined on local issues. Our saying this morning in Parliament that we want to strengthen the mandate for local politicians is a healthy sign.

The second strand of the bill relates to voter information. The bill will not affect the right of the individual to vote in a secret ballot. However, the bill's measures will allow us in the political parties to increase through our actions ballot numbers and turnout. We should be able to manage our

processes better as a result of that information. I am grateful to everyone who has taken part in this debate. It has been a very constructive morning.

## **Scottish Local Government (Elections) Bill: Financial Resolution**

11:40

**The Presiding Officer (Alex Fergusson):** The next item of business is consideration of motion S3M-3629, in the name of John Swinney, on the Scottish Local Government (Elections) Bill financial resolution.

*Motion moved,*

That the Parliament, for the purposes of any Act of the Scottish Parliament resulting from the Scottish Local Government (Elections) Bill, agrees to any increase in expenditure of a kind referred to in paragraph 3(b)(iii) of Rule 9.12 of the Parliament's Standing Orders arising in consequence of the Act.—[*Bruce Crawford.*]

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

## Question Time

### SCOTTISH EXECUTIVE

#### General Questions

11:40

**The Presiding Officer (Alex Fergusson):** Question 1 was not lodged.

#### Town Centre Regeneration Fund

**2. Jamie Hepburn (Central Scotland) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government when it expects the first tranche of funds from the town centre regeneration fund to be disbursed. (S3O-6952)

**The Minister for Housing and Communities (Alex Neil):** We aim to complete the first tranche of town centre regeneration fund assessments around late July, with a view to releasing offers of grant to successful applicants soon after that. Disbursement of funds will vary by project.

**Jamie Hepburn:** Does the minister agree that the very process of applying for those funds is of benefit to any towns that choose to do so, because it encourages them to think about how their area can best be improved? Does he agree that towns should also seek to build on such plans by identifying a range of funding for growth and regeneration?

**Alex Neil:** I agree with the member entirely. The process helps people to develop a vision for their town centre. I hope that when people make applications they do not just look at individual projects that might qualify for funding but use the opportunity to consider the longer-term vision for their towns and town centres. I know that the member has a special interest in Cumbernauld, where, I am sure, people will take that opportunity.

**Patricia Ferguson (Glasgow Maryhill) (Lab):** The minister is aware of my keen interest in the town centre regeneration fund, particularly given that it might affect Maryhill and Possilpark in my constituency. I realise that, at this point, the minister will not want to commit himself to particular projects that might or might not be funded. However, given the undoubted popularity of the fund, have the minister and his colleagues considered—at this admittedly early stage—the possibility of the fund being continued into future years?

**Alex Neil:** It is too early for us to consider that prospect, but if the member asks me the question again when we get into the budget cycle, I might be able to give her a more definitive reply.

**Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD):** There can be little doubt about the effect of out-of-town developments on communities such as Wick and Thurso in my constituency. If the centres of such towns are to survive, they will need investment. Will the minister assure me that he and his officials will be proactive in seeking suitable financial bids from towns such as Wick and Thurso? Will appropriate community councils be trawled as part of the process? Will he assure me that remote areas will not be left to lag behind areas nearer Edinburgh and Glasgow? Finally, will he assure me that the issue of match funding will not necessarily stand in the way of this type of investment?

**The Presiding Officer:** I advise members that a supplementary question really should be one question, not four.

**Alex Neil:** I shall do my best to answer the questions briefly.

First, there is no requirement for match funding, but projects that manage to have some leverage from other sources of funding, such as the private sector or other parts of the public sector, will score extra points in the assessment.

Secondly, on towns in remote areas, the advisory committee that we will appoint—I hope to announce the details in the next two weeks—will have a specific remit to ensure that, in the allocation and approval of projects, we get a reasonable spread throughout the country and in the size of the towns involved. We do not want all the money to go to large towns only, to small towns only or to medium-sized towns only; we want a reasonable spread, so that, as far as possible, we invest the money on a fair but effective basis throughout Scotland—including, no doubt, in Dumfries and Galloway, Presiding Officer.

#### Student Support (Studies Abroad)

**3. Andrew Welsh (Angus) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government what steps it is taking to help students who wish to study abroad as part of their degree courses. (S3O-6966)

**The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning (Fiona Hyslop):** As a Government, we are committed to the principle of free access to higher education. Last week, I announced that we were extending tuition fee support for students at Scottish universities who take part in recognised overseas exchange programmes from the 2009-10 academic year. Previously, such support was available only to students who took part in the European Erasmus exchange programme.

The extension of support will benefit some 300 students a year, helping to tackle some of the

financial barriers to students' participation in exchange programmes in countries such as Australia, Canada, China, New Zealand and the United States.

**Andrew Welsh:** I congratulate the minister on assisting Scottish students to access international education exchanges and work placements, which will expand horizons, develop skills and ensure Scotland's contacts with increasingly global business and knowledge economies. Will she also encourage that exchange process to be a two-way process that results in an influx of ideas and knowledge, which will benefit Scottish businesses and educational establishments and allow talented young Scots to experience best practice from wherever it is found?

**Fiona Hyslop:** I thank the member for his question. I remind him that we probably benefit more from international students coming to study here than from our students travelling abroad. That is why we announced the extension of tuition fee support for our students.

As part of my visit to China, I embarked on the creation of a joint research programme involving Scottish and Chinese universities, which will include an exchange of PhD students with the aim of awarding joint PhDs. Two-way traffic is definitely on the menu of our support for students, which involves both supporting Scottish students who travel abroad and, importantly, welcoming the many students who come here to study.

**Claire Baker (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab):** How will the Government ensure that students from lower-income backgrounds will be more able to take up exchange opportunities, given that universities report that they are the students who are least likely to take up such opportunities?

**Fiona Hyslop:** One of the things that we have done is provide support for a European officer for the National Union of Students for the first time, to ensure that, if there are barriers, they are identified and overcome. One of the reasons why we introduced the £300,000 package to help with tuition fees is that, increasingly, students from poorer backgrounds could not afford the £1,000-plus fees that were being charged by some universities in America and other places. The measure has already started to support the students that the member identified.

### **Child Protection (Barnett Consequentials)**

**4. Margaret Smith (Edinburgh West) (LD):** To ask the Scottish Executive whether any Barnett consequentials resulting from the recently announced increase in funds for child protection in England will be used to improve child protection services in Scotland. (S3O-6935)

**The Minister for Children and Early Years (Adam Ingram):** No Barnett consequentials result from that announcement. The funding that was recently announced by the United Kingdom Government to support the recruitment and retention of social workers, in response to Lord Laming's recommendations, forms part of existing budget allocations identified through the 2008 to 2011 comprehensive spending review. It is not new funding. Decisions by UK ministers on the allocation of resources for services in England have no bearing on funding that is already in place to support child protection services in Scotland.

Local authorities take responsibility for managing resources in their area in order to meet the needs of vulnerable children.

**Margaret Smith:** In light of what the minister has just said, worrying Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Education reports and concerns raised by Unison Scotland that reviews of child protection services will miss the point totally if they do not address the root problem of too few resources, will he confirm that the Scottish Government will look to put extra resources into resourcing social work staff and gaps in front-line services, so that, for example, all at-risk children have a named social worker? That issue was identified at the time of the report on social work services in Aberdeen.

**Adam Ingram:** I remind the member that record resources are going into local government for it to deploy and that Scotland already has the most robust child protection inspection regime in the UK, which focuses the actions of agencies on the protection of our most vulnerable children. However, we are not complacent and we are well aware of the need for continuous improvement. Members will be aware that we are reviewing the national child protection guidance, which was first issued in 1998. I do not expect resources to be a limiting factor in the roll-out and application of that guidance.

**Rhona Brankin (Midlothian) (Lab):** Does the minister share my concern about the length of time that some vulnerable and young children stay in the home with a parent who abuses drugs or alcohol? Will he consider introducing time limits in that regard?

**Adam Ingram:** The guidance that I mentioned will cover three subjects in particular. We will introduce a common overall approach to the most significant operational aspects of protecting children from harm. It is clear that a key issue to address is children who are affected by parental substance misuse. We also want to embed best practice. In particular, we want to support the implementation of the getting it right for every child agenda for children's services as it applies to children who are at risk, with the emphasis on

children who are affected by parental substance misuse.

### Fuel Poverty

**5. Stuart McMillan (West of Scotland) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government, in light of recent changes to the central heating programme, how it is addressing the issue of fuel poverty. (S3O-6960)

**The Minister for Housing and Communities (Alex Neil):** The energy assistance package replaced the central heating and warm deal programmes on 6 April. It takes a more holistic approach that tackles all three sides of the fuel poverty triangle by helping to maximise household incomes through benefits and tax credit checks; reducing fuel bills by providing advice on wise energy use and how to access social tariffs; and improving the energy performance of the poorest-performing Scottish homes by providing a package of measures for those who are most vulnerable to fuel poverty. I am proud that, for the first time, the initiative includes intensive support for low-income families with young or disabled children.

**Stuart McMillan:** I have been contacted by several elderly constituents who are concerned that they do not meet the Scottish Government's criteria for energy assistance. What is the Government doing to help those people, who are not eligible for a new heating system under the energy assistance package but who are still highly vulnerable and require assistance?

**Alex Neil:** All pensioners in households in which central heating has never been installed and pensioners in energy-inefficient homes who receive a passport benefit or who are aged 75 or over are entitled to benefit from stage 4 of the energy assistance package, as well as the first three stages.

The purpose of redesigning the programme was to target it more at the pensioners and families who most require assistance to make their homes more energy efficient and who are at the lower end of the income scale. It would be inappropriate to use scarce resources to provide free central heating systems for some of our retired bankers, for example, who receive substantial pensions.

### Affordable Housing

**6. Helen Eadie (Dunfermline East) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Executive whether it will allocate in full the £45.3 million arising from housing spending in the United Kingdom budget towards more affordable housing for Scotland. (S3O-6892)

**The Minister for Housing and Communities (Alex Neil):** Ministers will decide in due course how the consequential from the UK budget are to be allocated.

**Helen Eadie:** I note that, once more, the minister dances around and does not give a direct answer. What excuses will he give for the fall in the number of homes that Scottish housing associations build? All stakeholders attribute that fall directly to the Scottish National Party's decision to cut the grant for new affordable homes.

**Alex Neil:** Since Helen Eadie praised herself as a great socialist, I remind her of what Nye Bevan said about the language of priorities and of how we decide priorities systematically. When Mr Swinney makes his announcement on the consequentials, he will base it on the Government's priorities in achieving our strategic objectives on poverty and the economy.

As for the specifics of housing association starts, completions and approvals, when the official figures for last year are published on 26 May, I would like the member to revise her opinion. Perhaps she will be a bit confused when she learns the facts.

We announced just this week a record number of approvals—more than 8,100—for new housing association houses. The Labour Party never achieved such a figure.

**Rhona Brankin (Midlothian) (Lab):** On a point of order, Presiding Officer. If the minister knows the answer to a question—as was just implied—is he not duty bound to give the chamber that answer?

**The Presiding Officer:** The member is fully aware that ministers are responsible for the contents of their answers.

**Jamie McGrigor (Highlands and Islands) (Con):** Will the minister ensure that the available money goes to Scotland's housing association sector, which is well placed to deliver good-quality and affordable homes?

**Alex Neil:** We are doing everything that we can in that respect.

As for the figures, ministers must abide by the statistics code, so I am not allowed to give any numbers until they are officially published by the Government's statistics service.

**Malcolm Chisholm (Edinburgh North and Leith) (Lab):** I welcome the commitment that the minister gave at a parliamentary reception last night to our internationally acclaimed 2012 homelessness target. Does he realise that the City of Edinburgh Council has said clearly that it cannot meet that target with the level of resources that it receives? Will he not only allocate at least £45 million extra to housing this year but ensure that Edinburgh receives a large portion of that?

**Alex Neil:** Edinburgh is close to my heart and is high on our priority list, which is why we

announced a 30 per cent increase in the council's allocation earlier this year and why we will seriously consider the council's application for the totality of the £50 million that we are making available for council housing. That is in contrast to the zero sum that was made available for council housing in the previous Administration's eight years.

**Jim Tolson (Dunfermline West) (LD):** Will the minister give the assurance that he will use some of the funding to which Mrs Eadie referred to plug the gap that his Government has created by increasing the per-unit burden that it has forced on registered social landlords? Will he consider that point in relation to the £4.6 million capital allocation burden that has restricted Fife Housing Association's ability to deliver affordable houses?

**Alex Neil:** I am not saying that I expected those questions, but I have done research on Fife. For equivalent periods, in comparison with the previous Administration, this Administration has increased by 20 per cent the investment funding to housing associations in Fife, and the number of actual and planned units that housing associations in Fife are to build and complete has increased by 22 per cent. We are doing well by Fife, as we are by the rest of the country.

#### **Private Landlords (Registration)**

**7. Cathie Craigie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Executive what progress is being made across Scotland with private landlord registration. (S3O-6890)

**The Minister for Housing and Communities (Alex Neil):** Since April 2006, 142,939 applications for registration have been made under the landlord registration scheme. Of those, 91 per cent have been approved by local authorities.

Local authorities have a range of powers to enforce landlord registration. More than 800 late application fees have been applied, more than 600 rent penalty notices have been issued, 10 landlords have been refused registration and one landlord's registration has been revoked.

Local authorities are working with landlords to ensure that they are aware of their responsibilities and to help them improve their standards.

**Cathie Craigie:** I thank the minister for his detailed reply. He will know that the Parliament introduced the relevant legislation to tackle the problems that irresponsible and bad private landlords cause. However, Shelter Scotland, responsible landlords and the Scottish Association of Landlords tell us that, three years after registration started, one in four landlords is still not registered. Given what the minister said, what further action will ministers take to ensure that

local authorities act against unregistered landlords? Responsible landlords are telling authorities where the unregistered landlords are. Is the minister still discussing with his Westminster counterparts how housing benefit could be used to assist in the enforcement of registration?

**Alex Neil:** First, I will make the facts clear. It is not the case that one quarter of landlords are unregistered; 85 per cent of landlords are registered. We inherited something like 9 per cent coverage from the previous Administration.

At my most recent meeting with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, I raised the issue of registration, because three local authorities are falling behind the rest and bringing down the national average figure. Through COSLA, I am encouraging those authorities to step up their effort, because our ambition is to have 100 per cent registration before long.

**The Presiding Officer:** That concludes general questions. Before we come to questions to the First Minister, I know that the chamber will wish to join me in welcoming two distinguished guests to the gallery: His Excellency Fakhaddin Gurbanov, the ambassador of Azerbaijan; and His Excellency Kairat Abusseitov, the ambassador of Kazakhstan. [Applause.]

## 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-1686)

**The First Minister (Alex Salmond):** Later today, I will have meetings to take forward the Government's programme for Scotland with a particular focus on jobs and economic recovery. As we all saw from the unemployment figures this week, the position in the economy remains exceedingly serious. It would be foolish indeed to predict an early upturn. However, there have been some good indications in some of the recent statistics. For example, figures that were published last week show that new orders in the construction sector in Scotland rose in the first quarter of 2009 whereas, unfortunately, those south of the border fell by 9 per cent.

**Iain Gray:** This afternoon, the Parliament will spend time debating Scotland's relationship with the United States of America and Canada. Back on 23 January, the Cabinet Secretary for Justice did his bit by visiting Canada. The visit coincided with the knife crime summit here at home. Does the First Minister think that his Cabinet Secretary for Justice's time was better spent in Canada than at the knife crime summit in the Parliament?

**The First Minister:** As Iain Gray knows very well, Fergus Ewing, the Minister for Community Safety, was at the knife crime summit, where he talked about the substantial action that is being taken against knife crime in Scotland. For example, more than 2,000 knives have been taken off the streets of Scotland since May 2007 and there are now tougher prosecution guidelines. There is also the action of Strathclyde Police's violence reduction unit that sees police officers in Scotland taking action day and daily to keep their communities safer.

**Iain Gray:** All those things were, of course, discussed at the knife crime summit. The question is about the priorities of the Cabinet Secretary for Justice. Not everyone was sure that the visit to Canada was the top priority. We have secured, under freedom of information, an e-mail from one of the cabinet secretary's civil servants who was involved in planning his Canada trip and getting him slipped—relieved of parliamentary duties. It says:

"I am just a little concerned that after all the hassle"

that we have had

"getting him slipped we only have a few minor things for him to do on the Friday".

Friday was the very day of the knife crime summit and the e-mail was written less than two days before the trip. That Friday, the victims of knife crime were in the Parliament trying to ensure that others would not have to suffer the same pain and loss. Why on earth did the First Minister allow Mr MacAskill to skip that for a junket in Canada?

**The First Minister:** Victims of knife crime were at the summit, as were police officers and the responsible minister. The leader of the Opposition was not at the knife crime summit. Those who came together had an excellent discussion and analysis of how to tackle the scourge of knife crime in Scotland. The Government is taking forward a range of initiatives that include tougher sentences and getting knives off the streets. No one would doubt the determination of the Cabinet Secretary for Justice on those matters.

Let us talk a bit about the violence reduction unit and the valuable work that is being done to crack the gang culture in Scotland. In 1997, there was no funding whatever for the unit; in 2006-07, there was £500,000. There was none under the Tories and very little under Labour and the Liberals, but there has been £1.8 million since the Cabinet Secretary for Justice took office and took action against violence in Scotland.

**Iain Gray:** I thought that Mr MacAskill, as the Cabinet Secretary for Justice, was the minister responsible for dealing with knife crime.

It is fair to say that, in the end, Mr MacAskill managed to fill some of his Friday in Canada: he made an official visit to a pub. It was the Duke of Somerset in Toronto, and he met Steve MacTavish, the clan chieftain of Toronto. He then got in a decent three hours' rest before his appointment with the "Great chieftain o' the puddin'-race" at a Burns supper. He would have needed his rest because the organisers warned in the e-mails that, on arrival, he would be

"plunged instantly into a very crowded cocktail party".

No worries, though, because after the formalities

"the evening lapses into informal jollity. It's going to be fun."

For too many Scots, the word "plunge" evokes not cocktail crowds but death or injury by a blade. Mr MacAskill should have been at the knife crime summit. Will the First Minister apologise for the fact that his responsible minister chose jollity and junketing instead?

**The First Minister:** The Parliament should be ashamed of an Opposition leader who treats one of the most serious subjects in Scottish society in the way that he has done today.

The knife crime summit with the responsible minister was an excellent idea and brought people together, but it is about more than just one-off summits. The proposed Scottish sentencing council is designed to give victims of crime a voice for the first time throughout the judicial system in Scotland.

The knife crime summit was informed by the responsible police officers. Police officers in Scotland are able to attend such summits because, compared with the 16,234 officers in March 2007 and the 15,000 officers under the Tories, we now have 16,675 officers. Under this Government and its Cabinet Secretary for Justice, record numbers of police are keeping the streets and communities of Scotland safe from harm.

**Iain Gray:** It is true that I was not at the knife crime summit. Mr Salmond was invited to the summit too, and he was not there either. I assure him that Labour members take the issue very seriously. Some 45 per cent of homicides in Scotland involve a blade, but 71 per cent of convicted knife thugs do not go to jail and 65 per cent of those who go to jail get less than six months—and the First Minister wants to set them free.

This is how seriously we take the issue: Labour believes that a person who carries or uses a knife should go to jail. The Tories believe that, too. If the First Minister agrees with us—right here, right now—then knife criminals will know that they are going to jail. It is his call. Will the First Minister support mandatory jail sentences for knife crime, so that we can deliver what the people of Scotland want?

**The First Minister:** Iain Gray should have said that Labour supports mandatory sentencing north of the border, where it is in opposition, but does not implement it south of the border, where it is in government. The Tories did not do so either when they were in office in Scotland.

In the sustained attempt to tackle knife crime in Scotland, 2,000 knives have been taken off the streets since May 2007, there are tougher prosecution guidelines, more knife carriers are in custody and sentences are tougher. The average length of sentence for carrying a knife increased from 161 days in 2006-07, when Labour was in office, to 217 days in 2007-08. The proposed sentencing council will reflect the views of victims of crime in Scotland—I hope that Iain Gray will be prepared to support the proposal.

At the Public Petitions Committee event at which the issue was discussed, the voices were heard of people who are in the front line of tackling knife crime, such as Detective Chief Superintendent John Carnochan, of the violence reduction unit. He said:

“I’ve been a cop for 34 years. If I thought locking people up the first time they were carrying a knife and giving them four years in the jail would work I’d be your man.”

He went on to say:

“Jail doesn’t work, we need early intervention, restricting access to alcohol and knives.”

Perhaps at some point Iain Gray will accept that somebody with 34 years of front-line experience in the police force, who is pioneering violence reduction initiatives in the west of Scotland, might know a little more about the issue than the Leader of the Opposition does.

### Prime Minister (Meetings)

**The Presiding Officer (Alex Fergusson):** I call Annabel Goldie to ask question 2.

**2. Annabel Goldie (West of Scotland) (Con):** I am sorry, Presiding Officer—I was reflecting on the First Minister’s last answer, having failed to follow any of it.

To ask the First Minister when he will next meet the Prime Minister. (S3F-1687)

**The First Minister (Alex Salmond):** I have no plans to meet the Prime Minister in the near future.

**Annabel Goldie:** Knife crime has now reached epidemic proportions in Scotland. It is a contagion that blights every community in our country. Mr Gray’s sudden interest in the issue would be a lot more convincing if Labour had done something about it in eight years of government—and if Mr Gray had said something about it in his conference speech. It is interesting that his new-found conversion comes after a Scottish Conservative proposal was published yesterday—46 minutes later, he is on the bandwagon. Where we lead, Mr Gray may, by all means, follow.

The Conservative proposal is to have a presumption of custody for anyone who carries or uses a knife, with a minimum sentence of two years. An exemption to that would be available to judges, but it would be granted only in the most exceptional of circumstances. We know that the First Minister likes to talk tough, but is he prepared to act tough and take action against these thugs? Will he support the Scottish Conservative proposal?

**The First Minister:** This subject is a bit more serious than the two Opposition parties battling for preference, wondering and working out who can be first to ask the question. Annabel Goldie is probably correct about Iain Gray’s choice of subject today, in that it was designed to forestall her question, but I also think that Annabel Goldie’s pre-release of her conference speech rather invited that initiative from Iain Gray. Can we just address the issue in terms of making Scottish society safe?



Annabel Goldie's question gave the game away. She said that there would be a presumption but, in exceptional circumstances, the judge would be able not to send people to jail. Is that too far away from what is being argued in relation to the proposed Scottish sentencing council? I will quote the Cabinet Secretary for Justice, when he wrote to the Public Petitions Committee on 2 December 2008:

"I believe that rather than pursue statutory mandatory or minimum penalties, it would be more appropriate for the Scottish Sentencing Council to consider the appropriate disposals for persons found carrying knives or other dangerous weapons in public and to produce guidelines on this. This will allow the sentencing judge to have flexibility in sentencing and would not restrict the independence of the judiciary. It will also ensure consistency and transparency in sentencing as well as allowing the views of the general public to be taken into account. Were the Sentencing Council to decide that there should be a presumption that an individual will go to prison if they are found carrying a knife unless there are strong mitigating factors, I would not be unhappy."

Can Annabel Goldie fully explain—apart from with rhetoric—the difference between her exemptions under special circumstances and that statement from the justice secretary?

**Annabel Goldie:** If I were reduced to quoting the justice secretary as an authority on anything, I would be in trouble. We are talking about the political process sending out the toughest possible message to thugs, bullies and hooligans. That message is: take a blade outside and you will be going inside. When the public are crying out for that message and for protection and political leadership, why is the First Minister not only failing to deal with knife crime but supporting more automatic early release, more home detention curfews and abolishing prison sentences of six months or less? Why are we stuck in the Scottish National Party's soft-touch Scotland?

**The First Minister:** We have got to the soundbite at last. Annabel Goldie should be reminded that automatic early release was introduced by a Tory Government—and it is going to be ended by an SNP Government through a bill before Parliament.

I listen to Annabel Goldie's justice spokesman occasionally, as he bemoans the fact that more people are not in prison in Scotland. Of course, we all know that when the Tories were in office they did not build one prison in Scotland. I have listened to the same spokesman telling Scotland that it is disgraceful that only 60 per cent of fiscal fines are being paid. Yes, indeed it is disgraceful: that is why we are working to increase the number—but when the Tories introduced the policy only 40 per cent were paid. While 60 per cent is not good enough, it is a lot better than 40 per cent.

There is, however, something that Annabel Goldie and I can agree on and celebrate: not only have we had the furthest and largest drop in recorded crime in 25 years, we have the record number of 16,675 police officers on the street, protecting our communities, drug-busting across Scotland and keeping this country safe.

### Cabinet (Meetings)

**3. Tavish Scott (Shetland) (LD):** To ask the First Minister what issues will be discussed at the next meeting of the Cabinet. (S3F-1688)

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

**Tavish Scott:** Earlier, the First Minister mentioned the exceedingly serious nature of the economy. On Tuesday, we learned that 20,000 people in Scotland have lost their jobs in the past three months. This morning, BT announced that it will cut its workforce by 10 per cent worldwide. There are 8,500 BT jobs in Scotland—21,000 if one includes the businesses that depend on BT. What does the First Minister think the implications are for Scotland of BT's announcement?

**The First Minister:** The implications are extremely serious, as Tavish Scott rightly points out. This is one example of a number of significant job losses across the UK that will have a substantial impact on Scotland, and it is why the doubling of our ability to intervene in major redundancy situations is particularly welcome. It is why our acceleration of capital funding is welcome. It is why our acceleration of European funding is welcome. Everything the Government has been doing in terms of its budget and economic programme is designed to sustain and support tens of thousands of jobs across Scotland. That is why I hope and believe that I will have Tavish Scott's firm support in resisting the £500 million cut in the Scottish budget that threatens to cost another 9,000 jobs in Scotland.

**Tavish Scott:** BT has also said that it could relocate jobs from India. We know that we have in abundance the skills to take customer service and technology jobs back from India. BT centres in Dundee, Thurso, Alness, Aberdeen or Glasgow could be a base for them. Will the First Minister give one of his ministers the job of putting a compelling case direct to BT for such work to come to Scotland—jobs the country needs? Will the Government put a minister in charge of a team to make this pitch direct to BT?

**The First Minister:** That job will be taken forward by John Swinney as the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Sustainable Growth. It is an important task. I do not underrate in any sense the serious economic challenges that face our

country. Ministerial intervention can be extremely important. I think it was Tavish Scott who called for ministerial intervention to secure the jobs in wind-tower building in the Mull of Kintyre. That was done and the number of jobs has doubled. Someone from his party called for ministerial action to secure the Rosyth to Zeebrugge ferry. That was done and that ferry service starts again next week. The Cumbernauld jobcentre is another example of ministerial intervention being effective in saving 900 jobs.

I do not think for a minute that ministerial intervention alone will always stop or turn around serious redundancy situations, but wherever ministerial intervention can help we will certainly do it—and in the case of BT, Mr Swinney has already indicated to me that he will be delighted to take it on. This Government will never be found wanting in defending and promoting Scottish employment.

**Alasdair Morgan (South of Scotland) (SNP):** You will be only too painfully aware, since it is in your constituency, Presiding Officer—as will the First Minister—of the proposed closure of Kirkcudbright creamery with the loss of 121 jobs. In the Galloway economy, 121 jobs is hugely significant and they will be very difficult to replace. Will the First Minister tell me what actions the Government proposes to take to support the workforce? Will he also say something about the significance of that proposed closure for the wider Scottish dairy industry?

**The First Minister:** Alasdair Morgan puts the point very fairly. Yesterday's announcement that Milk Link proposes to close its dairy with the loss of more than 120 jobs is serious news. The impact on directly affected employees and the producers who supply the dairy, and the wider impact on the economy, will be considerable.

Richard Lochhead has already spoken with the company, and there will be further discussions on what support can be given to mitigate the proposed job losses. Scottish Enterprise and Skills Development Scotland are already actively engaged, and a meeting with Milk Link is taking place today.

Richard Lochhead has also convened and will chair a dairy summit on 27 May, because there are wider issues across that industry in Scotland at present. The event provides an excellent opportunity for the dairy supply chain to come together to address the issues of concern. I am in no doubt that the Kirkcudbright situation will feature strongly in those discussions.

**Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab):** The First Minister will be aware of the two deaths in Orkney, and one death in Moray, as a direct result of *Clostridium difficile*. He will also be aware

that there have been two further associated deaths. I am sure that he and all members in the Parliament will join me in offering our condolences to the families who have lost loved ones.

Last Friday, I wrote to the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Wellbeing to ask that the public inquiry into *C. difficile* at the Vale of Leven hospital be extended to cover the Orkney cases. In light of the subsequent cases in Moray and the fact that I have today been contacted by a constituent who suggests that the problems at Dr Gray's hospital date back to December, will the First Minister extend the inquiry to cover the whole of Scotland?

**The First Minister:** Of course the entire Parliament and the Government joins Rhoda Grant in extending our condolences to the families and friends of those who have been affected by that dreadful condition.

The health secretary, Nicola Sturgeon, will respond comprehensively to Rhoda Grant's letter. The terms of reference for the *C. difficile* inquiry are being considered, but they must be discussed with the presiding judge at the inquiry. As Rhoda Grant will understand, the correct and proper way to do these things is to discuss the precise terms of reference with the judge.

### Operation Algebra

**4. Angela Constance (Livingston) (SNP):** To ask the First Minister what lessons can be learned from operation algebra. (S3F-1707)

**The First Minister (Alex Salmond):** I know that everyone here will want to acknowledge the pain felt by the victims—and their families—of those vile and sickening crimes. The main lesson is surely that offenders cannot escape justice but will be caught and that specialist investigators and prosecution teams working with international law enforcement partners is clearly the way forward in that area of work. The Parliament should pay tribute to our police and prosecutors, whose diligent and painstaking work tracked down those evil men and brought them to justice.

Another lesson is that we must keep arrangements for managing sex offenders under constant review. That is why, during the past two years, the Government has been taking a number of important measures. We have recently announced plans to pilot greater individual disclosure for parents who may have a concern about an adult who has access to their child. Through the Criminal Justice and Licensing (Scotland) Bill, we are introducing tougher court sentences and orders to impose new obligations on high-risk sex offenders as well as to restrict their movements.

Since coming to office, we have made it clear that when a high-risk sex offender goes missing all

options must be considered, including publishing details in the news media and online, as has happened in several cases during the past year.

**Angela Constance:** In addition to ensuring the rigorous monitoring of known sex offenders, what measures will the First Minister consider, given that seven out of the eight offenders who were convicted as a result of operation algebra were not registered sex offenders? How can we do all that we can to ensure that all aspects of society do what is possible to protect children from offenders who are not known to authorities, but who are too often known and trusted by children and their families?

**The First Minister:** As Angela Constance knows, the investigation—operation algebra—was triggered when an information technology worker found a suspicious file on a computer. That indicates the role that we all have, if we have suspicions, to contact the authorities.

It should be said, however, that once the investigation got under way and the prosecution took place, major breakthroughs were made in terms of the rigour and the science and technology that was used in the prosecution, which—along with the conspiracy charge that was brought against the accused—sends out a distinct and clear message that people who engage in that vile activity will be tracked down, dealt with, taken before justice and properly sentenced.

We should, while accepting the horror of the details of the case, be prepared and willing to congratulate our police and prosecution authorities on the fantastic job they are doing to keep the country safe.

**Paul Martin (Glasgow Springburn) (Lab):** The First Minister will be aware of the 33 recommendations of the Justice 2 Sub-Committee in the previous session in connection with managing registered sex offenders. How many of those 33 recommendations have been responded to by the Government? Will the First Minister commit the Government to providing the kind of resources that will be required to deal with some of the most dangerous offenders on the planet?

**The First Minister:** The precise answer is that 29 of the recommendations have been responded to by the Government. I set out in my first answer to Angela Constance some of the major initiatives that have been taken.

Paul Martin will particularly welcome our proposed information pilot in Scotland. We are confident that the pilot will indicate a satisfactory response and application, which will enable the same system of information to be spread throughout the country.

**Bill Aitken (Glasgow) (Con):** If anything positive can emerge from this appalling case, it is the performance of the police and the prosecution services. I wholly endorse the First Minister's comments in that regard.

Does the First Minister consider that there may be some merit in making it a condition of the licence of those who are released, having been convicted of sex offences, that they provide details of all the internet accounts they hold and all the sites they operate? It would seem that, in the case of at least one accused person, that might have been of benefit. Further, it might enable earlier action to be taken against those who pose a danger to society's most vulnerable—our children.

**The First Minister:** The Criminal Justice and Licensing (Scotland) Bill will enable just such a proposal to be introduced, because it deals with additional conditions that will be put on people on the sex offenders register. If Bill Aitken makes proposals, they will certainly be well considered.

Given that I have on occasion had cause to suggest that Bill Aitken takes an overly negative view of certain developments in the justice system, I welcome his congratulations for the prosecution authorities and the police in this case. It is the nature of things that much of the coverage of our criminal justice activities tends to dwell on where mistakes are made or where shortcomings are found. Even in the most horrible, vile circumstances, when we see a profoundly efficient prosecution and police investigation come to fruition by bringing eight dreadful people to justice, we should unite as a Parliament to congratulate our judicial authorities.

### **Prisoners (Rehabilitation and Retraining)**

**5. Richard Baker (North East Scotland) (Lab):** To ask the First Minister what action the Scottish Government is taking to provide rehabilitation and retraining in prisons. (S3F-1705)

**The First Minister (Alex Salmond):** The Scottish Government is providing record investment to develop a 21<sup>st</sup> century prison estate. That will allow the Scottish Prison Service to deliver a range of activities that can assist prisoners to reintegrate with society.

Following the Scottish Prisons Commission's report, a multi-agency project is working to improve offender management. The role of offender retraining and rehabilitation will be included in that. Education and training is available in every Scottish prison. The Scottish Government is undertaking a national review of offender learning and employability services, which is due to report this summer.

The Scottish Prison Service also delivers a range of offending behaviour programmes that are

designed to address the needs of prisoners who present the highest risk to the public.

**Richard Baker:** Does the First Minister agree with his justice secretary that the prison regime for which his Government is responsible is “a skoosh”? The justice secretary wants to take thousands of offenders out of jail and refuses to invest in proposals for community courts—despite the clear will of the Parliament. Does that not leave the Government’s policies on sentencing lacking any credibility?

**The First Minister:** The justice secretary was saying that short sentences are a skoosh in comparison with strong community sentences and orders.

Like some other members of the Parliament, Richard Baker wants to position himself on certain issues. In the previous session of Parliament, we heard from Cathy Jamieson some very intelligent assessment of why short sentences do not work in any of the requirements of society, so I wonder why Labour’s new justice spokesman should take the line that he has. I also wonder whether everybody on the Labour benches is content with the somersaults of their party over the past two years. I was interested to read in the *Evening News* of 18 December a comment on a similar Richard Baker attack. It said:

“one Labour MSP admits to finding the approach ‘depressing’ and adds: ‘Anyone who knows anything about it feels uncomfortable with what we’re saying.’”

I do not know which Labour MSPs feel uncomfortable with Richard Baker, but I cannot help agreeing with the one—or more than one—who does.

### **Looked-after and Accommodated Children**

**6. Margaret Smith (Edinburgh West) (LD):** To ask the First Minister what action the Scottish Government is taking to improve life chances for looked-after and accommodated children. (S3F-1699)

**The First Minister (Alex Salmond):** Improving the life chances of all looked-after children in Scotland is a key commitment of the Government. Good corporate parenting is at the heart of successful childhoods for those who are in care. That is why the Government has already worked directly with 22 councils to strengthen their corporate parenting function and will work with the remaining councils and other agencies over the coming year.

In the past year we have published guidance for community planning partnerships on corporate parenting and improved educational outcomes for those in care; we have provided award-winning new training materials for those who work with

looked-after children; we have trained 140 local trainers across Scotland; and we have launched a website that already averages more than 2,000 hits a month. In addition, we have commissioned the Scottish Institute for Residential Child Care to lead a partnership initiative to look into how we can further improve residential child care. The report is expected later this year.

**Margaret Smith:** I welcome what the First Minister has said. I am sure that he agrees that it is vital for the Scottish Government to consider the implications of the recent report on the Kerelaw unit. Will he agree to look also at the recent report entitled “Sweet 16? One year on—is life any sweeter?” by the former Commissioner for Children and Young People in Scotland? In her report, she expresses concern that financial difficulties and cuts are impacting negatively on the implementation of her recommendations on supporting young people leaving care—60 per cent of whom will have no qualifications and one in six of whom will become homeless within the first year.

**The First Minister:** As Margaret Smith knows, under this Government the funding available to local government in Scotland has been increasing year on year as a percentage of total public funding.

I have read the report into Kerelaw and read about the serious issues that it raises. As Margaret Smith will know, many of the recommendations fall on the local authority. However, from its response, I am certain that Glasgow City Council is taking the recommendations seriously. It acknowledges the shortcomings over a decade and more and is putting into place plans to deal with the serious shortcomings that have been identified.

12:33

*Meeting suspended until 14:15.*

14:15

*On resuming—*

## Question Time

### SCOTTISH EXECUTIVE

#### Finance and Sustainable Growth

##### Scottish Futures Trust (School Buildings)

**1. Ken Macintosh (Eastwood) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Executive whether ministers will inform the Parliament before the summer recess of how the Scottish Futures Trust will be used for any school building proposals. (S3O-6909)

**The Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Sustainable Growth (John Swinney):** We have already made clear that we plan to announce later this year the next part of our schools investment programme. That will involve working with local authorities to take forward capital investment through the Scottish Futures Trust.

**Ken Macintosh:** We can put the cork back in the champagne: we will hear an announcement on the Scottish Futures Trust later this year. Two years into this parliamentary session—more than half way through—we have yet to hear of the Scottish National Party Administration commissioning one school, despite its promise to match the previous Administration “brick for brick”. Is the minister aware of last week’s report from Audit Scotland, which highlighted the fact that one third of Scotland’s schools are in poor or bad condition? Does he believe that it is acceptable to do nothing for two years while our pupils put up with inadequate facilities?

**John Swinney:** The opening answer that I gave Mr Macintosh simply confirmed the position that I have explained to him in Parliament on countless occasions over the past few months. It describes exactly what the Government will do. I also point out to him that the school building programme over which the Government presides continues apace. During this parliamentary session, 250 schools will be built or refurbished under this Administration. We are supporting £2 billion-worth of construction on schools.

**Ken Macintosh:** What about the SFT?

**John Swinney:** I answered Mr Macintosh’s question about when the Scottish Futures Trust will be involved in the procurement of schools. I have given him that answer on countless occasions.

There is a host of other investment in the capital estate that is designed to improve the schools estate. The Scottish Government is currently

supporting £2 billion-worth of school construction. Therefore, for Mr Macintosh to go around the country peddling the myth that nothing is happening on schools estate development is absolute rubbish and he knows it.

**Jeremy Purvis (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD):** It is nearly two years since the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning told the Education, Lifelong Learning and Culture Committee that local authorities could look forward to Scottish Futures Trust-funded schools. Will the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Sustainable Growth confirm that he will announce in the autumn that the Scottish Futures Trust will neither fund nor directly commission schools, and that it will simply be a consultant to local authorities that are procuring schools?

**John Swinney:** The Scottish Futures Trust will deliver greater value and effectiveness in the Government’s capital programme. I would think that that approach would be supported widely in Parliament, and that all members would think it a laudable and supportable aspiration. It is what the Scottish Futures Trust’s board and management have concentrated on so far. As I said in my earlier answer to Mr Macintosh, announcements will be made to Parliament in due course.

**Andy Kerr (East Kilbride) (Lab):** The cabinet secretary did not give an adequate answer to the previous question. Perhaps he will answer this one: how will the work of the Scottish Futures Trust, as he has just described it, be different from the work that civil servants inside the Scottish Government do as part of their duties? Why are we paying millions of pounds for that expensive quango?

**John Swinney:** Mr Kerr is in no position to lecture me about spending millions of pounds on quangos, given how he presided over and financially supported public-private partnership projects that have been shown to have squandered public money instead of providing value for money.

The Scottish Futures Trust will deliver the improvements in value for money that will be essential as we move into a period of greater pressure on public expenditure and we have to deliver greater value for money. I assure Mr Kerr that we will be able to deliver those value improvements for the benefit of school pupils around Scotland.

#### Scottish Futures Trust (Glasgow Primary School Estate)

**2. Robert Brown (Glasgow) (LD):** To ask the Scottish Executive what support is likely to be available from the Scottish Futures Trust for the

modernisation of Glasgow's primary school estate. (S3O-6924)

**The Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Sustainable Growth (John Swinney):** The modernisation of Glasgow's primary school estate is a matter for Glasgow City Council, but the Scottish Futures Trust is ready to provide advice on infrastructure investment, where appropriate, across the public sector. As the Government has announced already, we plan to announce later this year the next part of our schools investment programme, which is being developed along with the Scottish Futures Trust. In addition to the increased levels of capital investment that have been provided to Glasgow in the current spending review period, the Scottish Government has also supported the council's acceleration of its infrastructure investment by bringing forward a total of £9.5 million of capital funding from 2010-11 to the previous and the current financial years.

**Robert Brown:** I heard the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Sustainable Growth talk about peddling myths in his answer to the previous question, but it is not a myth that schools in Glasgow are closing instead of being modernised, that parents demonstrated outside Parliament today on the issue of school closures and that no money has come from the Scottish Futures Trust, nor is any promised, for the Glasgow schools project. Does the cabinet secretary accept that there is an urgent need for movement on that matter? Can he give us any guidance on whether funding will be available? If it will be available, what amount will come from the next part of the programme to which he referred? Can he help Glasgow in that regard at all?

**John Swinney:** First, Glasgow City Council makes decisions on closures of its schools. It is proper to ask questions about such issues in public debate, because parents are understandably concerned about them, but I say with the greatest respect to Mr Brown that questions on Glasgow City Council's schools estate should be directed to the council.

On the support that the Scottish Government is making available to local authorities, and particularly to Glasgow City Council, I remind Mr Brown that in the spending review I increased in one year the capital allocation to local authorities by £100 million. That level of support has been sustained throughout the spending review period. Clearly, Glasgow City Council, as the largest local authority in Scotland, will have access to a significant proportion of that capital expenditure and will be able to deploy it in areas of its choosing. Fundamentally, decisions about the schools estate in Glasgow are a matter for Glasgow City Council.

On the Scottish Futures Trust, I made it clear in my earlier answer that the Government will make a statement to Parliament on the funding approach for the next elements of the schools estate programme. That statement will be made in association with the Scottish Futures Trust, which will be fully involved. Mr Brown will be able to question ministers on the details of that when the statement is made to Parliament.

**Patricia Ferguson (Glasgow Maryhill) (Lab):** I listened carefully to the cabinet secretary's response to Robert Brown, but he will be aware that, of the £196 million that has been allocated to Glasgow City Council for capital expenditure, more than £115 million is earmarked for projects—such as the M74 extension and the White Cart flood prevention measures—whose capital spend is ring fenced. In the past 10 years, Glasgow City Council has built 53 primary schools and 11 secondary schools. Some of that was done with public-private partnerships, but the vast majority it was done with the council's own funds. The council no longer has those funds, and the Scottish Government is not offering any advance on them or a way out through the Scottish Futures Trust. What can the Government therefore offer the parents of pupils and the pupils whose schools are going to close at the end of June?

**John Swinney:** With the greatest respect, Patricia Ferguson confuses the issue of Glasgow City Council's decisions on its schools estate, which the council is properly responsible for taking, with the issue of capital investment. Local authorities make choices on capital investment, so if Glasgow City Council has decided to invest a significant proportion of its capital budget in the M74 extension, that is a matter for the council.

As I have said in my answers already, the Government will come to Parliament and set out its approach to the school building programme. That is what I have said in all my answers to Mr Macintosh over a sustained period during 2009, and that is exactly what the Government will remain committed to doing.

**Sandra White (Glasgow) (SNP):** The minister is obviously aware of the situation in Glasgow, but is he aware that many of the schools that are being closed are in good condition and that the 96 per cent of parents who replied to the consultation process only wish Glasgow City Council to meet them again to talk about the situation? Does he agree that the city council can afford at least to meet the parents of the children in those schools to allay their fears?

**John Swinney:** As Sandra White would expect, decisions about consultation and dialogue are matters for Glasgow City Council. As a matter of form, it is important that people in authority are prepared to listen to the aspirations and

representations of different communities and individuals. I am certainly committed to doing that, and I am sure that Glasgow City Council is equally committed to that process of dialogue.

### **Businesses (Support)**

**3. Iain Smith (North East Fife) (LD):** To ask the Scottish Executive what additional funding is being made available to Scottish Enterprise and Highlands and Islands Enterprise to provide direct support to businesses. (S3O-6934)

**The Minister for Enterprise, Energy and Tourism (Jim Mather):** Enterprise agencies already have substantial budgets devoted to business support. In addition, some £30 million of capital funding has been brought forward by Scottish Enterprise in 2009-10 to support a number of key infrastructure projects, including infrastructure works in the Fife energy park. The Government has also delivered substantial direct support to many thousands of Scottish businesses through the small business bonus scheme in 2008-09 and in 2009-10 and it plans to do so in the future.

**Iain Smith:** Does the minister accept that, at last week's Finance Committee, Scottish Enterprise confirmed in evidence that its budget is, in cash terms, being cut year on year? Chief executive Jack Perry said:

"there is a case for investing in economic development at the current time, mainly because we get good levels of leverage through investment, which makes our money go further."—[*Official Report, Finance Committee*, 5 May 2009; c 1219.]

The written evidence from Scottish Enterprise said:

"The continued, and ideally increased, investment in the activities of Scottish Enterprise is paramount in addressing both the current economic conditions and also preparing the Scottish economy to take advantage of the longer-term economic opportunities that will inevitably arise".

Does the minister agree?

**Jim Mather:** When we look at the totality of the situation and the bookkeeping entries—the moving out of the Skills Development Scotland and business gateway functions; the impact of the small business bonus scheme; the front-loading of European structural funds; the new and enhanced role for local authorities that allows them for the first time to be involved in economic development; and the proposals from Midlothian Council, East Lothian Council and others for local small business loans schemes—we see a picture for business, especially when it is working together with the Government, that is getting brighter and brighter.

**Dave Thompson (Highlands and Islands) (SNP):** The new business gateway service was

introduced in the Highlands and Islands on 1 April, when the budget was transferred from HIE to the councils. Has the transfer gone smoothly? What improvements does the minister expect that that will bring to small businesses in the Highlands and Islands?

**Jim Mather:** The transfer is going smoothly and early indications are positive. In my constituency of Argyll and Bute, HIE and the business gateway share the same premises. Argyll and Bute Council and HIE have taken a collaborative approach from the outset back in 2007. The Scottish local authority economic development group is beginning to see the transfer as an enormous opportunity and is making a positive response by becoming much more heavily involved in economic development. The small business consultative group decided this week that it will work closely with SLAED, the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities and SOLACE—the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives and Senior Managers—to ensure that the transfer of the functions rolls out across Scotland in the most cohesive way possible.

### **Small Businesses**

**4. Gil Paterson (West of Scotland) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government what steps it is taking to assist small businesses during the recession. (S3O-6962)

**The Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Sustainable Growth (John Swinney):** The Scottish Government's economic recovery programme contains a number of measures to assist small businesses in the current economic climate. Examples include: ensuring that business advice and support is available through business gateway; the introduction of a 10-day prompt payment target; the extension of the small business bonus scheme from April 2009; and the allocation of £60 million in capital funding to town centres and high streets across Scotland through the town centre regeneration fund in 2009-10, which will support town centre retailing and business activity.

In addition, I wrote on 28 April to chief executives and heads of procurement of Scottish public bodies to express the expectation that all Scottish public sector bodies should follow six simple steps to promote the involvement of small and medium-sized enterprises in public procurement processes, including the use of the public contracts Scotland portal. Taken together, those steps will help to give SMEs fair access to public sector contracts.

**Gil Paterson:** I thank the cabinet secretary for his full answer. I note that 69 per cent of respondents to a recent survey by the Federation of Small Businesses said that they were making

substantial savings as a result of the small business bonus scheme, and one in eight said that those savings were helping them to stay afloat during the recession. However, I also note that some businesses face issues of eligibility, for a variety of reasons. What steps is the Government taking to ensure that all those who should benefit from the scheme are able to do so?

**John Swinney:** The Government has been heartened by the level of take-up of the small business bonus scheme in the early part of the programme although, undoubtedly, not all businesses are benefiting from the scheme. We have examined, and will continue to examine, how much more communication and information can be put into the public domain to encourage businesses to take up the scheme. That work is under way, and we will endeavour to ensure that anyone who is eligible for the scheme—or any other form of business rates relief—is able fully to take up the opportunity with which the scheme provides them.

**Gavin Brown (Lothians) (Con):** In his first answer, the cabinet secretary referred to the 10-day prompt payment target, which has been reasonably successful—I am prepared to give the Government credit for that. What is the position in the public sector more generally—outside central Government—in relation to the target? Can the Government do anything to help companies, especially smaller businesses, that do not contract directly with Government but which are heavily involved further down the supply chain?

**John Swinney:** I am grateful to Mr Brown for his initial comments. In March 2009, 91.6 per cent of Government bills were paid within a 10-day period. When the Government introduced the target in October, the payment period was 30 days and performance was not strong even in relation to that target. There has been a material change in performance, and last week I thanked personally the staff of the Scottish Government who have made that achievement possible.

Gavin Brown asked about other elements of the public sector. Through dialogue with local authorities, I have encouraged them to adopt our approach. The core aspects of government have responded extremely positively, but we must monitor performance on an on-going basis.

I concede that there is a real problem where bills are settled with larger organisations and it takes a significant period for the money to reach smaller companies. Gavin Brown appreciates that there is no statutory provision for the Government to take action, but I will endeavour through my regular dialogue with business organisations to encourage larger companies to respond positively to the Government's prompt payment approach and to ensure that the cash flow of smaller business

organisations is enhanced by prompt payment, where Government contracts are involved.

**John Park (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab):** I am sure that the cabinet secretary recognises that keeping people employed and giving them an opportunity to retrain and upskill are key, especially for small businesses. At the recent apprenticeship summit, with which the cabinet secretary was involved, many small businesses said that it is almost impossible in the current climate for them to think about retraining and upskilling staff. Given that the issue cuts across two portfolio areas, I urge the cabinet secretary to raise it with Fiona Hyslop, to see what the Scottish Government can do right now to help smaller employers to engage in training and to take on apprentices.

**John Swinney:** I acknowledge Mr Park's sustained interest in the subject. Provision of the support that will allow businesses to weather difficulties is at the heart of what the Government is trying to do, and the small business bonus scheme is assisting many companies to do that. As Mr Park knows, we have secured from the European Commission a concession that allows us to tailor our European social fund programmes, as well as training interventions that are funded through Skills Development Scotland, expressly to support individuals who require retraining for the labour market and people who are in employment and who face the danger of unemployment.

I assure Mr Park that, although the issues are shared across portfolios, there is a very active dialogue between me and the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning, and our respective officials, to ensure that all the Government's interventions in this area are integrated and complementary. The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning and I will soon meet the chairs and chief officers of Skills Development Scotland, Scottish Enterprise, VisitScotland, Highlands and Islands Enterprise and the Scottish Further and Higher Education Funding Council. All those organisations are involved in addressing the issue that Mr Park has raised, in order to ensure that all our interventions are properly focused in the fashion that I have described.

Mr Park knows that the Government will be receptive to any suggestions and proposals that he wishes to advance, as we were during the budget process when he advanced the argument for increasing the number of apprenticeships. I was very pleased that the Government was able to accede to that suggestion.

#### **Local Government Funding (Review)**

**5. Nanette Milne (North East Scotland) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Executive what the scope is of



its joint review with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities of local government funding. (S3O-6873)

**The Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Sustainable Growth (John Swinney):** The joint review of the local government finance settlement distribution methodology is being undertaken to ensure that the arrangements for allocating the substantial resources that are provided to local government are as fair and equitable as possible.

**Nanette Milne:** In the light of the fact that Aberdeen City Council and Aberdeenshire Council are two of the lowest-funded local authorities per head of population, can the cabinet secretary tell me whether the review of local government funding will consider primary and secondary indicators that influence the allocation of resources to Scottish local authorities, including those of localised deprivation and demographic changes?

**John Swinney:** I assure Nanette Milne that the review that is under way will be examining the methodology which is, as I know she understands, complex. It takes into account a broad variety of indicators to assess the funding composition of local authority budgets. Some of those factors are driven by population and some by the numbers of people who are eligible for particular services. Some are driven by geography, and some by levels of deprivation. All those issues will be actively considered as part of the current review of the distribution methodology.

**Brian Adam (Aberdeen North) (SNP):** Will the minister make it a principle that will guide the review group that there will be an aim to reduce the gap between the highest-funded and lowest-funded councils on a per capita basis, with the possible exception of island authorities, or local authority areas that include islands?

**John Swinney:** As I explained to Dr Milne, the purpose of the review is to consider all the different components of the distribution methodology, ensuring that we reach a fair and equitable position in relation to the distribution of resources to local authorities. I am very familiar with the questions around the funding arrangements for Aberdeen City, which Mr Adam represents. Those issues will be at the core of the distribution methodology review that the Government and COSLA are undertaking to address those questions.

### **Project Scotland (Meetings)**

**6. Bill Butler (Glasgow Anniesland) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Executive when it next plans to meet representatives of Project Scotland. (S3O-6888)

**The Minister for Enterprise, Energy and Tourism (Jim Mather):** Regular contact is

maintained between the chief executive of Project Scotland and our third sector division. We welcome the approach that Project Scotland is taking to identify ways to improve employment opportunities for the 16 to 25-year-old age group.

**Bill Butler:** I thank the minister for his answer, and I acknowledge that the cabinet secretary has been good enough to meet representatives of Project Scotland and parliamentary colleagues, including me, several times to discuss the organisation's future.

The ministerial team is aware that the Government ceased to provide financial support to Project Scotland on 1 April this year, a decision that places the long-term future of that life-changing organisation in serious doubt. Next Thursday, a group of Project Scotland volunteers will visit the Parliament to give members an insight into the positive impact that Project Scotland has made on their lives. Would the minister, and the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Sustainable Growth, be willing to come along and meet those remarkable young people, some of whom come from Mr Swinney's constituency, and learn first hand how Project Scotland has changed their lives?

**Jim Mather:** We have debated the situation at some length, and it is well understood. The cabinet secretary met Julia Ogilvy, the chair of the organisation, on 4 February, together with Bill Butler and other members. A placement with Project Scotland, at £8,500 for six months, compares very badly against what millennium volunteering has been able to achieve, with placements at £180 per volunteer. However, that said and recognising the fact that we have extended funding to allow the possibility of migration forward, I will make every effort to ensure that my diary can cope with meeting Mr Butler and the Project Scotland youngsters.

### **Social Economy**

**7. Marlyn Glen (North East Scotland) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Executive what priority it gives to the development of the social economy. (S3O-6896)

**The Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Sustainable Growth (John Swinney):** We are committed to the development of the whole third sector—including social economy organisations—and we are making a record level of investment to help the sector grow and build capacity, capability and financial sustainability.

**Marlyn Glen:** Since the social economy is so important in promoting social inclusion, will the cabinet secretary join me in welcoming the announcement by the Equality and Human Rights Commission of its new £10 million funding

programme for the voluntary and community sector in the United Kingdom, given that last year 27 projects across Scotland were supported by its grants programme?

Does the cabinet secretary agree that social enterprises offer a good example of widening the scope of women's employment and career opportunities, as demonstrated by the news that 51 per cent of entries for the Bank of Scotland social entrepreneur awards this year have been from women? How will the Government make use of the entrepreneurship of the third sector if—according to research by the University of Stirling—women earn 8 per cent more in that sector? How will the Government use that to close the overall gender gap in pay?

**John Swinney:** I welcome Marlyn Glen's comments; in particular, I welcome her remarks, which I saw the other day, about the fund from the Equality and Human Rights Commission. That is a very helpful intervention. Having a range of funding streams available to support developments in the social economy complements very well the features of the Government's "Enterprising Third Sector Action Plan 2008-2011", which was published in June 2008.

The focus of that action plan was to ensure, first, that we created more social enterprises; secondly, that we created greater sustainability within those social enterprises; and thirdly, that those social enterprises could perform a greater role in the Scottish economy. Of course, the achievement of a larger social economy is one of the key outcomes in the Government's national performance framework. It is there because we want to deliver a significant shift in economic activity by enhancing and increasing the capability of the social enterprise sector.

For the benefit of members, there are a number of characteristics of the funds available for investment. The Scottish investment fund is valued at £30 million and the enterprise fund, which is valued at £12 million, is designed to support organisational development, capacity building and increased sustainability of established third sector organisations.

The other week, I had the privilege of visiting the Cornerstone organisation in Aberdeen, which is a very successful social enterprise; I have had the privilege over the past couple of years to visit many social enterprises in my capacity as a cabinet minister. I warmly encourage the sector to take up the avenues of financial support that the Government has made available to enhance the position and effectiveness of the social enterprise sector.

## Scottish Investment Bank

**8. Sandra White (Glasgow) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Executive what benefits the Scottish investment bank will bring to the economy. (S30-6967)

**The Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Sustainable Growth (John Swinney):** The Scottish investment bank will be focused on supporting Scottish-based businesses with growth potential, investing in partnership with the private sector. It will provide financial support to help develop these businesses, create employment and maximise their contribution to the economy.

**Sandra White:** I welcome the significant investment that is being made by the Government to support business growth. However, looking ahead, it would be good to expand that even further. Has the cabinet secretary considered any other potential sources of funding that could be used similarly in the future?

**John Swinney:** The Government's first steps in relation to the Scottish investment bank have been to draw together a number of funding streams currently available and to put in new resources that had been identified through the European social fund programmes. We are keen to ensure that we bring together other sources of resource to ensure that businesses in Scotland have access to investment funds, which are critical at this time of economic difficulty and which will undoubtedly assist us in delivering economic recovery. We will keep Parliament advised of developments in that respect.

**John Park (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab):** I have supported the concept of a Scottish investment bank for a number of years; I think that there is wider support for it from members on different sides of the chamber. However, there has been some concern about the amount of time that the Scottish Government has taken to get the Scottish Futures Trust off the ground. That concern is legitimate, and there is obviously some concern about what it might mean for the Scottish investment bank.

An announcement has already been made outside the Parliament. Does the cabinet secretary intend to have some parliamentary scrutiny of the Scottish investment bank, and perhaps some discussion from the Scottish Government on the matter, so that we in the Parliament can look at what the bank will do and what it will set out to achieve?

**John Swinney:** The Government will, of course, respond to any desire for parliamentary scrutiny on any question. Ministers regularly attend committees, and I am here to answer questions today. [*Interruption.*]

I hope that I did not hear some cynicism in Mr Whitton's sedentary remark that I had not answered previous questions. I am frequently—indeed, always—here to answer questions. Cynicism from Mr Whitton—how unlikely.

The Government will be happy to engage in any parliamentary scrutiny on those issues.

**The Presiding Officer (Alex Fergusson):** Question 9 was not lodged.

### Saltire Prize

**10. Shirley-Anne Somerville (Lothians) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government what progress has been made in the development of the saltire prize for advances in wave and tidal energy. (S3O-6963)

**The Minister for Enterprise, Energy and Tourism (Jim Mather):** The draft saltire prize competition guidelines have been developed and were open to public consultation from 30 January 2009 through to 24 April 2009. The guidelines will be finalised and full applications will be accepted from 1 July 2009. The five-year competition period is on schedule to commence on 1 January 2010.

**Shirley-Anne Somerville:** I note that the Scottish Government's key energy sector report, which was published yesterday, estimated that Scotland has the potential to produce 60GW of electricity from renewable resources, which is 10 times our peak demand. I am pleased to hear that the saltire prize will play an important role in meeting that goal.

Does the minister agree that investment in new nuclear power stations would be a costly distraction from the harnessing of our vast offshore renewables potential that the saltire prize encourages?

**The Presiding Officer:** I call the cabinet secretary—sorry, the minister.

**Jim Mather:** Thank you for the promotion, Presiding Officer.

I very much agree with the member—the focus on renewable energy is entirely appropriate. It plays to our comparative advantage, which has been proven by the international attention that we are getting in relation to the saltire prize: we have already had 100 applications from about 24 countries. The European Union is showing interest in and support for the initiative in relation to the grid, offshore wind, and carbon capture and storage.

For Scotland, a focus on renewable energy means the ability to deliver for export clean green energy skills; intellectual property and technology; and the chance to match the legacy of oil and gas

with a higher proportion of wealth accruing to and remaining in Scotland.

**Liam McArthur (Orkney) (LD):** The minister has accepted that the saltire prize, notwithstanding its potential benefit, is unlikely to pay out until at least 2015. Does he accept that there are now serious concerns in the renewables sector at the lack of a dedicated research and development funding stream? Will he commit to make clear as a matter of urgency the Government's plans to build on the success of the wave and tidal energy scheme that was introduced by my colleague Nicol Stephen? Can he indicate the likely timeframe for renewable businesses being able to draw down much-needed funding?

**Jim Mather:** I take on board the member's message, and we understand the seriousness of the situation. However, with the new banding in the renewables obligation certificates scheme, we believe that we have a very material ability to attract investment. That, coupled with the momentum from the saltire prize in drawing attention to Scotland as a location in which people can invest and in increasing the awareness of Scotland's propensity to give a good return in terms of the productivity of the devices that are located here, augurs well for the future.

**Lewis Macdonald (Aberdeen Central) (Lab):** When does the minister expect the funds from the previous Administration's wave and tidal energy scheme to run out? Will he give us his estimate of the amount of public funding that the marine energy sector will need between that point and 2015?

**Jim Mather:** Time will tell exactly when the funds will run out. The funds are there and are being accessed and utilised, but the important issue is the opportunity in Scotland for the devices and systems that are put in place to generate revenue, which will justify further investment from the private sector.

**The Presiding Officer:** Questions 11 and 12 were not lodged.

### Employment

**13. Willie Coffey (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government when it last met the United Kingdom Government to discuss the protection of jobs in Scotland. (S3O-6942)

**The Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Sustainable Growth (John Swinney):** Scottish ministers have met and spoken to their UK counterparts regularly on a variety of issues associated with the protection of Scottish jobs. Recently, that has included contacts with other devolved Administrations at joint ministerial committee meetings; meetings between the

finance ministers of the devolved Administrations and the Chief Secretary to the Treasury; and meetings between the First Minister, the Secretary of State for Scotland and me.

**Willie Coffey:** The cabinet secretary will recall that I highlighted previously the problems that face the manufacturing sector in my constituency. As he knows, even companies with a strong asset base and good products are facing serious cash-flow difficulties. Would the cabinet secretary consider discussing with the UK Government how manufacturers might be helped to convert their land and property assets into the cash that they need to get them through the recession?

**John Swinney:** The Government, through its work with Scottish Enterprise and Highlands and Islands Enterprise—which are primarily involved in the direct interface with individual companies on their plans and developments—would certainly be prepared to give advice to individual companies on the issues that Mr Coffey raises. However, in the current context, land values and asset values are a particular factor to be wrestled with in judgments about disposal to generate capital resources for further investment.

We discuss with the UK Government on an on-going basis a range of questions in connection with employment in Scotland. I would be happy to take forward the issues that have been raised by Mr Coffey.

**The Presiding Officer:** Question 14 was not lodged and question 15 has been withdrawn.

### Renfrewshire Council (Budget)

**16. Hugh Henry (Paisley South) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Executive what the budget increase for Renfrewshire Council was in 2008-09 and 2009-10. (S3O-6899)

**The Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Sustainable Growth (John Swinney):** Budget decisions taken by Renfrewshire Council are a matter for the council. The council has budgeted to spend £420.6 million in 2009-10, compared with £410.1 million in 2008-09.

**Hugh Henry:** The fact is that Renfrewshire Council received a real-terms budget increase. However, I will not dwell on that.

Instead, I refer to an exchange at First Minister's question time on 30 April. The First Minister said:

"I genuinely do not understand how a rising education budget in real terms can translate into fewer teachers and schools in Glasgow. Glasgow City Council owes an explanation of that not only to the concerned parents but to everyone else in Scotland."—[*Official Report*, 30 April 2009; c 16967-8.]

Should Renfrewshire Council do the same?

**John Swinney:** I am sure that Renfrewshire Council is in regular dialogue with the people of Renfrewshire. I was in Paisley just the other week for a discussion with the business community. The local authority was an active participant in the discussion; indeed, it was chaired by the leader of the council, Councillor Mackay. I am sure that Renfrewshire Council is in regular dialogue with its constituents and their organisations.

### Carbon Capture and Storage

**17. Nigel Don (North East Scotland) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government what benefits there will be for the north-east from the proposals to develop carbon capture and storage as part of the European Commission's strategic energy review plans for a North Sea offshore grid. (S3O-6944)

**The Minister for Enterprise, Energy and Tourism (Jim Mather):** As the announcement of the Scottish carbon capture and storage research report on 1 May indicated, Scotland is well placed to take a world-leading role in the development of carbon capture and storage technology. CCS has the potential to reduce carbon emissions significantly from major emissions points, as well as to create significant employment and growth opportunities throughout Scotland.

Within Scotland, the current funding opportunities from the UK and European Union Governments regarding CCS relate to the Longannet project, which has our full support. However, in the longer term, there are other Scottish projects that we wish to be developed. Those could include the Peterhead gas station, for example, which we would wish to become eligible for assistance in due course.

Along with our long-term vision for a North Sea offshore grid, the Scottish Government is committed to doing all it can to turn those proposals into reality and ensure that the benefits apply throughout Scotland.

**Nigel Don:** How soon will Aberdeen city and shire benefit from the proposals?

**Jim Mather:** The initial focus must be on Longannet, as the demonstrator site, because it is very much the low-hanging fruit, provided that UK and EU support is forthcoming. Clearly, we remain disappointed that the Peterhead project did not go ahead. We would hope to see it resuscitated. However, with the report being placed on the record, and with the momentum in Scotland on carbon capture and storage, the member should be assured that we expect things to happen sooner rather than later.

**The Presiding Officer:** I can take some time out of the next debate, so I call David Stewart.

### Airports (Marketing Support)

**18. David Stewart (Highlands and Islands) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Executive what plans it has to provide marketing support for airports to develop further air routes to Europe and beyond. (S3O-6921)

**The Minister for Transport, Infrastructure and Climate Change (Stewart Stevenson):** EC guidelines 2005/C 312/01 mean that we have no plans to provide marketing support to airports for the development of new international air services.

**David Stewart:** The minister is well aware that the Scottish route development fund, set up by the previous Administration in 2002, was a great success. More than £7 million was spent, and 52 routes went ahead. There were great successes such as the Glasgow to Dubai route.

Notwithstanding his earlier reply, does the minister share my view that a new route development fund—which could incentivise lower-emitting aircraft—would be a huge boost to tourism, inward investment and the indigenous business community in Scotland?

**Stewart Stevenson:** I would be absolutely delighted if the European Commission were to change the rules to permit such a scheme. Were that to happen, we would of course consider it very seriously.

### United States of America and Canada (Engagement)

**The Presiding Officer (Alex Fergusson):** The next item of business is a debate on motion S3M-4131, in the name of Michael Russell, on Scotland's engagement with the United States of America and Canada. I remind members that, because the stage 3 debate on the Flood Risk Management (Scotland) Bill was concluded yesterday, this afternoon's debate is scheduled to finish at 5 o'clock.

I call Michael Russell to speak to and move the motion. Minister, you have a reasonably flexible 11 minutes.

14:56

**The Minister for Culture, External Affairs and the Constitution (Michael Russell):** Thank you, Presiding Officer. I shall be reasonably flexible.

I am pleased to speak to the motion in my name, which is on what I regard as a very important topic indeed—Scotland's past, present and future engagement with the United States and Canada. I notice that there is a paucity of amendments, which I hope is a good sign. I am happy to say that I will accept Labour's amendment, so I am sure that we can have a positive afternoon.

It is worth reminding ourselves that Scotland's historical links with the USA and Canada date back to the very founding of those great nations. There will not be sufficient time this afternoon—even with flexibility—to do full justice to the extent of Scotland's influence on the political, cultural, social and economic development of the USA and Canada. However, a few examples will illustrate the point.

According to the best sources, around half of the Presidents of the United States, including the current incumbent, have some sort of Scots or Scots-Irish ancestry. Scots accounted for a similar proportion of the signatories to the US declaration of independence, and nine of the 13 governors of the original United States were Scots. The signs of the connection are all around us. Just a few weeks ago, I was in Dumfriesshire visiting the cottage of John Paul Jones, the founder of the United States Navy. Scotland is dotted with places that have that sort of live connection with the United States.

Many of America's foremost businesspeople have been proud to claim Scottish roots—people such as Andrew Carnegie, John Rockefeller, John Paul Getty and, more recently, Bill Gates. Estimates of the total number of Americans with Scots or Scots-Irish ancestry range widely, from 9 million to 29 million, which represents possibly as many as one in 10 Americans.

Scotland's mark on Canada has been even greater: some 15 per cent of the population can trace their roots back to Scotland. In Nova Scotia, the proportion is even higher, at around 30 per cent. Remarkably, some 40 per cent of the citizens of Prince Edward Island, which has a population of only 135,000, claim Scots ancestry. Indeed, I am very proud of the fact that my wife's ancestry includes the Cape Breton giant—the tallest non-pathological human being from Scotland and Canada. Sarah Boyack is shaking her head in wonderment. However, as well as being a privilege, it is an indication that in almost every family—and I suspect in the family of almost every member in the chamber—there will be some link with Canada or the United States.

There are strong connections in bloodlines, but there are connections elsewhere. Many people from North America who are not Scottish come to Scotland to enjoy the connection. For those who are Scottish or have Scottish roots, the connection is all the greater. We will see that this year, at the gathering in July, which will be the largest ever bringing together of people with Scots and Scots-Irish roots who want to come to Scotland for a single event. The event builds on the enthusiasm that has been generated by the year of homecoming, which is focused in America and Canada on strengthening and nurturing our connections with the Scots diaspora. We have commissioned research that should inform us how we can best develop those existing links.

We should not just look backwards; we should look forwards. Our aim will be to work with partners across the private and public sectors in Scotland and North America to develop a cohesive, effective and supportive framework for our future relationship.

At the heart of that are the celebrations that take place across North America on 6 April to commemorate the signing of the declaration of Arbroath in 1320. It might seem slightly arcane that that event is celebrated, until one realises that there is a strong link between the declaration of Arbroath and the American declaration of independence. The celebrations started in Nova Scotia in 1986 and spread to other provinces of Canada. They were adopted by a resolution of the United States Senate in 1998, and in 2008 the then US President, George W Bush, issued a proclamation marking the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of tartan day, as it was called.

The Government on this side of the Atlantic has been capitalising on the good will that that has created, but we need to accelerate that activity. Individual activity by parts of Government has been significant, but it was not until 2001 that Henry McLeish signalled an intention to harness the potential opportunities. I pay tribute to him and

the work that he did. Since then, he and his successors, Jack McConnell and Alex Salmond, have built the relationship and ensured the engagement of Government. The Parliament's relationship has been an important part of that. The decision in 2001 to establish a Scottish affairs office in Washington DC was a useful foundation on which all of that could be built.

The challenge remains to connect in a modern way the people of North America with the people of Scotland, and to build out of the traditional and historical relationship a new relationship. Of course, the prize to be had is great. Let us look just at the financial prize. With a value in 2007 of £2.8 billion, the US remains Scotland's biggest export market and our single largest overseas market for tourists. There were 417,000 visits to Scotland from the US in 2007, with an estimated spend of £257 million. In the same year, Scotland's exports to Canada were worth £275 million and there were 124,000 inward visits. Those are big connections that can be made bigger. When those figures are reinforced with a whole range of other trading and business links, one can see a sharp edge to the issue—an edge of earning money in Scotland and ensuring that Scotland prospers as a result of the relationship.

Tartan day—indeed, the whole of Scotland week—is now the visible symbol of that relationship. It is an opportunity for us to renew the relationship and to profit by it. We have heard of business and cultural examples. On the cultural side, I refer to the phenomenal success of "Black Watch", the National Theatre of Scotland's touring production. At one time, we were informed that it would be too rich fare for America, but the Americans took to it with huge enthusiasm and gusto, and the National Theatre of Scotland is talked about very warmly in New York, in particular.

There has been investment in building the relationship. The previous Administration made a considerable investment, which has continued to grow. When we were elected two years ago, we were respectful of what had taken place and keen to extend it. That we have done. We expanded the remit of the Scottish affairs office to include responsibility for the totality of Scottish ministers' objectives in the USA and Canada, which includes the contribution that is made by Scottish Development International and other Scottish public sector organisations, such as VisitScotland. In the leadership role, the Scottish Government counsellor in North America, Robin Naysmith, is charged with ensuring that the work of the Scottish Government and its partners is integrated, cohesive and co-ordinated, and supports the Government's primary purpose of increasing sustainable economic growth for Scotland.

The distinctive touch that we have brought to the process has been to harness all the resources and interests and to focus them on the Government's purpose and what we believe Scotland will profit by. In 2008, we published an international framework that set out the basis on which we would seek to engage with our partners overseas. Since then, we have refreshed the plan and we held a stakeholder event some weeks ago to focus on how the plan can be built up. We need to build on the strength of our historical and cultural links, sharpen the focus of our activities, simplify the way in which we promote Scotland in Canada and the United States of America, and share our vision with partners and friends in a way that ensures that we can all work to the same objectives.

We have made a good start. I will reflect on my personal experience in that regard. Since this Government was elected in 2007, ministers have made 15 official visits to the United States and five official visits to Canada. All of those visits were focused on a string of political, cultural and educational objectives.

Earlier this year, the First Minister made a short and highly successful visit to Washington DC, where he met the recently appointed US Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton, just four weeks into the new US Administration. During that visit, the First Minister was joined by members of the 50-strong friends of Scotland caucus in the House of Representatives, when Senators Jim Webb and Lamar Alexander launched a new friends of Scotland caucus, with bipartisan membership comprising a third of the US Senate. Those events represent a level of political engagement between Scotland and the US that has not been reached since the days of the founding fathers.

Last month, the Deputy First Minister led a Scottish Government delegation to North America for Scotland week, building on the success of the first delegation of its type in 2008. Nicola Sturgeon, Jim Mather and I visited 10 cities in Canada and the US where, in the course of the week, we undertook a total of 60 official engagements and met individually 32 current or potential investors in Scotland. Through receptions, dinners and other events, we spoke to a further 1,000 business, cultural and diaspora figures to promote homecoming Scotland 2009. Our objectives were to build confidence in Scotland as a place in which to do business, live, learn and work, and to promote homecoming Scotland. As we predicted, the total budget for the trip did not exceed £400,000.

Our collective efforts during Scotland week were greatly enhanced by the welcome involvement of the Presiding Officer and a cross-party delegation of four members of this Parliament who travelled extensively in Canada and the US. You and I had

the memorable experience of walking down 6<sup>th</sup> Avenue, Presiding Officer, either side of the actor Alan Cumming, without traffic coming in the opposite direction. It was an important, enjoyable and significant set of events.

Among the highlights of Scotland week 2009 were business meetings with some of America's biggest businesses, such as Johnson & Johnson, Microsoft, Sun Microsystems, Chevron, Boeing, J P Morgan, Morgan Stanley, the Trump Organization, Citi, IBM, Research in Motion and the Bank of New York Mellon, all of which are investors in Scotland. We also had meetings with potential investors and representatives of more than 100 other companies during business receptions and dinners in New York, Toronto, Seattle, North Carolina and Vancouver, which was taking part in Scotland week for the first time.

The Scottish Government sponsored the sixth annual Scotland run in New York, which was branded the homecoming Scotland run and attracted a record 8,000 participants—alas, I was not one of them, and nor, I think, were you, Presiding Officer.

A showcase for Scotland's textile industry and innovative fashion designers was hosted by the flagship department store Saks Fifth Avenue.

The Deputy First Minister made a major speech at the prestigious Stanford University, in which she highlighted Scotland's scientific excellence. I went to the Economic Club of Canada, where I outlined the Scottish Government's response to the current economic situation, and to the Munk centre for international studies in the University of Toronto, where I lectured on Scotland's constitutional future. In North Carolina, Jim Mather met the state governor and co-hosted, with you, Presiding Officer, a successful reception for Senate and House of Representative members of the North Carolina state legislature. I understand that Mr Mather has since been back to America—no doubt he will talk about that when he sums up.

Ministers have spent a lot of time engaging in and building up the relationship between Scotland and North America, but I believe that more can be done to encourage activities not only in the United States but in Canada. One focus that I will bring to my job will be to ensure that we increase the amount of work that we do in Canada and the profile of that work, because the relationship with Canada is strong and on-going.

In Toronto, I had the pleasure of meeting the former Canadian foreign minister Flora MacDonald—a name that almost says it all—for the first time since I met her in New Delhi in 2000. At the age of 80, she is going all over the world to talk about peace and justice, and she leads and supports a charity that works in Afghanistan. She

traces her whole personality and success to the strong background that she inherited from the many generations of her Scottish family in Canada. She embodies Canada's strong relationship with Scotland. She is proud of her background. She is very Canadian, but very Scottish, too.

When we look at what we can achieve in Canada, we should see a huge opportunity. We should celebrate the work that we have done throughout North America, we should be grateful to all those who have taken part from all parties, and we should intensify our work, based on clear objectives.

I move,

That the Parliament recognises the importance of Scotland's relationship with the United States of America and Canada; notes the contribution of the Scottish Government, the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body and all those who were involved in the development of Scotland Week over the last eight years in North America; expresses its gratitude for the significant contribution of the Scottish diaspora in helping to promote Scotland's rich cultural heritage, and encourages the Scottish Government to continue to develop a more joined-up approach to the promotion of Scotland in Canada and the United States of America by working in partnership with all relevant organisations in the public and private sector in order to ensure that Scotland derives real social and economic benefits from such activities.

**The Presiding Officer:** I hope that the minister will forgive me for pointing out that I did take part in the homecoming Scotland run, when I managed to summon up enough energy to hold one end of the finishing tape; the Deputy First Minister held the other end.

15:10

**Pauline McNeill (Glasgow Kelvin) (Lab):** When I first heard that the debate had been scheduled, I thought, "Oh, that'll be a fun afternoon, hearing about Mike Russell and Nicola Sturgeon's vacation in New York, Washington, Toronto and Vancouver." Nicola Sturgeon definitely got the better deal—although Mike Russell might not agree—in that she got to host an event involving Scotland's budding fashion designers at Saks Fifth Avenue.

In all seriousness, Labour has always recognised the huge significance of Scotland's relationship with the United States and Canada, which the debate gives a chance to examine in some detail. That is why we will support the Government's motion, and I am pleased that the minister has said that he will accept the Labour amendment.

As the minister said, our engagement with the US and Canada is fundamental to our success as a nation. As well as being the largest inward investor in Scotland, the US is the top export

destination for Scottish goods. As we know, Canada has an extremely strong connection with Scotland. The country's first Prime Minister was a Glasgow-born Scot, and 4 million Canadians claim to have some Scottish heritage. In my research, I discovered that the Canadians even have their own Loch Ness monster called ogopogo—I did not know that—although, as we know, our Loch Ness monster is real.

As I think Mike Russell mentioned, if one speaks to people from the US, many of them say that they have a connection with Scotland, even if it is often an extremely distant one. Considering that less than a quarter of US citizens have passports and travel outwith the country's borders, it is clear that Scotland has made quite an impact on the most powerful country in the world. Americans like the Scottish people and they like the Celtic connection, and rightly so. We nurture that.

The new president, Obama, gives many of us hope that a new political approach will be adopted in the US, and I am sure that we all look forward to that.

Recent data show that there has been a sizeable depreciation in sterling, which has resulted in a decline in key export markets. The Confederation of British Industry has called on the Scottish Government to support exporters and to come up with a plan that will assist their recovery, and it is incumbent on the Government to live up to those demands. It is interesting that although there has been a decline in whisky exports to the USA, there has been an increase in whisky exports to Canada, so it is clear that Canada is a growth market.

The year of homecoming gives us a chance to recover our position. Scotland week, which the minister mentioned, represents a key opportunity to promote what Scotland has to offer. It has always been a key objective of Scotland week—previously known as tartan week—to promote Scotland's trade and investment links. The Scottish National Party should never forget that Scotland week is about promoting Scotland; it is not about promoting the party that is in power. I have watched carefully the speeches that Government ministers have made abroad to ensure that they have presented an accurate view of what the Scottish people think about their future.

It is interesting that the budget for Scotland week has halved and that the First Minister was not part of this year's event—I make no connection between those two facts—but I am sure that that does not mean that the Government is any less committed to it. I hope that Jim Mather will address that point when he sums up. Scotland week is a golden opportunity to grow Scotland's economic potential by connecting the existing



cultural and historical links and using them to our maximum advantage.

In her speech at Stanford University, the Deputy First Minister talked at length about Scotland's contribution to science and innovation. Scots have made numerous inventions around the world, from ultrasound and magnetic resonance imaging to anaesthetics and penicillin, but I recently discovered that there is no exhibition or permanent display dedicated to the work of Scottish inventors, which I argue is an important part of our history and culture. Glasgow Science Centre or Our Dynamic Earth could hold such a display, and I am pursuing the idea with some vigour. I know that the Science Museum in London has offered Glasgow the chance to exhibit some Scottish inventions, and I hope that the Government will support any attempts to bring that about.

We punch above our weight in research and development, taking 12 per cent of United Kingdom research council grants and thereby benefiting from the UK funding framework. Also, our continued collaboration with US universities is a two-way street. Recently, for example, Philip Cohen from Dundee became only the fourth Scot in history to be invited to join the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America.

While Nicola Sturgeon was making her speech, Mike Russell was doing his bit in Canada, causing uproar among radio chiefs with his suggestion that Scotland should follow Canada in having quotas that stipulate that a third of the music played on radio should be home grown.

**Michael Russell:** Will the member give way?

**Pauline McNeill:** I have more to say, but I will give way.

**Michael Russell:** I have to say that I cannot recall hearing from a single radio chief—however that might be defined—either in uproar or otherwise. I would welcome any evidence that the member can provide in that respect.

**Pauline McNeill:** Perhaps the minister has not read any of the articles in which that very language was used. I am happy to send him the quotes. It simply goes to show that a bit of consultation with the industry might save ministers from creating that kind of response.

However, in fairness to the minister, I think that we can learn a lot from Canada's approach to the music industry, and I hope that he will consider some of its other initiatives, which could find support. It is not the K T Tunstalls but the other less successful artists who need support or other interventions.

**Margo MacDonald (Lothians) (Ind):** Although I appreciate the member's long record of promoting

Scottish music and musicians, I wonder whether she agrees that we should ditch the lot and support Susan Boyle. After all, it has taken us eight years to get to where we are, and she went coast to coast in eight minutes.

**Pauline McNeill:** It is hard to disagree with the member. I was abroad when Susan Boyle became famous, but it certainly seems as if she has made an impact on the world.

I have said that we support the Government's motion, and I am pleased that it will support our amendment. However, the year of homecoming, in particular, is in danger of being dominated by our past rather than our future. For example, the advertisement for homecoming, with its all-white cast, promoted a rather dated version of Scotland, and the problem was compounded by the belated airbrushing-in of a solitary Asian man. I am sure that we all condemn that action. In any case, the Labour amendment seeks to put the matter beyond doubt and ensure that we are talking about a modern and diverse Scotland.

I do not believe that the Government is capitalising on the year of homecoming. It makes no sense for it to spend less money on promoting the event abroad and for its strategy to focus on the home market. There is a job to do here. After all, visitor numbers are declining. I wonder whether in his summing up the Minister for Enterprise, Energy and Tourism will tell us whether FirstGroup, with its US connections, has been approached to promote homecoming over there as well as in Scotland. The Government has spent £112,000 on TV ads promoting homecoming in Scotland, but has spent only £56,000 on advertising it abroad.

I said earlier that it is important for the Government to promote Scotland and its perceptions. In a speech that he gave last year at the University of Virginia, the First Minister focused on the fundamental rights of nations and peoples and quoted Thomas Jefferson's comment that

"Every nation has a right to govern itself ...under what forms it pleases",

giving the overall impression that the national conversation truly reflected Scottish opinion. The Parliament will—and, indeed, should—support its ministers in their attempts to promote Scotland abroad, but what we expect them to do is promote Scotland's business, trade and good relations, not give the false impression that the country is in favour of independence when it clearly is not. We cannot allow Government ministers to present such a portrayal of Scotland. The Scottish National Party must resist the temptation to promote itself.

In such times, there is real work to be done in Scotland. Visitor numbers are declining, and we

need to improve our trade links, particularly with the US and Canada. We should and we will portray a modern Scotland—the one Scotland of many cultures. I am sure that much of what happened during Scotland week can be taken forward in the weeks to come.

I move amendment S3M-4131.1, to insert after second “Scottish Government”:

“to promote Scotland’s cultural diversity in a modern Scotland and”.

15:20

**Ted Brocklebank (Mid Scotland and Fife)**

**(Con):** Unlike your good self, Presiding Officer, Mike Russell, Iain Smith and my colleague Bill Aitken, I have not had the good fortune to march down the Avenue of the Americas with Alan Cumming, far less with Sean Connery, nor to behold the First Minister in a Stetson and kilt heading up the tartan day celebrations. However, I am feeling consensual and I am prepared to believe that those are invaluable props in promoting Scotland in the Americas, not just stunts to drive the nationalist bandwagon.

I have teased the minister about whether all the press and radio stories that the Government claims to have generated during Scotland week have brought any business. However, it is imperative that Parliament builds on the strong links with America and Canada, which are our most important diaspora partners for exports and tourist spend, as the minister has said. We recognise the efforts of the Government and its predecessors in developing business links in particular with the Americas, therefore we will support the motion, with the caveat, of course, that the promotion of Scotland should not be to the detriment of promoting the wider United Kingdom.

It has been my great good fortune to study at first hand the ties that bind the United States and Canada to Scotland. With due respect to tartan day, dressed to kilt and the rest—which my researcher has told me, and the minister has confirmed, cost the best part of £400,000 in 2009; I am sure that that money has been excellently spent—members will be glad to hear that my odysseys to the Americas over the years have not cost the Parliament a penny.

Members will have noted that there is a stanza from John Galt’s song of the Canadian fishermen on the Parliament’s Canongate wall. Few lines more hauntingly express the pain of exile:

“From the lone shieling of the misty island  
Mountains divide us, and the waste of seas  
Yet still the blood is strong, the heart is Highland  
And we in dreams behold the Hebrides.”

Some years ago, I produced a television series for Channel 4, the video of which is still available

relatively cheaply. Borrowing from John Galt, I called it “The Blood is Strong”. The phrase seemed to me to articulate perfectly the Gaelic sense of cianalas—the deep yearning that Scots have for their homeland. Cianalas is still to be found in the Carolinas, where exiled Jacobites first landed at Cape Fear. It is to be found in the prairies of Manitoba, where a rash forebear of our former colleague Lord James Douglas-Hamilton bankrupted himself trying to establish a new Scotland. It will be found in gleaming downtown Toronto. I discovered that that city’s telephone directory has more names with the prefix “Mac” than Edinburgh does. There is certainly cianalas in the fishing hamlets of Cape Breton, where Gaelic Scots first made landfall at Pictou—most perished in their first dreadful winter of 1773. In those and many other parts of the Americas, the blood is indeed still strong. No intervening waste of seas can dilute the history that we share and the debt that we owe in peace and war to our United States and Canadian cousins.

As we have heard, half of the signatories to the American declaration of independence were Scots. One came from Carskerdo, not far from Ceres in north-east Fife. The first two Prime Ministers of Canada were Scots. Gaelic, the ancient language of the Scots, still flourishes in Cape Breton, Nova Scotia. Historically, culturally and economically, Americans and Canadians will therefore be especially welcome in the year of homecoming.

Unlike Pauline McNeill, I do not think that the debate should be an occasion for breast beating about how many credit-crunched visitors will make their way back to the old country. I am sure that we will have such debates on many occasions, perhaps towards the end of this year and next year, but today we should simply rejoice that fishermen MacAskills from Cape Breton will join fishermen MacAskills on Berneray and Harris this summer and marvel that, two centuries on, the language in which they talk about fishing will still be Gaelic. It is a time for American Armstrongs and Canadian Galbraiths to return to Langholm and Crinan respectively, and to marvel that the first man on the moon was an Armstrong and that the father of modern economics, Harvard’s John Kenneth Galbraith, was the grandson of an Argyllshire crofter. Carnegies returning to Dunfermline and Bells returning to Edinburgh will celebrate the founder of the US steel industry and the inventor of the telephone respectively.

**Margo MacDonald:** I do not want to rain on the member’s parade, but we should also remember who founded the Ku Klux Klan.

**Ted Brocklebank:** I do not know the tartan of that particular Klan.

Returning Davisons will recall that John D Rockefeller learned about business not from his carousing salesman father but from his thrifty Dundee-born mother. Let us not carp that the new Burns birthplace project is a year late and short of funds; instead, let us hope that those travelling to Ayr to pay tribute to the bard this year might include America's greatest living poet, who is a fervent fan of Burns. His name is Robert Zimmerman, he has a house on Speyside and he is also called Bob Dylan.

Today, we pay tribute in words to our cousins from the Americas; doubtless, we will have an opportunity to toast them with something more tangible at the many homecoming events that have been arranged throughout Scotland later this year. I urge every member of the Parliament to support the gatherings and ceilidhs in their areas and to wish *ceud mìle fàilte*—a hundred thousand welcomes—to our homecoming visitors. The aim is not just to look backwards and celebrate our historical links, but to look forward as well. I am happy to support the motion.

15:25

**Iain Smith (North East Fife) (LD):** Follow that.

When I saw the business for today's meeting, I thought that I might prefer to be down at the Grange watching the Saltires play Middlesex, but the issue is nonetheless important. We cannot underestimate the importance to Scotland of our relationships with the United States and Canada. As the minister said, about 15 per cent—worth more than £3 billion annually—of our export trade is with the United States. About 450 US companies have invested in Scotland, employing about 100,000 people. Nearly 20 per cent of our visitors from overseas come from the United States or Canada and they spend about £350 million a year. There are strong links in many of the key sectors of our economy, such as energy, electronics, life sciences and financial services, which give potential for more investment and export opportunities, as well as opportunities for our companies to invest in the United States and Canada and bring foreign earnings into Scotland.

As Ted Brocklebank said, many of our major companies, such as FirstBus and Scottish Power, have already invested in America—I will not mention the Royal Bank of Scotland. Many of our universities, most notably the University of St Andrews in my constituency, attract large numbers of American students, who bring in welcome income to the universities and local economies. Those students also help to develop academic and research links, with long-term benefits for Scotland. Of course, I cannot mention St Andrews without mentioning golf, which is of great importance to Americans and Canadians. For all

those reasons, it is essential that Scotland continues to develop our relationships, whether academic, economic or through tourism, with our cousins across the Atlantic.

As Ted Brocklebank rightly pointed out, there are strong historical connections across the ocean. Millions of people in the United States and Canada claim a direct link with Scotland, and many more claim an indirect one. There is good will for Scotland, as anyone who has been on a personal visit or part of a parliamentary delegation will know. In the 10 years since the Parliament was set up, I have had the great fortune to go on three visits to Canada and the United States. Two of them were Commonwealth Parliamentary Association visits to Canada. The first was to Quebec in 2001 and, two years later, I was part of the delegation that celebrated the 250<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Selkirk landings on Prince Edward Island. We also visited New Brunswick. Last year, I had the good fortune to attend Scotland week as my party's representative, so I know the value of that week, which is highlighted in the Government's evaluation report on that event. I look forward to finding out about the benefits from this year's Scotland week in this year's evaluation report from the Government.

It is important that we examine what we do during such visits. It is easy simply to use them as a way in which to build links between parliamentarians, but the Parliament and the Government should work together more closely on the programmes to ensure that we all sing from the same hymn sheet and that we develop tourism and business links.

During Scotland week last year, we went to Virginia to see for ourselves how the much-lauded Scotland performs system—well, it is lauded by the SNP Government—was developed in Virginia. The visit was interesting and informative. For example, it informed me that, unlike Scotland performs, which has been used by the SNP Government, the system in Virginia is based on a board that includes representatives from the Government, the legislature and civic society, particularly businesses. That board develops the policy and the measures that are required. There are big lessons to be learned from that. If we are to have a Scotland performs system, that should involve our working together on what we should measure, rather than just measuring what the Government thinks we should measure.

We also went to Toronto in Canada, where we looked at energy issues, which are of great importance in Scotland and to me, as the Economy, Energy and Tourism Committee, of which I am convener, reaches the end of its energy inquiry.

We spent a great deal of time promoting homecoming and Scottish tourism, which we all felt are extremely important to Scotland's economy this year. The tartan parade was the highlight of the event. When I reached the end of it, I was pleased to get on to the VIP bus. However, I had to rush off it again suddenly when I saw coming towards me the banner of the University of St Andrew's alumni in New York, to whom I was able to speak. It was a great event and a great opportunity.

One of the key passages in the Scotland week evaluation report is about team Scotland. We miss that team Scotland approach. We need to work together—Parliament and Government—to work out our international framework and what the relationships are. We need to ensure that when we make visits as ministers and parliamentarians, we work together to develop Scotland's economy.

I hope that the international framework that was published by the Scottish Government last year will be developed. It says:

"Further plans on North America and further work on promotion and reputation management will follow during the coming year."

A year on from its publication, and still we have not seen the further plans on North America. It might have been useful to publish them before today's debate.

**Michael Russell:** I think I said in my speech that we are in the process of refreshing the America plan. I have been keen to influence it myself, so it is slightly later than it might have been. Progress is good and I hope that we will publish something in the weeks and months to come. I will not tie myself down, but there will be a new plan.

**Iain Smith:** The traditional Government response—it will be produced shortly.

The way forward for us is important. We need a focused approach in North America. We need VisitScotland, SDI, the Scottish Government and parliamentarians to work together to maximise our impact by concentrating on where we will get the best returns—for example, biotech industries and energy, where there are great internal and external investment opportunities.

We need to work now on what will follow homecoming. Although it is for one year only, we need to build on it and to start thinking about what we will do from 2010 onwards to develop any of the successes that homecoming might bring.

I am happy to support the motion and the amendment.

15:32

**Tricia Marwick (Central Fife) (SNP):** It is a great pleasure to speak in the debate. I am sorry to hear that Ted Brocklebank has never been fortunate enough to be part of a Scottish Parliament delegation, but I am sure that his speech today will serve as a job application to his party to be part of the delegation for Scotland week next year.

I was fortunate to be part of the Scottish Parliament delegation for Scotland week this April, together with the Presiding Officer, Sarah Boyack, Murdo Fraser and Tavish Scott. All of us who were part of the delegation would echo the view of the minister, Michael Russell, that the warmth of the welcome for Scotland in New York, Quebec and North Carolina will stay with us for some time to come.

In New York, the Scotland week march down 6<sup>th</sup> Avenue was well supported by the diaspora, to say nothing of the thousands of ordinary New Yorkers who turned out to give the marchers support. It was good to see that the homecoming Scotland team had been working well—as we walked, we saw many saltires that I am sure had been given out just before the march. The team had given out so many of them that by the time we came to the end of the march, they had run out. That probably shows the great demand for saltire hats and the like.

In Quebec, the delegation met committees to discuss joint concerns and opportunities around renewable energy issues, relationships with federal Governments and other opportunities for us all. It was clear that interest in Scotland was genuine and tangible. As a measure of that, the delegation was present as a motion to commemorate tartan day was introduced in the Parliament. It was interesting that the representatives of the federal Government, who were introduced to the Parliament just before the Scottish delegation, had nothing like the welcome from the Parliament that the Scottish delegation had.

Since I came back, I have referred in the chamber to the fact that our Presiding Officer was quite taken with being referred to as the President of Scotland. I know not what Mr Salmond, our beloved First Minister, would make of that, but the delegation rather enjoyed it.

I was also delighted to hear a good Fife accent when we visited St Andrew's church in Quebec. It turned out that the curator of the kirk came from Lochgelly, 2 miles away from where I was born and brought up, and her good Fife accent was undiluted after 30 years in Quebec.

The Scottish delegation met the governor of North Carolina and both houses of the General

Assembly, and the Presiding Officer made a presentation to them. Murdo Fraser and I had in-depth discussions about the federal Government's stimulus programme, to which I have referred in previous debates. The Scottish Parliament and the minister co-hosted a reception for the Scottish community and both houses of the Assembly. I was surprised to find out that North Carolina had the highest percentage of citizens claiming Scots ancestry in the United States.

The Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body has yet to discuss what our future relationship with the US and Canada will be. We need an evaluation of the most recent Scotland week. However, I am clear that the Parliament and its MSPs have opened up great links with the state legislatures in the US and the provincial Governments in Canada. We have much to learn from their powers and their relationships with other Governments and by exchanging views on matters of joint interest.

It is clear that the Parliament has a role in making links with other legislatures, but the Scottish Government's Scotland week programme did not make full use of the parliamentary delegation. Many more joint events could have taken place. For example, the reception for the Scottish community in Raleigh, North Carolina—at which Murdo Fraser and I worked the room in our own inimitable way—was co-hosted by the minister and the Presiding Officer. It is clear to me from that event and others that the Scottish Government should in future work far more closely with the Scottish Parliament to ensure that we get as many bangs for our buck as possible from the Scottish Parliament's and the Scottish community's representation and to ensure that Scotland is showcased in the best possible way. I would like some commitment from ministers that, in future years, they will try to ensure that they and the Scottish Parliament work together far more closely than happened during the most recent Scotland week.

There is great interest in Scotland at every level—from the political to the personal, and from the industrial to the cultural—from people who share a heritage and a vision for our world. I am happy to support the Government's purpose of establishing new links and building on the existing ones. There is much more to be done, but no one denies that a great start has been made.

15:38

**Charlie Gordon (Glasgow Cathcart) (Lab):** It is appropriate that we have such a debate in the year of homecoming. I say yes not only to the celebration of our historical, cultural and social links with North America, but, I hope, to an

injection of hard currency to help maintain jobs in Scotland during the current recession.

I have had the opportunity to visit parts of the USA and Canada. North America is seldom dull: Pittsburgh and Vancouver are like nowhere else I have ever been, whereas Montreal and Boston feel somewhat like continental Europe. Contemporary politics in North America are anything but dull. The historic election of President Obama last November was sandwiched between federal elections in Canada last October and provincial elections in Québec last December. Incidentally, in the latter, according to Reuters news agency, the Parti Québécois increased its representation in the provincial Parliament while hardly ever mentioning a referendum on independence—that is just an aside.

I am a member of the Parliament's European and External Relations Committee, whose members have engaged with two important delegations from Canada in recent months. Last December, some of us met the agent-general of Québec province, Pierre Boulanger, who represents Québec in the UK; and, in March, some of us met a cross-party group of Canadian parliamentarians from the federal Parliament and various provincial Parliaments. Both sets of discussions were mutually interesting and useful.

The Minister for Culture, External Affairs and the Constitution gave evidence to the European and External Relations Committee on 31 March this year, soon after he was promoted—I was going to say appointed, but perhaps "promoted" is a more apposite term. At that meeting, the convener reminded him that the committee awaits receipt of the Scottish Government's refreshed North America plan, and the minister replied that it would be published in the summer. Well, the sun is shining today, but he gave a rather vaguer commitment a few minutes ago to Iain Smith. Perhaps he could have a go at telling us exactly when we will see the North America plan, because we are all very interested in it.

**Michael Russell:** I seem to remember that I indicated during questioning at the committee meeting that I thought that there had perhaps been more documents in the past than there should have been. I think that Mr Gordon and the convener agreed with me on that, and I agreed to consider how we present the documents. I indicated in my earlier speech that we will refresh the North America plan—indeed, that process is under way. I welcome Mr Gordon's contribution and I am sure that he will take entirely seriously my assurance that we are not diminishing but intensifying our work and that we will have documentation that will be fit for purpose.

**Charlie Gordon:** Let us hope that it will be a long summer and that we will see the plan before the end of it.

In the meantime, I have been reading the minister's blog on his official visits in Canada—a task that some may be averse to, but it is all in a day's work for me. The blog obviously came in handy for the minister when he was preparing the speech that he delivered earlier. I found the blog informative but a wee bit dull—I wondered whether it had been ghost-written by an apprentice spin doctor. If so, that might explain the incorrect use of apostrophes in parts of it. Whatever the case is, the blog is useful, but it does not capture the minister's ebullience, which we witnessed earlier.

The global recession has hurt Canada, although not perhaps in the same way as it has hurt our own country. Ontario province, with the great city of Toronto at its heart, has suffered many job losses at US-owned factories. For the first time in living memory, Ontario province will be a recipient of funds from the federal Government, due to its reduced living standards. Ontario and Canada generally want to reduce their overreliance on, and overexposure to, economic conditions in the USA. We Scots must plan and press for stronger trade links with Canada, not just stronger tourism and cultural links.

Canada is not a basket case—far from it. For example, Alberta province's oil reserves are second in scale only to those of Saudi Arabia; and the city of Calgary is consequently rising to become, possibly, Canada's wealthiest city. I received an e-mail from a constituent who visited Calgary in March, in which he said, incidentally, that he did not see any sign of the promotion of homecoming Scotland, but I will reserve judgment on that. I endorse all our efforts on homecoming. I am doing my own wee bit in that regard: there is a link to the homecoming Scotland website on the home page of my website.

15:44

**Aileen Campbell (South of Scotland) (SNP):** There is an old saying that England and America are two countries separated by a common language. My experience of visiting the States is that the version of English that we speak in Scotland often sounds like a completely different language to American lugs. Indeed, I am sure that many of the interns who work for members throughout the chamber will testify to that. However, they will also testify that, while it may sound impenetrable at first, the common denominator is not so much the way in which our common language is spoken, but what is said.

For many decades—indeed, for centuries—Scotland has been lucky enough to speak a

language of friendship with the peoples of North America, in both the US and Canada. That language of friendship extends to the principles of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness that are mentioned in the American declaration of independence and in the bills of rights that have been adopted in Canada over the years. As with many such declarations around the world, Scotland's declaration of Arbroath and its assertion of the right of the people to choose who governs them inspired those documents and charters.

For that reason, 6 April—the date on which, 689 years ago, the declaration of Arbroath was signed—was picked as the date for the first US tartan day in 1998. It is worth noting that several Canadian provinces marked tartan day before the idea was adopted in America, but that is just more evidence of the close relationships among our three countries and the benefits that come from working and learning together. Tartan day has grown and evolved to become what we now know as Scotland week. I believe that we can all be proud of the Parliament's achievements in building on that relationship and in strengthening the dialogue between our countries.

This year's Scotland week events built on the success of those of previous years, with official events taking place in 10 cities across the US and Canada. There was an amazing amount of formal and informal activity, both in North America and in Scotland, to make the most of the week. The Minister for Culture, External Affairs and the Constitution recorded his experiences—as Charlie Gordon noted—in an exciting blog, which includes some impressive pictures of his time representing our country.

As the minister said, Scotland week is just one very visible and high-profile manifestation of the relationship between Scotland and the US and Canada, but links of all kinds take place on a daily basis. Anyone in Scotland who traces their family tree back through a couple of generations is likely to find links to North America. We often refer to Americans and Canadians as our cousins, and many families in Scotland literally have cousins or relatives who live across the Atlantic. Scotland's online national archives are well-known to American genealogists, and the popularity of TV programmes such as "Who Do You Think You Are?" and of Radio Scotland's "Digging Up Your Roots" testify that the interest and curiosity work both ways. Indeed, roots often go deeper. In my family, my father tells the legend that some of our ancestors moved to Canada, where they invented the McIntosh Red apple. I am not sure whether that is true, but I hope that it is.

Having mentioned the success of television programmes on genealogy, I should point out that

TV entertainment is also shared by our countries. I happen to know that Scotland's own celebrity interior designers, Colin and Justin—whom I met at the Young Scot awards—are hugely popular in Canada. The culture minister will be delighted to know that they have offered their services to promote the year of homecoming in whatever way they can.

It is appropriate that today's debate on the success of Scotland week and on our relations with the US and Canada takes place during the year of homecoming. No one visiting Scotland this year, or with an affinity for Scotland, can fail to notice that we have opened wide our country's doors to welcome anyone and everyone who wishes to learn more. We want people to visit Scotland to enjoy what we have to offer the world, and we want to learn from them.

Such an initiative would be good and commendable at any time, but it is especially welcome now as the world experiences economic recession. Leisure travel and tourism often suffer early and seriously as disposable incomes diminish, so the year of homecoming will help to insulate Scotland by making an extra case for visiting this country at a time when people need to choose carefully where and when they wish to travel. The 200,000 potential visitors who are included in VisitScotland's loyalty programme receive monthly updates about homecoming, as do more than 2,400 diaspora organisations around the world.

Tourism from the US and Canada is worth hundreds of millions of pounds to Scotland's economy—almost £1 million per day, or some 22 per cent of the total spend by overseas tourists in 2007. We do not yet know how those figures will be affected during the economic downturn, but it is clear that such tourists will continue to remain of huge importance.

I know that many of us in the Parliament have done our own bit to promote homecoming. I have written to municipal representatives in towns and cities—such as Biggar, Saskatchewan, and Irvine, California—that share place names with towns in the South of Scotland, which I represent.

I have also been involved in trying to make it a little easier for people from Scotland who wish to travel to the US, especially those who wish to make an impact that will benefit Scotland in the long run. As members will be aware, the US consulate in Edinburgh stopped issuing visas several years ago so the recent understandable tightening of visa restrictions has resulted in more and more people from Scotland finding that they must travel to London to acquire a visa. That can prove particularly expensive for bands that wish to travel on tour. Bands such as Mogwai and representatives of other bands have told me about

the high costs of travelling to London in order to play in the US. Such costs might have a negative impact on the cultural exchanges to which the minister referred, so I have had a meeting with the US consul, Lisa Vickers, to discuss the issue. Of course, independent countries such as Norway, Ireland and even Iceland have a full US embassy with all the associated visa and diplomatic services that are attached to such institutions.

There is much that Scotland, the US and Canada can learn from one another. Just as an aside, perhaps one important lesson is that deciding to have a Parliament whose purse strings are not controlled by London is no barrier to success in the modern world. However, even under devolution, Scotland continues to improve and develop its relationships with countries around the world. As today's debate has shown, our relationship with North America is among the most important and historic of them all.

15:50

**Bill Aitken (Glasgow) (Con):** It has often been said that we Scots travel well. The history of the world proves that—in the far east, where bankers and trading companies did exceptionally well in places such as Hong Kong, Malaya and Singapore; in Africa, where we exported Christianity to a significant extent; and in the United States and Canada. One of my earliest recollections of life, as a young child, was seeing large queues of people waiting outside the warehouses and docks at Yorkhill and Anderston to get on board the ships that would take them to Canada and the USA in the 1950s. It is a particularly acute memory—I often wonder what became of those people. We can be certain that the vast majority of them were a success, because we Scots tend to be a success when we travel. History is littered with success stories.

As has been mentioned, Scots have profoundly influenced the commercial, political and economic life of the United States and Canada. Carnegie and others saw the way in which industries could be built up with the degree of humanity towards fellow citizens for which we Scots are particularly noted.

Over the centuries, we Scots have also exported our warlike tendencies. We should not forget that the Royal Highland regiment, under General Wolfe, took the Heights of Abraham in Quebec and defeated the French forces of General Montcalm. We must also remember that the Scots contributed significantly to the combatants in the American war of independence. From my recollection of history, both sides included a strong representation of Scots.

One of the things that have bound Canada, the USA and many of us on this side of the Atlantic together is the way in which we stood shoulder to shoulder against the twin menaces of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, fascism and communism, and were able, in glorious combination, to stand up for the political and personal freedoms of so many people in Europe.

Of course, business is largely business. We need to build on the relationships and emotional and historical attachments that exist to ensure that they are demonstrated in more tangible terms. As Aileen Campbell correctly pointed out—although her figures were slightly lower than mine—we owe a great deal to those who come from across the Atlantic as tourists. According to my calculations, about 25 per cent of the total tourist take comes from Canada and America; that brings in £330 million a year. Obviously, we will have to see the effects of the recession. I hope—and Mr Mather may have some grounds for expecting—that the slump and economic depression may be compensated for to some extent by the fact that the pound has fallen in value against the dollars of both Canada and the USA. We need to consider what we can do to encourage the tourism business that is invaluable to so many communities in Scotland, especially more rural communities.

Of course, business is not restricted to tourism. We need to see how we can build on the associations that exist to provide opportunities and markets for our exporters. The plummeting value of the pound may benefit them in that respect.

We must also remember that, although there is a great demand for Scottish goods and memorabilia, and for the products of traditional Scottish industries, such as whisky and tweed, we are a contemporary country. We must accept that times change, and we must consider how we can make ourselves more attractive in commercial terms and export more in the way of tangible goods, rather than just emotional goods, to the USA and Canada.

We do not know what the future holds in that respect. It is fortunate that younger people now have a much more internationalist outlook than was the case 40 or 50 years ago, say. That is a very good thing. There will be opportunities in the years ahead, despite the recession, that will enable people to travel more. It is always said of politicians that it is advisable for them to get out more, and I genuinely think that it is a good thing for people to travel. It broadens the mind and widens our experience.

We have a great deal to learn from Canada and the USA. I have been privileged to visit those countries on several occasions, including with parliamentary delegations. Like other speakers, I

have been amazed by the warmth of the reception that we have received, by the genuine interest in Scotland and by the genuine wish that connections can be built on and increased in both size and number in the years ahead.

This is a constructive debate, and the amendment is infinitely acceptable. There is little, for once in the Parliament, to divide us. I commend the motion.

15:56

**Rob Gibson (Highlands and Islands) (SNP):**

The opportunity to share a discussion of the links between Scotland and North America highlights a very important part of our history and of our future. I will start on the Plains of Abraham. After the battle, a Gaelic-speaking Scots Highlander on the British side received the surrender from a Gaelic-speaking Scots Highlander on the French side. We should not forget, however, that General Wolfe said of the Highlanders that it was

“no great mischief if they fall.”

The Canadian support for this country in our time of need in the past is one thing; the British Government's support for the Highlanders at that time was not in evidence. They were being used as mercenaries.

We talk about multiculturalism, and the Labour amendment is about

“Scotland's cultural diversity in a modern Scotland”.

There is an interesting sidelight to that in the North American context. Ted Brocklebank mentioned the interest of Bob Dylan, who used the tune from the song about Lord Franklin for one of his early famous songs. Lord Franklin, who led the expedition to find the north-west passage, left from Stromness in Orkney. Of course, he got lost. The great Dr John Rae, who was himself from Orkney, was commissioned by the British Admiralty to try to find out what had happened—this was in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Living with the Inuit, like many fur traders who brought back the riches of the Canadian west through the Hudson's Bay Company and the North West Company, John Rae reached the point where the Inuit could show that the Franklin expedition had been lost.

Interestingly, and to put it in a multicultural sense, John Rae was not welcomed when he reported on the matter on return to London. The people there would not believe the Inuit who had pointed out that the Franklin expedition had ended up decimated by the ravages of leaded tins—which they had not known about—and of cannibalism, when they had gone mad. Lord Franklin's wife would not accept it. To this day, there is a statue in London praising the fact that Lord Franklin found the north-west passage. It was



actually John Rae who found the north-west passage. There is perhaps a need for the Labour Party to help us, using whatever influence it has in London, to get the statues there changed to show the truth. That would be a great help, and it would extend the multiculturalism of Scotland in this day and age. That link is an important one to make. Members should all see the brilliant Canadian documentary on the subject to appreciate how Scots learned to live with the natives in North America and were able to pursue the fur trade because of it. They did not die using the most modern methods of the day.

The cultural trade goes both ways. I am delighted that we have the transatlantic sessions at Celtic Connections, where we celebrate the music of both sides. There is much of that now, unlike in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, when it was a one-way ticket. However, it is even better to note that the principal magazine of traditional music, folk roots and world music in Canada, *Penguin Eggs*, is edited in Edmonton by a man from Dingwall in Ross-shire who is part of our diaspora; Roddy Campbell has made a great job of bringing together the French and English parts of music in Canada.

Interestingly, in the issue of the magazine that I have there is a review of Billy Kay's book "The Scottish World: A Journey into the Scottish Diaspora" by a long-time Scots exile in Canada, Enoch Kent. Kent writes that Kay's personal travels in Canada are "interesting" and quotes Kay:

"No country in the world has been so profoundly influenced by the Scots as Canada, and the influence stems from ordinary humble folk to the great and the good of this huge country"

That is an enormous gift that we have given to the world. Indeed, it is useful for us to draw on some of the ideas that they were able to develop there. Let us not forget the Alberta oil fund that was set up when oil was being developed there, or the Alaska permanent fund, which has been giving people there \$2,000 a head. The idea of using their non-renewable energy sources to support and improve their own communities is something that we could desperately do with having learned a good deal earlier in this country.

In the modern sense of energy, the competition or collaboration with people in Nova Scotia who are trying to develop tidal power at the moment is an important way to the future. The Bay of Fundy contains great potential there, as does the Pentland Firth in our country. I am glad to say that the competition will be to the good of the whole world because while we have installed a 2MW tidal device off Eday in Orkney—the first to serve the grid—the Nova Scotians are about a year behind us. However, they have Irish help and

there will be a huge international competition in tidal power that will allow us to be able to help other people in the world eventually by exporting our technology when we perfect it. I hope that we win, but I wish the Canadians good luck also.

In talking about the potential for the future, we should not forget the past. It would be terrible if we did not recognise how people in Canada and the United States look to Scotland in a cultural sense. As Ted Brocklebank said, the blood is strong. Indeed, I heard Capercaillie singing at Aberlour on Saturday night and there was a large number of Americans in the audience for that homecoming event.

16:03

**Robin Harper (Lothians) (Green):** This is a very welcome debate. Everyone in the chamber will support the Scottish Government's efforts to build good relationships with our friends in North America. I have many connections with Canada: my Uncle Ralph was the Queen's equerry in Montreal in the 1960s; my elder half-brother was a professor at a Canadian university; and I have cousins and nephews strewn across the country from one side to the other. I visited the United States with the specific intention of spending time in Yosemite and celebrating the great contribution that our very own John Muir made to national parks there and eventually to national parks in Scotland.

It is in the context of the land, people and places that have been mentioned—the Inuit and oil in Alberta—that I come to the burden of my speech. Sometimes one comes across issues that one thinks need to be raised. I decided that it would be inappropriate to lodge an amendment on the issue, but I think that it is appropriate to raise it in this context.

Are the ministers aware of the plight of the Lubicon Cree of northern Alberta? Just last month, Amnesty International produced a film entitled "Poverty of Justice". One of the three cases that the film deals with is the plight of the Lubicon, who tell their story. In 1952, oil and gas was found under their lands and, despite their fierce objections, exploration and extraction began in the 1970s, alongside a massive expansion of logging.

In 1971, the Government in Alberta dismissed the traditional owners of the land as

"merely squatters on provincial crown land with no land rights to negotiate."

The Lubicon, however, viewed their situation very differently. In 1991, the Lubicon nation's chief said:

"We never had anything fancy, but we never went hungry. Then all of a sudden they found oil and we were caught in a situation where we were in the way."

The discovery of oil led to an all-too-familiar story. Once oil extraction began, human rights abuses and great poverty soon followed. Spills and leaking oil pipes have poisoned the groundwater, so the Lubicon can no longer trap, hunt, fish or even collect their water as they used to. In an 18-month period in the mid-1980s, 19 out of 21 Lubicon pregnancies were miscarried or stillborn, which was attributed to water pollution. Although the oil and gas fields have brought in billions of dollars for the Albertan Government, the Lubicon have not seen a penny.

In 2007—just two years ago—the United Nations warned about the continued plight of the Lubicon. The UN's special rapporteur called for a moratorium on all oil extraction on Lubicon land until a settlement had been agreed that was consistent with the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, but that plea was ignored.

There are now a staggering four oil wells on Lubicon land for every man, woman and child. Just last year, the decision was taken to force a massive pipeline through Lubicon Cree territory and build a camp for 600 workers near the traditional Lubicon fishing lands. The pipeline will connect to the tar sands of eastern Alberta—it is the most polluting method of fossil fuel extraction that has ever been developed.

Ministers may regard the situation as something that is happening in a far-away place about which we know little. They may not regard statements supporting indigenous rights as politically correct or right. However, we should remember our own history. Many who left Scotland for Canada in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries were forced out after their lands were stolen and their families divided. It would be a betrayal of their memory and our cultural heritage to remain quiet as others with equal rights to their land are exploited and ignored in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

If minorities were treated in such a way in Scotland, we would expect the international community to speak out, to be their friend and our friend at the same time, and to urge a fair resolution and respect for human rights. Canada enjoys a very positive international reputation on human rights and was heavily involved in the drafting of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The treatment of the Lubicon Cree is therefore an exceptionally bad mark, which Canada's friends must encourage it to set right. Quite rightly, our ministers wish to derive social and economic benefit for Scotland from their activities in Canada but, in doing so, they should not turn a blind eye to the social problems within the country.

My plea to ministers is therefore to pledge to conduct human rights impact assessments for any oil and wood-related trade agreements that we

wish to make with Canada; and to discuss the plight of the Lubicon Cree if and when the opportunity arises—or to create that opportunity—with our Canadian friends, and to communicate any responses to the European and External Affairs Committee.

16:08

**Sarah Boyack (Edinburgh Central) (Lab):** I welcome the chance to put on record my thoughts following my participation in this year's tartan week. I enjoyed the cultural elements of the visit to New York—I will say a few words about that first, but I want to focus on our political discussions with colleagues in Quebec and the US. It is difficult to find an easy slot in which to do that in the Parliament, so this debate is an excellent opportunity.

We enjoyed meeting members of the New York Scottish community both on our visit to the UK's memorial garden for the victims of 9/11 and in relation to the work of the St Andrews society, which does a huge amount to build links between Scotland and the US, as well as doing charity work and organising of the tartan day parade, which Tricia Marwick and the minister have already mentioned. As Mike Russell said, we were very well served by our tartan day marshal, Alan Cumming, who is much better known and recognised in the US, and in particular in New York, his adopted home, than he is in Scotland. That is the measure of his success as a Scot who has gone abroad.

Although our visit to New York was interesting, I found the visit to Quebec a fascinating experience, because it gave us an insight into how asymmetrical federalism works in practice and offered interesting parallels with our development of asymmetrical devolution. It would be appropriate to record our thanks to the President of the National Assembly of Quebec and his deputies and their staff for the fantastic welcome that they gave us and the hard work that they did to ensure that we had a successful visit.

In Quebec, it was interesting to sit in another Parliament watching the mechanics of how members hold their ministers to account. The dynamic is very different, and not just in relation to the politics. Obviously, the nationalist Government there has been defeated, which was a cause for joy among at least three quarters of our delegation. The ministers and the Opposition parties are limited in the time that they have not just for questions, but answers. The clock ticks backwards, a bit like it does during our speeches, from 90 seconds, to 45 seconds to 20 seconds, which really forces the ministers to answer the question. If they do not answer the question, it is completely obvious—it is not just clear from the

record. It was fun for us to consider how that might work in our Parliament.

The other element that I particularly enjoyed was the excellent presentation on Quebec's promotion of renewables. Quebec, like Scotland, has some fantastic natural and geographical opportunities. I had expected Quebec to be promoting marine renewables, as we are doing, but that is not its focus. When I talked to people there, I understood the reasons for that: they are focusing on proven technologies for wind and hydro power, for which they still have massive untapped opportunities. I am not saying that they put us in the shade; they just have different opportunities.

I found the differences very interesting. Quebec and Canada did not go through the Thatcher era. Its company, Hydro-Québec, is owned by the Quebec Government. Quebec has massive opportunities to exploit the resources and export to the US. As it toughs out the recession, it knows that it has a renewables dividend, which will come directly to the Government. All members of our delegation were pretty envious of that.

When I came back from the visit, it was interesting to reflect on how much more we could do with our public sector organisations in Scotland. We have debated the Forestry Commission Scotland and I know that Scottish Water has ambitious plans to promote renewables on its estate. What other land do we have that could be used for renewables in order to reinvest directly in our services?

Part of the delegation went off to the Carolinas and the rest of us—Tavish Scott and I—went to Maryland and Washington. The trip to Maryland and Washington gave us a good opportunity to follow up discussions with different sets of politicians and officials. We spent a long time talking to the governor of Maryland's chief of staff. I understand that we are the third delegation to have gone there—Jack McConnell and John Swinney have been there—so it was interesting for us to follow up on earlier discussions. There was a big focus on climate change and the state statistics system. There is a very tough focus on management in the public sector, on how the dollars are spent and on allowing the public to see what they get for the money.

The journey that we took by train through the state gave us a good snapshot of the physical evidence of the economic restructuring that Maryland has gone through. We were privileged to get an hour of Governor Martin O'Malley's time.

Our visit to Washington was fantastic. We met US business leaders, with whom we discussed climate change and the Blue Green Alliance, which would translate in Scotland to a red-green alliance. It was very interesting to meet the Sierra

Club, the trade unions, representatives who are working on the climate change bill in the United States and senior officials of the US Department of Energy. That is where the most stark differences were. All the states in the US are going for 25 per cent renewable electricity by 2020, but I have to say that their challenges made our challenges look easy. They do not have the planning system that we have. However creaking members will often say it is, we have a democratic system that offers certainty and does not just deal with issues in the courts. In the US, they have ambitions for renewables and for developing a smart grid. They have a very different energy system from ours. The transportation of electricity from one part of the US to another makes the transportation of our green electricity from the Highlands to the central belt and to the rest of the UK look like a piece of cake. I am not underestimating our challenges, but their challenges are much greater.

I hope that we can continue to have dialogue. That would not mean sending us all back to the States—much as I would love to go back on another trip. We could use teleconferencing and electronic communications. Thinking of ways in which our legislators can link together could offer interesting opportunities.

I have not been stopped yet, Presiding Officer. Do I still have 20 seconds to go? Are you being lenient with us today?

**The Deputy Presiding Officer (Alasdair Morgan):** I can give you 20 seconds.

**Sarah Boyack:** Many thanks.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** I will watch the clock ticking down.

**Sarah Boyack:** That is great—I knew that we would have slightly more time in this debate.

The other big lesson that I picked up in the States was from Obama's climate change ambitions and fiscal stimulus package. In the US, they are at a different stage in the debate: there is not the same level of acceptance of the need for action. The business community in the States is not in the same place as CBI Scotland, which sees the challenges but also the opportunities. Things are different in the US. Here, businesses have been brought on board to tackle climate change, and that is something that the US could learn from us.

However, we can also learn from the US. The minister will be delighted to know that I have found yet another country where domestic tax breaks are offered to people who put energy efficiency measures in place.

We also had the chance to meet people in Congresswoman Kathy Castor's office, to talk about how her staff will be working through the

legislative process on their climate change bill, and to talk about her work on foreclosures to protect her constituents in Florida.

It was fascinating and a privilege to be part of the delegation; I very much enjoyed the opportunity. I will finish by picking up on Tricia Marwick's point. I get the sense that we could make more of some of these visits—both in promoting team Scotland while we are there, and in reflecting on the trip when we come back and thinking about how to broaden the links. We have to develop those links, not just on a personal basis but institutionally.

16:17

**Christopher Harvie (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP):** Ten years ago, I visited the town of St Andrews in New Brunswick. It is a beautiful town, dominated by the Greenock church of Scotland and by birdseye maple. The place was originally in Maine, USA, but after the war of independence, its empire loyalist folk towed its buildings on barges across the St Croix River, and set them up in Canada. We have heard of refugees, but I think that that is one of the very few examples of a refugee town.

We sometimes talk rather too much about our influence on the declaration of independence. Scotland's role has always been very lively in North America, but also very ambiguous. Robin Harper brought us that sad tale of the Cree in Alberta. I remind him of the last novel by John Buchan, who was Governor General of Canada in the 1930s. "Sick Heart River" is an extremely sensitive ecological examination of the problems of being Canadian at that time.

Our orientation towards North America started off in the 19<sup>th</sup> century with our anti-slave movement. We can speak of that experience with some expertise, because we still had our own slaves—our miners and our salt workers—until 1800. We inspired Abe Lincoln with his love of Burns and freedom, but there was also a conservative element that we donated to southern society. Mark Twain was on the tail of that in the 1880s, blaming the civil war and southern culture on Walter Scott—too many saltires, too many majors and colonels, too much Gothic prose, and too many clansmen, with a "k".

"We have heritage and we have correction," was what a politician from South Carolina said to me about the prospects for the state, which is not a very industrial part of America. There were two great alternatives: they could get girls to wear white dresses, sit in colonial mansions and shout "Fiddle-de-dee!" from "Gone with the Wind"; or they could show people round the prisons.

They say that the only place that George W Bush knew of in Europe was Scotland, which he had visited while he was a student. We are told by *Newsweek* that, every morning, he turned to the writings of an obscure Scots theologian called Oswald Chambers. Believe me, a theologian has to be really obscure for me not to have some notion of him. Basically, he told Dubya every morning that he was doing God's work—which is what we are now coping with today.

That worked to our benefit, however. Think of all the expensive members of the House of Representatives who are enjoying golf at St Andrews, paid for by Washington lobbyists, whose numbers exploded from 10,000 to 26,000 under President Bush. Those lobbyists stuffed representatives' pockets, with \$50 million coming from one pressure group alone—come on, Westminster MPs, where have you been all this time? We could do well out of one sort of relationship, but we will have a lot to answer for. On the other hand, our own Canongate Publishing secured the rights to the work of an obscure senator from Chicago called Barack Obama and ran with them.

In the 2008 election, American electors threw out rule by giant corporations and corrupt politics. That would have brought joy to the second-greatest Scottish economist who, alas, died in 2006: John Kenneth Galbraith. He wrote a wonderful book that can be read almost as a contemporary history: "The Great Crash of 1929". Again, we have had massive frauds, notably that involving Enron in 2002, which should have inspired intervention. Instead, they promoted Westminster complacency attractive enough to encourage the migration to London of the Sarbanes-Oxley refugees and enough dodgy ingenuity to confuse poorly budgeted regulators. Special financial instruments hit the UK hard because of Gordon Brown's light-touch regulation. J K was, once again, spot on when he wrote:

"On the whole, the greater the earlier reputation for omniscience, the more serene the previous idiocy, the greater the foolishness now exposed ... the social historian must always be alert to his opportunities, and there have been few like 1929."

Until 2008, that is.

The worst connection with North America that we can promote is such complicity in financial jugglery or freebies for lobbyists. The best is a link that promotes democratic thought and action. I will highlight one such example. Ideas are under way to establish a series of Scottish studies centres and programmes at US universities—something that Ireland and the Irish-American community have pulled off in the past with great success. Perhaps the most advanced current project is being discussed for Princeton University, where

Galbraith lectured. Such promotion of Scotland at American universities will not only boost knowledge generation and academic co-operation but boost US awareness of Scotland, which has already been heightened by the Government's homecoming initiatives. It may spark long-term interest in Scottish literature, culture and products, benefiting Scottish exports, and it will make young Americans look towards Scotland as somewhere to visit, study, train and work—provided that Westminster's short-sighted new immigration regulations do not spell the end of the valuable internship programmes that we offer in Scotland. My colleague Kenneth Gibson has warned of that.

As one contribution to knowledge transfer and co-operation, and in homage to John Kenneth Galbraith—who ever wrote with more wisdom and wit of the “non-potable Scotch” of his Ontario boyhood?—I ask the minister to support the efforts of Scots-American academics to establish a Scottish centre at Princeton. And why not name it after the great Galbraith himself?

16:24

**Margo MacDonald (Lothians) (Ind):** Until the speeches of Chris Harvie and Robin Harper, I thought that the rather prosaic title of the debate—“Scotland's Engagement in the United States of America and Canada”—should have been replaced with an alternative such as “Here's tae us—wha's like us?” A lot of the speeches have definitely been in that vein.

I do not want to rain on anyone's parade, as I said to Ted Brocklebank, but the debate could also have been called “What I Did on My American Jolly”. It was not terribly serious to start off with. I know that that makes me sound like a bit of a sour old trout, but I do not have the scattering of cousins in North America and Canada that Robin Harper has—although my husband's cousin's son owns the bar that Shania Twain drank in.

Let me make it plain that I love many things about North America, particularly the USA. I love Willie Nelson, Alan Jackson, Dwight Yoakam, Reba McEntire and all of the country scene, but I am not blind to the fact that we have an unequal relationship with the USA when it comes to nuclear weapons and things like that. That must be pitched into the equation when we are talking about our relationship with America.

Pauline McNeill said that Americans like us, but Americans do not know us. I was once in Atlanta, trying to check my bags through to Edinburgh, and I had to have an argument with the lady at the desk, who maintained that Edinburgh was in London. I had to explain that it was the capital city of Scotland. Do you know what the name on her badge was? Marie Stuart. She had never heard of

Scotland or Scots, which is, unfortunately, true of a great number of people in America.

Tricia Marwick says that Americans have a great interest in us. Some of them have—I would not deny that some communities in North America know the difference between Scotland and Ireland and have a particular interest in Scotland—but I am more interested in what Chris Harvie said about building up a Scottish centre of learning, knowledge and true information at Princeton. I would back that any time.

Although I appreciate that tartan day has become Scotland week and that there are now 10 cities that have events to mark the week, I am still critical. Susan Boyle got coast-to-coast coverage on American television in eight minutes, but, in eight years, Scotland week is still not coast to coast.

**Michael Russell:** I should correct the member on two points. First, far more than 10 cities are involved; I mentioned 10 cities only because those were the ones that the three ministers managed to visit. Secondly, by any definition, Scotland week is coast to coast. We mentioned events in New York and San Francisco and in Prince Edward Island and Vancouver. In both countries, it is coast to coast.

**Margo MacDonald:** Scotland week would be a lot more coast to coast if it got on Craig Ferguson's “Late Late Show”, which is one of the most important television programmes in America. I used to work with him in Scottish Television—for all I know, Ted Brocklebank might have worked with him as well. It would also be good to get hold of Dermot McQuarrie, whose father, Albert, was a Conservative MP and who is a vice-president of the Fox Broadcasting Company.

We have never exploited those avenues because we have not thought clearly about the priorities of Scotland week. Is the priority to promote the profile of Scotland and make ourselves better known as a community or to build up business links? I am not at all sure, but I think that the Irish know what their priorities are. First, they built on the notion of Ireland. Their television adverts promote the island of Ireland—I point out to Ted Brocklebank that they are not in the least hung up about reminding folk that the north of Ireland is still British; they simply market Ireland as an identity. We should do exactly the same thing: we should market ourselves not as part of the United Kingdom but as Scotland, distinct and unique.

If the priority is business, presumably it makes good business sense to target our effort either sectionally, geographically or both. Charlie Gordon got that right in his speech. I thought that I heard hints that that is happening already, and I hope to

hear more about that when the minister sums up. We heard that there have been three visits to Maryland. Profile or business? I would like to know what the priority is. It is not good enough to say that they like us, so we go back to see them. There must be more focus.

I urge the minister to separate those two strands. He should think big with regard to identity and image and think in a focused way with regard to business. I am sure that I am trying to teach my grandfather to suck eggs, of course. Rob Gibson pointed to big thinking in terms of business when he talked about tidal technology. That is the kind of thing on which we can go international—we are as good as anybody in the world in that regard.

I have enjoyed the debate. I do not mean to sound like too much of a sourpuss, but I really think that we should be a bit more realistic about how others see us. Members might have been a little rose tinted in how they described the situation, but I hope that I am proved wrong.

16:30

**Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD):** Before I make the standard winding-up speech, I would like to refer to the speeches of three members in particular. Robin Harper's was most thought provoking, and I listened to it with great interest. Rather than rain on the parade, as she suggested she might do, Margo MacDonald gave us a timely reminder to examine what we are about. In his speech, Chris Harvie told me something that I did not know, which I found most useful. Like Margo MacDonald, I support what he said about John Kenneth Galbraith and Princeton.

I turn to the main speakers. Mike Russell took us through the issue extremely professionally. I am interested in his wife's ancestry, and I look forward to seeing the size of his grandchildren in due course; we shall see. He reminded us about the July gathering and, like Chris Harvie, referred to the link between the declaration of Arbroath and the declaration of independence. He also talked about the development of a new relationship between Scotland and the United States and Canada. That is extremely important because we cannot look only at the past, although I do not think that any of us does that. It is a question of building for the future.

"Black Watch" has been an astonishing success on the other side of the Atlantic, and my first main point is that I believe that we should hear more in such debates about the opportunities that exist for the British and Scottish film industries to use locations in Scotland. We have seen "Braveheart" and "Loch Ness", but a lot more could be done in the future.

**Michael Russell:** That is an extremely good point, and it works the other way as well. When I was in Canada, I took the opportunity to speak to the mayor of Toronto, the mayor of Hamilton and the federal culture minister about the specific work that they were doing to attract film investment. If we had taxation powers, we could imitate their ability to attract production. That is a key issue.

**Jamie Stone:** That is an interesting remark. I hope that it means that we will have a constructive dialogue on the subject in the future; I do not doubt that we will.

I like Pauline McNeill's idea of having a permanent exhibition of Scottish inventions. It is a worthy thought, which we could do something with, and it deserves further examination. In a most wide-ranging and eloquent speech, Ted Brocklebank went all the way from Carnegie to poetry and Bob Dylan. I was amazed at the breadth of what was an extremely interesting speech.

My colleague Iain Smith mentioned my alma mater, the University of St Andrews, and the money that can be brought in for research. Like Tricia Marwick, he spoke about co-ordination between the Scottish Parliament and the Scottish Government. I put on record my thanks to Jim Mather because before I led the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association delegation to Canada—I have never been to the United States, but I have been to Canada once—he gave us a lot of help, for which we were grateful. If we could build on that example, that would be useful for both the Scottish Government and the Scottish Parliament. Iain Smith also spoke about what we should do after the year of homecoming. That is a challenge for the years ahead—we can learn from the events that lie before us.

My second main point is that people in my constituency want the homecoming to extend right up to the furthest parts of Scotland. It must have a meaning for Iain Gunn of Banniskirk and the Gunns and for Malcolm Caithness and the Sinclairs when they have their clan gatherings this year. I do not doubt that significant efforts have been made in that direction, but such linkage is hugely important and very much expected.

Reference has been made to cousins in Canada. Unlike Margo MacDonald, I have a diaspora of cousins in Canada, although there is a slightly sad aspect to that. My father's uncle Walter was killed in the first world war in 1917; I understand that he died bravely. When the family came to read his will, there was not much in it. He was a bachelor, but they discovered that he had left his money to some children—unknown to them, he had three illegitimate children in Canada. Therefore, I have cousins in Canada. I do not

know them and they do not know me, but I wish that I did.

There is a certain sadness about that. I have often wondered whether I should put an advertisement in the *Toronto Gazette* or whatever it is called, beginning, "If you think that you are descended from my great-uncle Walter...". I find it very sad that people had to leave Scotland because of the social mores of the time, and it is worth remembering why some Americans and Canadians are living in those countries.

Rob Gibson mentioned Nova Scotia. During our visit there, we were overwhelmed by the sheer friendliness of the people. I should point out, Presiding Officer, that as I was making a speech and presenting a gift from the Scottish Parliament—a silver tray—to your equivalent, the Speaker of Nova Scotia Legislature, I was somewhat taken aback to be subjected to a barrage of bread rolls. I understand, though, that that is absolutely traditional and that it was nothing personal.

The same was true in Toronto: the Scottish diaspora could not have been more welcoming, and while there we went to what was simply the biggest annual St Andrew's ball I have ever seen. I was astonished to find that the people knew their reels better than we do—in fact, they were doing reels that we have long forgotten—and again I underline what other members have said and pay tribute to the friendliness of the Canadian people.

The Parliament could do more to link up with the US and Canada. For example, many of us have benefited from the help of the US interns who from time to time come into the Parliament via the University of Edinburgh. Given the boundless enthusiasm of those interns and the fact that they are a great asset, I have always been surprised that members of this Parliament and indeed at Westminster have not forged more such links and relationships. Some of those interns will have moved on into Congress and other legislatures on the other side of the Atlantic and will prove to be invaluable contacts for the Parliament in years to come.

16:36

**Ted Brocklebank:** I, too, have enjoyed this debate. Although I have a natural inclination to suspect any motion that includes the words "encourages the Scottish Government", I feel that on the face of it there is nothing in today's motion or Labour's amendment with which I disagree and there is much to applaud. Despite Margo MacDonald's disapproval, it has been fun to strut the old street cred with Mike Russell and others, and it is always refreshing to find new ways of

rehashing research material, especially with a distinguished former TV colleague.

I thought there were a number of interesting speeches. First, I agree with the minister that we must strengthen and nurture the diaspora in a modern way. We look forward to seeing the minister's revised American plan, and I agree with Iain Smith that it should pick up on the work of and the lessons that we learn from the year of homecoming.

I am indebted to Margo MacDonald for informing me that the founder of the Ku Klux Klan had Scottish roots. I will certainly check with Jamie McGrigor as to whether that particular klan has officially registered a tartan.

Back in February, I, like Charlie Gordon, met the cross-party group from Canada and was particularly interested to hear the latest about oil development in the Athabasca tar sands. As Mr Gordon pointed out, the tar sands hold more oil than anywhere else in the world, with the possible exception of Saudi Arabia. Surely this development presents a great opportunity for Scotland's oil field technology, particularly in relation to maximising the flow of heavier crude—in this case, crude that is infiltrated with sand—and I hope that Jim Mather and his team are promoting possible joint ventures as we speak.

That said, we must bear in mind Robin Harper's eloquent plea on behalf of the Cree Indians and his remarks about how their human rights are affected by the oil developments. As a member of the European and External Relations Committee, I feel that the committee might well want to do more work on that matter. I certainly look forward to hearing more about it.

I agree with Rob Gibson that, in looking forward, we must not forget the past. After all, according to the Inuit proverb, "To know where you are going, you first have to know where you have come from". I am always struck by how proud Americans and Canadians are of their Scottish roots. For example, the world's biggest annual Highland games are held at Grandfather Mountain in North Carolina over two days in July. It is remarkable how many of the 40,000 attendees whose names are not obviously Scottish are still desperately proud of their Scottish lineage—and I have seen statistics that indicate that Scottish is the nationality claimed by most Americans after their own.

I certainly enjoyed Bill Aitken's memories of the emigrant ships leaving from the Broomielaw in the 1950s. In that respect, it has been estimated that between 1720 and 1920 alone more than a quarter of a million Scots—not just Highland Scots but Scots from all parts—left the old country. Most had already gone by the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, but it is

interesting that two vessels—the Metagama and the Marloch, which were packed with Lewis women—sailed from Stornoway for Nova Scotia as late as 1921 in the wake of the sinking of the troopship Iolaire. With the loss of more than 200 young Lewis men returning from the first world war, the island was bereft of marriageable menfolk. The Lewis women turned to Canada.

It is interesting that one of them was Mary MacLeod from Tong, who was to marry the son of a German carpenter called Friedrich Trump, whom she met in New York. Their son, Donald MacLeod Trump, is trying to promote his own version of homecoming with his controversial multimillion-pound development at Menie in Aberdeenshire. Some call it progress.

I have never been hung up over terms such as “clearances” as distinct from “voluntary migration”. If the economic circumstances made it impossible for people to stay in any meaningful sense of the word, they were “cleared”. Chris Harvie talked about Ken Galbraith, whose people emigrated from Crinan. When Ken Galbraith returned to visit his great-grandfather’s grave, I asked him whether he thought that the Galbraiths had been right to go. The great man, who was 6 feet 8 tall, stood, looked around and said, “On economic grounds, certainly.” He then looked around again at the beautiful Argyllshire country and said, “On aesthetic grounds, perhaps not.”

The reluctant Scots émigrés who left or were forced to leave the old country went on to fight and die with Davy Crockett and his Texans at the Alamo and for the British against the American rebels at Moore’s Creek Bridge in the Carolinas. Bill Aitken reminded us that Wolfe turned to his Scots regiments to launch the final attack on the Heights of Abraham and wrest Quebec from the French. He knew their mettle: only 13 years earlier, the Highlanders had fought against him when he was a young officer at Culloden.

Rob Gibson recalled Wolfe’s alleged remark that it was

“no great mischief if they fall.”

They did fall, not only at Quebec but at Ticonderoga on the shores of Lake Champlain, where, against the French, the Black Watch sustained its greatest ever losses prior to Passchendaele. Rob Gibson called them mercenaries; by the time of Ticonderoga, most British were calling them patriots because, as well as winning most of the wars, the Scots helped to win the peace with the French. Hugh MacLennan, the great Canadian novelist wrote:

“There wouldn’t have been a place called Canada if the Scots hadn’t formed the mortar that bound the English to the French.”

All too often, that mortar was mixed in blood.

**Jamie Stone:** Does Ted Brocklebank agree that, shortly after Wolfe’s battle, many Highland soldiers, in the spirit of friendship, married French girls in Quebec?

**Ted Brocklebank:** Absolutely. Those things happened in peace and war.

In these more peaceable times, Scotland, America and Canada have a long and proud history and culture in common and deep economic ties that will, I hope, strengthen after the year of homecoming.

It gives me great pleasure to support the motion as well as the Labour amendment.

16:43

**Pauline McNeill:** The year of homecoming and Scotland week have allowed us to put our relationships with the US and Canada under the spotlight, to accentuate the positive, and to consider the potential for growth in trade links. I will address some issues that have been raised in the debate, which has been interesting.

I take Ted Brocklebank’s point that the year of homecoming should be about the straightforwardness of Scottish fishermen being in the same place as American fishermen and making a cultural link, but it would be wrong to miss out on building on our success and exploiting our connections. I hope that Jim Mather agrees that there is work to be done in that respect.

We know that our visitor numbers have fallen by 11 per cent, which is a worrying trend. We cannot miss the opportunity to do something about that, as well as to celebrate in Scotland week and the year of homecoming. In some ways, the year of homecoming could not have come at a better time for Scotland. The following of our most famous poet, Burns, has created an opportunity for us to appeal to Scots abroad and to those with a connection to Scotland to come home to Scotland or simply to visit it.

We heard a constructive plea from Tricia Marwick, who was part of the Scotland week delegation, for a more central role for MSPs in the future. She made her point very well and confirmed that Scots are well received by Americans. Perhaps Americans like their Celtic connections, even if they do not really know where Scotland is.

Charlie Gordon called for the North America plan to be available by the end of the summer. He is doing his bit for the year of homecoming through the link on his website. I am sure that we should all follow his example.

Aileen Campbell has clearly met a few stars in the past few months. She reminded us that we



have important Scottish celebrities. K T Tunstall complains about her success in America. She says that she is so well known because Katie McPhee, a star of "American Idol", chose to sing her song "Black Horse and the Cherry Tree". After that, K T Tunstall went from 79<sup>th</sup> to 22<sup>nd</sup> in the American charts. Whatever the reason, she has been successful in breaking into the American market, which is an extremely difficult thing to do. In the 1960s and 1970s, the UK had almost 10 per cent of the music market there, but now the figure is less than 1 per cent, so K T Tunstall's is no mean achievement.

I liked listening to Bill Aitken—who has clearly had enough of us, as he has left the chamber—speaking about the place where he comes from. He said, rightly, that there is little to divide members on the issue. Rob Gibson always tells us what he has been doing at the weekend—we now know that he was listening to Capercaillie last weekend. He makes the important point that there is a huge American following for such music. Eddi Reader, with whom Rob Gibson is also familiar, has a huge American following, particularly as a result of her modern portrayal of Burns. I was struck by Robin Harper's speech and the human rights issue to which he devoted it—I was completely unaware of that issue. We are all the wiser for that and I am sure that we will think deeply about it.

Sarah Boyack, who was also part of the delegation to Scotland week, compared a legislature in Canada with the Scottish Parliament. She also mentioned opportunities to learn from countries such as Canada about what we want to achieve here in renewable energy. We always learn something from Christopher Harvie's eloquent speeches. Today, he reminded us of important connections when he told us that Canongate Books published the memoirs of Obama. As ever, Margo MacDonald brought a reality check to the debate. She mentioned the phenomenon that is Susan Boyle. To me, that story suggests that we cannot hold talent back, whatever we do. There is a lesson to be learned from that.

Margo MacDonald also made an important political point, which perhaps not enough members have made, about the relationship with the United States. We will perhaps debate another day what Obama might do in the middle east and how, through the relationship with America and other important parts of the world, we might change the world for the better. She also asked us to consider whether the priorities for Scotland week should be about trade or profile. Perhaps it can be about both—I certainly think so.

To maximise the achievements from Scotland week and the year of homecoming, there has to

be collaboration between the Scottish Parliament and the Government. I believe that that has taken place. Despite the comments in my opening speech about ensuring that we give a true reflection of Scotland when we go abroad, I accept that the Deputy First Minister made an excellent speech during Scotland week about Scotland's history and its contribution to innovation and invention. I am glad that at least Jamie Stone supported my suggestion that there should be a permanent display in Scotland on that contribution, of which we are all proud.

I believe that the year of homecoming will be successful, but the message has got a little lost. It has not been clear at times who the Government is trying to entice here. Some companies have said that the Government has advised them that the priority is to promote the homecoming in Scotland and not abroad. I seek clarification on that. A bit more resource would ensure a much more spectacular programme. Although there are interesting parts of the programme, for whatever reason it does not include artists such as K T Tunstall, Franz Ferdinand, Simple Minds or other great Scottish acts. I would have liked them to be included.

There is work for the Government and all of us in strengthening and nurturing Scotland's relationship with the US and Canada. There is a lot to build on for the future. I support the Government motion and I am pleased that the Labour amendment will be supported.

16:49

**The Minister for Enterprise, Energy and Tourism (Jim Mather):** Having listened to all the speeches, I am pleased to have the opportunity to speak in the debate. It is clear that all of us in the chamber feel strongly about the relationship between the United States and Canada and us—I certainly feel strongly about it and I am convinced that it is vital to our country's future wellbeing.

I am grateful for the speeches that we have heard; by and large, they were constructive. I do not agree with all of them, but I will take some suggestions forward. I acknowledge that we must take seriously and build on our engagement in North America. The US remains the world's largest economy. As has been said, it is our largest market for exports, inward investment and tourism.

I declare an interest: my career has been heavily skewed to the US and Canada. It has involved Seagram, which was based in Montreal, IBM and ComputerLand. In its golden era of the early 1970s, IBM taught me a great deal. Sometimes, I have more affection for IBM than for some educational institutions in my pedigree. I am happy

to see IBM reinvent itself and I might talk more about that later.

We have a live interconnection not just through visitors, but through the 4,000 US students who come to Scotland every year. Our universities collaborate with some of the most prestigious institutions in the US. Christopher Harvie described his idea of a new centre. I am interested in how we can synchronise collaboration and activity in both countries, with an academic focus on the new beginning that we debated in Margo MacDonald's members' business debate last night. Our banks—in recovery and learning from mistakes—can come together with the vast strengths that we have in investment trusts, fund management, the life and pensions sector and actuarial, legal and accountancy skills to meld with academics and others in those professions in North America, to achieve a strong new beginning. That includes Canada, which is also significant for us. Our exports there amounted to £375 million in 2007 and it is second to the US among countries outside Europe for export importance to us. The wealth of opportunities for us in Canada in culture, education and the oil and gas sector are perhaps the most significant. The Scots diaspora population there is higher than that in any other country.

Since I became a minister, I have been a fairly frequent visitor to Canada and the US to make the case for Scottish business and to build its profile and opportunities, as Margo MacDonald suggested. I have taken the message about the new Scotland to the east and west coasts of the United States and to several mid-west states and I have visited the Canadian provinces of Ontario, Alberta and British Columbia.

Just last week, I made a short visit to Houston in Texas to attend the offshore technology conference, which nearly 40 Scottish companies and some 400 Scottish delegates attended. I am proud and pleased that *The Press and Journal* has supported a delegation to that conference since 1976—it has taken a delegation across and made that happen year in, year out. That conference is the premier energy trade event of the year and it presents a fantastic opportunity for Scotland to showcase its innovative technology and skill set. I make a special mention of the Aberdeen-based company Caledyne, which was presented with the 2009 special meritorious award for engineering. Are we getting the message across to Americans and Canadians? Of course we are, as we are with the Mexicans, who still have their share of the Gulf of Mexico to develop. We also showcased Scottish companies just last year in Edmonton and Calgary in Alberta.

The most recent visit to the US highlighted the fact that Scotland can compete with the best in

areas such as offshore technology and in some cases is the best the world has to offer. It has never been more important to ensure that those messages are heard and understood in our key overseas markets and here. We have world-class facilities to broadcast the message about.

When I was in the United States in April as part of the Government's Scotland week delegation, I met some of the biggest investors in Scotland—companies such as Morgan Stanley, JP Morgan, IBM and the Bank of New York Mellon, which was founded by Alexander Hamilton. John Adams called him the bastard son of a Scottish pedlar, which was an unfortunate, but probably accurate, description. Alexander Hamilton was Washington's first Secretary of the Treasury and set in place an economy and an institution that will survive and move forward.

My role in Scotland week has been not only to build profile along with other ministers but to make economic opportunities. We have been doing that with the stellar facility of the Scottish Development International team. There was a lot of mention of team Scotland, and I take Iain Smith's and Michael Russell's points on that. Team Scotland is now SDI, Scottish Enterprise, VisitScotland, the Government, the Parliament and parliamentarians. I look forward to developing that approach in future. I will come back to that idea in a moment, but I will focus on Scottish Development International's professionals, who are opening doors for us big time. They make the calls and get us in, and we help by turning up and elevating them so that they talk with us to companies at chief executive and chairman level.

The great news that I have to bring back following the session with Morgan Stanley, JP Morgan and others is that those companies are convinced that Scotland remains a great place to invest in and do business. They intend to remain in Scotland and most of them intend to do more here. The compelling reason why they intend to do that should warm the hearts of all members; their Scottish employees are held in the highest regard. Those employees create the necessity for the companies to remain here and the opportunity that they perceive to develop further.

Scotland week provided an ideal opportunity to promote the tourism industry and tell the Americans that 2009 was not only a good year to invest in Scotland but a great year to visit. It was an ideal opportunity to broadcast the year of homecoming. The tourism sector's message was well received not only because of the strong dollar but because of the element to which Ted Brocklebank referred: the aesthetics that could have brought John Kenneth Galbraith back. We were able to underscore the fact that the strength of the dollar against the pound makes it much

more cost effective to visit and that it gives them access to a fabulous time in Scotland. We were also able to tell them how well organised we are getting in tourism, which is coming together strongly with the Scottish Tourism Forum. We recognise that the real emphasis on tourism must be industry led, and that is now happening through the offices of Iain Herbert and Gavin Ellis.

Throughout my time in the States in April, it was evident that a huge amount of good will exists towards us. Michael Russell tells me that it was exactly the same in Canada. Along with the Presiding Officer, I had the pleasure of hosting a special Scotland week reception in Raleigh, North Carolina, which was attended by members of the state legislature, the Scots diaspora and our parliamentary deputation. [*Interruption.*]

**The Presiding Officer (Alex Fergusson):** Order. I am sorry to interrupt you, minister. Can we have less noise in the chamber, please.

**Jim Mather:** That reception was a heartwarming event at which we struck a chord. As house calls on some newspaper titles were made beforehand, I am sure that that chord resonated elsewhere. That demonstrates the huge opportunities that exist for us.

Tricia Marwick's point that we could do more and that we should reflect more on Scotland week when we come back—a point that Sarah Boyack augmented—makes immense sense. It is important that we sit down after the event and consider what we can do to learn more and to connect more with chambers of commerce, voluntary organisations, legislatures and other bodies that have specific things to teach us.

**Margo MacDonald:** Will the minister inform us whether the Scottish Government has asked the appropriate American authorities whether the visa service will be restored to Scotland?

**Jim Mather:** I assure Margo MacDonald that we are always pressing on that. She brought pessimism and realism to the debate. The important point is that we are building our profile and business and will continue to build both.

Pauline McNeill made an important point about the fact that were out supporting business but we also need to support exporters. That is exactly Scottish Development International's nature: it is a two-way valve in that respect. We can go and make house calls to make it rewarding for people who are investing in Scotland to continue to invest here—and to invest more—but we can also work with Scottish firms and help them to open up new markets.

Some of Pauline McNeill's less generous comments about the homecoming event are perhaps best skipped over. The issue is that my

multicultural family is proud of our status as a mongrel nation. We will continue to be that and, with the year of homecoming, will continue to seek to attract people who are affinity Scots, many millions of whom could come to Scotland and take part in sound activities.

I am glad that Charlie Gordon got to Alberta. The Albertans have a great line: Albertan resources for the Albertans. That is another lesson that we can learn from Canada.

## Decision Time

17:00

**The Presiding Officer (Alex Fergusson):** There are four questions to be put as a result of today's business. The first question is, that motion S3M-3964, in the name of Bruce Crawford, on the Scottish Local Government (Elections) Bill, be agreed to.

*Motion agreed to,*

That the Parliament agrees to the general principles of the Scottish Local Government (Elections) Bill.

**The Presiding Officer:** The second question is, that motion S3M-3629, in the name of John Swinney, on the Scottish Local Government (Elections) Bill financial resolution, be agreed to.

*Motion agreed to,*

That the Parliament, for the purposes of any Act of the Scottish Parliament resulting from the Scottish Local Government (Elections) Bill, agrees to any increase in expenditure of a kind referred to in paragraph 3(b)(iii) of Rule 9.12 of the Parliament's Standing Orders arising in consequence of the Act.

**The Presiding Officer:** The third question is, that amendment S3M-4131.1, in the name of Pauline McNeill, which seeks to amend motion S3M-4131, in the name of Michael Russell, on Scotland's engagement in the United States of America and Canada, be agreed to.

*Amendment agreed to.*

**The Presiding Officer:** The final question is, that motion S3M-4131, in the name of Michael Russell, on Scotland's engagement in the United States of America and Canada, as amended, be agreed to.

*Motion, as amended, agreed to,*

That the Parliament recognises the importance of Scotland's relationship with the United States of America and Canada; notes the contribution of the Scottish Government, the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body and all those who were involved in the development of Scotland Week over the last eight years in North America; expresses its gratitude for the significant contribution of the Scottish diaspora in helping to promote Scotland's rich cultural heritage, and encourages the Scottish Government to promote Scotland's cultural diversity in a modern Scotland and to continue to develop a more joined-up approach to the promotion of Scotland in Canada and the United States of America by working in partnership with all relevant organisations in the public and private sector in order to ensure that Scotland derives real social and economic benefits from such activities.

## RNID Hearing Matters Campaign

**The Deputy Presiding Officer (Alasdair Morgan):** The final item of business is a members' business debate on motion S3M-3894, in the name of Cathy Jamieson, on the Royal National Institute for Deaf People hearing matters campaign. The debate will be concluded without any question being put.

*Motion debated,*

That the Parliament welcomes RNID Scotland's campaign, Hearing Matters; notes that there are 758,000 deaf and hard of hearing people in Scotland, the majority of whom are aged over 55; further notes that it takes people on average 10 to 15 years to address hearing loss and that there are around 350,000 people in Scotland who could benefit from a hearing aid but are not currently using one; considers that some GPs in the NHS Ayrshire and Arran area are screening adults for their hearing in the community rather than making a straight referral to audiology or ENT, and believes that hearing loss should be identified and treated at the earliest opportunity and the introduction of hearing screening on the NHS for those aged 55 and over considered.

17:03

**Cathy Jamieson (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (Lab):** I thank the members from all parties who have stayed in the chamber for the debate. I thank Mary Scanlon in particular, because I know that she may well have had to be somewhere else but chose to be here.

I am pleased to get the chance to speak on the RNID's hearing matters campaign. My interest in the issue was not prompted by personal expertise or experience; it was triggered by the Co-operative Group's support for the RNID campaign, which made me want to find out more. Frankly, I was very surprised when I realised that there are 758,000 deaf and hard-of-hearing people in Scotland—a significant proportion of the population—many of whom have age-related hearing loss. I was also rather shocked to discover that around 350,000 people who could benefit from a hearing aid do not use one.

More than half of all people aged 60 and over have some noticeable hearing loss, but it can take people up to 15 years to seek help. A United Kingdom study found that one in five people between 55 and 77 has difficulty in hearing and one in eight has a hearing problem that causes them moderate or severe worry, but only 6 or 7 per cent of people in that age group have hearing aids.

The RNID launched the hearing matters campaign because of the extent of untreated hearing loss; the campaign calls for hearing loss to be identified and treated at the earliest possible opportunity, and for the Scottish Government to

consider introducing hearing screening for everyone over 55.

RNID Scotland's campaign report highlights how untreated hearing loss affects people's lives. For example, arguments in the home can arise over whether the television is too loud and people may not respond when a family member is talking to them. The report also highlights how stress in a family setting decreased after the problem was identified and hearing aids were used.

Why do people not seek help? Sometimes the reason is stigma or a perceived link between hearing loss and ageing, but people may also simply be embarrassed about wearing a hearing aid. Routine hearing screening would encourage people to go for a check in the same way as they get their sight or teeth checked.

Screening for the over-55s could be provided in a community setting, such as a general practitioner's surgery, and could be carried out by practice nurses. That would allow a quick decision on whether a referral to audiology is appropriate. Such an approach is already working in practice. The Isle of Wight Primary Care Trust has purchased several hand-held hearing check devices for use in GP practices. In my local health board area—NHS Ayrshire and Arran—I know that some GPs have also purchased hand-held devices, which they use to make the checks before referring patients on where appropriate.

Such an approach would fit with public opinion in Scotland. When the RNID undertook a survey, it found that some 93 per cent of Scots believe that everyone over the age of 55 should be offered a free hearing test. Some 72 per cent believed that such tests should be available in the community.

The RNID provides a simple telephone hearing check, which is supported, again, by the Co-operative Group. The check takes about five minutes and assesses one's ability to hear someone speaking over background noise. The experience is similar to being in a crowded room. The test is pretty easy to use—I have tried it—and seems a very quick and easy way of identifying potential problems that would allow people to be reassured, as I was, or to know that they should follow up the test by seeking further advice from professionals.

There are still concerns about audiology waiting times. The most recent audit in 2006 found that most health boards exceeded the then standard, which was for a waiting time of less than 26 weeks from referral by a GP to an appointment with audiology services in which a hearing aid is fitted. At that stage, waiting times ranged from 12 weeks in the NHS Dumfries and Galloway area to 92 weeks in the NHS Borders area. Therefore, the announcement in 2007 that audiology would come

within the 18-week waiting time target by 2011 was generally welcomed. We had expected to be able to see progress at the beginning of April this year when the information was supposed to be put into the public domain. I hope that the minister will confirm in her speech what progress has been made towards meeting the target and when the figures will be published.

Of course, although waiting times are an important issue—we all agree that it is unacceptable that anyone should wait up to 92 weeks for a hearing aid—so, too, is the quality of audiology services. People need access to timely and relevant information in a format that suits them. On-going support and maintenance of equipment are also vital. Surely it is not too much to ask that a review appointment should be offered to all hearing-aid patients every three years.

RNID Scotland's hear to help project in the Scottish Borders has a full-time member of staff and a team of volunteers who visit people to help them with, for example, cleaning their hearing aids, changing the tubes and batteries and demonstrating equipment that might be of help to people. So far, more than 200 people who previously had no one-to-one support have been helped and more than 300 people have been reached through presentations and events in the Borders area. That experience could be used as a model of good practice in other health board areas, including my own. Indeed, with the RNID being the Co-operative Group's charity of the year, funds that are raised in Scotland will be used to expand the hear to help project to other areas. The Co-op's target is to raise £200,000 by the end of the year, and I understand that it is on track to do that.

In conclusion, let me also make a plea for further research to build on the work that is being done by the institute of hearing research's team based at Glasgow's royal infirmary, led by Dr Michael Akeroyd. That work has helped to improve the care and management of hearing loss, not just in the UK but worldwide. Further research would also build on the RNID's support for 10 years of biomedical research; more than £6.5 million has been contributed to tackling age-related hearing loss, improving hearing aids, developing cochlear implants, restoring hearing and curing tinnitus.

I hope that this debate will highlight some of the issues that people with hearing loss face and how we can develop services that will help them to enjoy a decent quality of life. It would be a major step forward for Scotland to have a routine screening programme for the over-55s, ensuring that hearing loss is identified and treated at the earliest opportunity. For those who have not yet tried out the RNID telephone check, the number is 0844 800 3838. I advise members to take a note

of it—it may be useful to them or to someone else whom they know.

17:10

**Nigel Don (North East Scotland) (SNP):** As is customary, but also right, I thank Cathy Jamieson for bringing this debate to the chamber. It relates to the sort of important issue that we can overlook if we do not ensure that we pick it up periodically.

The perspective from which I approach the issue is very different from that of Cathy Jamieson. I do so from personal experience, partly because I have some genetic make-up that suggests that I will become deaf, and partly because I managed to damage my right ear, so I use a hearing aid regularly. That has one huge advantage. Everyone should have a hearing aid, because it has a radio setting. If one is outside in a place where the radio loop is working, the eddies work, too, and it is often possible to hear things that people do not realise one can hear. People need to be aware of that.

Those who suffer from mild deafness lose out socially, as they tend to withdraw. Everyone has some experience of family irritations. We know that parents are good at selective deafness, but there is a different kind of deafness that leads people not to engage. I put on record for those who are not aware of it that, when people become just a bit deaf, they lose not the ability to hear but the ability to distinguish—what suffers is the signal-to-noise ratio, if I may use that term. People know that someone is saying something but, if there is any kind of background noise, they find it much more difficult to distinguish what is being said. That is not understood by people who do not suffer from the condition. It is wonderful that we now have hearing aids that are minor computers and are capable of at least trying to distinguish signal from noise, instead of just amplifying everything, which does not help much. Some are better than others. I have a sneaking suspicion that the one that I use is not terribly good; we may have to work on that.

We now have universal screening at birth, and the RNID is seeking routine screening for those who are over 55. I can think of reasons why that may not be the correct answer; I suspect that the minister will have words to say about the matter. However, I do not take issue with the RNID about it. When, in their communication with older people—55 is not old—those in the health system recognise there may be a hearing problem, which is not terribly difficult to pick up, they should do their level best to encourage the folk concerned to go to their GP and to get themselves referred. Perhaps that is the message that we really need to get out in the health profession. It may be a more practical answer than screening.

It is true that stigma is an issue. Self-deception, to which the human animal is particularly prone, is also an issue. People say, “I may be a little bit deaf, but not much.” Whatever we do, we need a joined-up approach. I am looking forward to meeting NHS Grampian tomorrow to discover how audiology is progressing in the Grampian area, where I live.

There are a couple of other issues that I would like to raise in the seconds that remain to me. First, in a recent answer to a parliamentary question, I was told that the number of British Sign Language translators is rising and that more are in training. I encourage the minister to ensure that that trend continues, because there are many people who need them. It would be good to have a universal service.

Secondly, I recently had an intern do some work for me on the funding of services for people who are deaf and blind, to at least some extent. There are about 2,000 such people in Scotland. I must tell the Parliament and the minister that the funding for them does not seem to be well co-ordinated. That issue is perhaps not for tonight, but it is one to which we should return.

17:15

**Mary Scanlon (Highlands and Islands) (Con):** I thank Cathy Jamieson for raising the subject for debate. I apologise for not signing the motion. When I saw the phrase:

“the introduction of hearing screening on the NHS”,

I thought, “My goodness, how many millions of pounds will that cost?” I did not read, as I should have done, the last word of the motion, which said that the introduction of such screening should be “considered”. I will sign the motion tomorrow, and I apologise again for not having done so already, but in these times we all find making financial commitments difficult. I very much welcome the debate. I am delighted to have come back from our conference in Perth today to debate an issue that is very worthy of debate.

Listening to Nigel Don, I was reminded of Phil Gallie. In the first session of the Parliament, he used to ask me whether I could hear what people were saying, and I used to reply that I could. It took him quite a long time to realise that he needed to go for a check-up, and he got a hearing aid eventually. I am sure that he will not mind me mentioning his name. The point is that there was quite a long delay before he recognised his need.

With life expectancy increasing, the problem commonly affects people we would consider to be middle-aged and about 10 years from retirement. However, as Cathy Jamieson said, only 6 to 7 per cent of people with difficulties actually wear a

hearing aid. My next point was about stigma, but Cathy Jamieson has covered it very well.

There are one or two other points that I do not think have been covered yet. The first came up in a previous debate on the issue. Hearing loss can make people feel more depressed, excluded and isolated, for obvious reasons. As RNID research points out, arguments and incidences of frustration in the home decreased after the person concerned got a hearing aid. I have seen some research that suggests that 70 per cent of deaf people believe that they failed to get a job on the basis of their deafness. Deafness affects their lifestyle and their quality of life.

It has also been noted that deafness can lead to mental health problems. If people feel isolated, excluded and depressed, that is not surprising. I was surprised to read in some research that the average length of stay for a hearing mental health patient in a psychiatric hospital is 148 days; a deaf mental health patient will spend, on average, 19 years in residential care. For so many reasons, investing in services to assist deaf people is definitely investing to help them and to save.

I was surprised to note that the Scottish Government does not know—I might be proved wrong on this—how many deaf children there are in Scotland. Without that information, it must be very difficult to make informed policy and financial decisions about education. Further research confirms that deaf children are underperforming in comparison with their hearing peers, although we have spoken so much lately about “Health for All Children 4”, the review of nursing in the community and so on. I ask the minister whether all children have their hearing checked when they start school and during earlier health checks.

I also want to ask about referrals to Donaldson’s school. The last time that I visited it, I saw that that wonderful resource is undoubtedly utilised.

I will move to my final point now, as I am getting looks from the Presiding Officer. It is vital that deaf children are given every opportunity to succeed and to become confident individuals and responsible citizens who can make an effective contribution to society. They should not be neglected or stigmatised; they should be given the same opportunities as other children in Scotland.

17:20

**Ross Finnie (West of Scotland) (LD):** I am sure that we all find it very comforting that Mary Scanlon should have returned from her party conference to take part in a debate of the quality that she is assured of while in this place.

I thank Cathy Jamieson for raising this important topic. She laid out all the statistical background as

to its importance, the problems relating to its being picked up at the appropriate age and some of the other problems that are associated with it, so I shall not rehearse them.

We all have examples from our constituencies of people who find themselves becoming increasingly excluded for some reason, who have social problems and who—as Nigel Don carefully pointed out—have not quite appreciated that it has come about because of a progressive hearing impairment. We have also heard of how, with modern hearing aids, they have lived normal lives—not all of them appear to have tuned into outside radio stations; that was a new disclosure.

While the focus of attention tonight is the RNID hearing matters campaign, for the reasons that Mary Scanlon alluded to I want to start at the age of five, not 55. As Nigel Don said, every child born in Scotland is screened under the universal newborn hearing screening programme. Excellent though that programme is, there are still questions as to our ability to bring together the data so that we are aware of the number of children who are diagnosed as having a hearing impairment and, more important, the extent of their hearing loss and the degree of their impairment. Such data seem still to be falling through the system.

One of the possibly unintended consequences of the universal newborn hearing screening programme is the near abandonment of the early school test. Five might not be the right age to conduct a test, but whereas one is tested immediately after birth, we go through the rest of life without a routine testing programme.

I am not suggesting that we have a separate primary hearing test, but we ought to be considering very carefully what we test and what we do not test as our children enter primary school. As we know, a large number—and a broad range—of learning difficulties, some of which relate to hearing difficulties, are unidentified by primary teachers. There is therefore a case for looking at current problems—whether they are to do with hearing, sight problems or obesity to name but three—in a broader and more systematic way at that early stage.

I agree with Nigel Don that 55 might not be the right age at which to be screened, but the RNID has picked it as a point at which it could make a material change, and I support that. As Cathy Jamieson said, it would ensure that any developing hearing problems were captured much earlier than often happens now, and that would help to remove and destigmatise some hearing problems.

The RNID has stated the case and, even more helpfully—and perhaps unusually—suggested ways in which what it suggests might be delivered.

That is very constructive. It points to the possibility of testing being delivered in GP practices—not that that is a substitute for systematic screening, but it would be a good starting point if practice nurses could carry out such tests.

Furthermore, because the minister is always concerned about the cost of such programmes, the RNID has helpfully provided data to show how a screening programme provided through GPs could meet the quality adjusted life years test under the National Institute for Clinical Excellence guidelines. Those are helpful suggestions that I hope the minister will take on board in the positive spirit in which they are offered by the RNID.

I am delighted to have been able to participate in the debate and to support the motion, which asks the minister to give careful consideration to the RNID campaign.

17:24

**Dr Richard Simpson (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab):** I join other members in congratulating Cathy Jamieson on the motion and the Co-op, of which I am a member, on its choice of the RNID as its charity this year.

The universal newborn hearing screening programme, to which other members have referred, is very important. I have memories—which I was sharing with Cathy Jamieson the other day—of my children being tested by someone rattling keys or some similar object behind their heads, which irritated the hell out of them and did not test both ears.

We have moved on. The fact that we have proper testing is welcome but, as Ross Finnie said, we need to think about the fact that the pre-school testing has been dropped and whether that is the correct thing to do in terms of universal screening. We need to consider whether it should be recognised that there is a possibility of infection occurring and that even the newborn screening test—which is very effective—could miss something. I wonder whether we should take another look at that, perhaps by carrying out a project to study it and find out whether anything has been missed.

I will concentrate on two areas that have not so far been mentioned. One is tinnitus, which affects about 10 per cent of adults and from which I suffer myself. I was trying to work out why I suffer from it. I know that one reason why I have it more intensely in one ear than the other is because I once did some work as a driller in the construction of Loch Awe power station, which is underneath a mountain. I was drilling rock and the noise was such that at the end of a week of shifts it took me the whole weekend to recover my hearing. In those days, before health and safety regulations

came in, there were no earplugs and no opportunity to ensure that one was not affected.

Other drillers were drilling the Clyde tunnel at that time, and as they were drilling under pressure they developed even worse hearing problems. I am sure that I suffer from tinnitus partly because of drilling. The second reason I have the problem is because I was assaulted by a very friendly drug-using patient during my brief absence from the Parliament—I feel much safer here than I did in some of the clinics I was running. Assault was not something I enjoyed.

I mention tinnitus because 10 per cent of adults are affected in some way, and half of them are affected to a large degree, so it really begins to trouble them. Around 1 per cent of those people are affected really quite severely. In half of those who are affected by tinnitus, sleep is affected, which can be disturbing for them because they then become more irritable. It is a difficult condition and information is important, but there is not a huge amount that one can do about it.

Ensuring that employees take precautions is very important. My practice worked with United Glass (Closures & Plastics) Limited in Bridge of Allan, where the noise of the machines was enormous. As a result of health and safety legislation, the company introduced noise conduction to take the majority of the noise away, but the employees had to play their part by wearing either earplugs or mufflers. That is an important balance in the regulations for health and safety at work: employees are responsible, along with employers, to try to ensure that people do not subsequently suffer from deafness.

The testing of older patients is also important. In the 1980s, my practice—partly as a result of the work that we were doing with UG—had a machine, which meant that we were able to offer testing to all our patients as part of the screening system that was then in place for older people. We tested people at age 65. The number of people in whom we picked up a hearing problem was extraordinary.

I will finish, Presiding Officer—I know without even looking up that you are looking at me. I will say one final word. One of my colleagues had an old-fashioned hearing aid that people did not like wearing—it was the one with the big battery on the chest. When he did not like what he was hearing in meetings, he would switch it off—and I will now switch off.

17:29

**The Minister for Public Health and Sport (Shona Robison):** I thank Cathy Jamieson for bringing this important matter to the attention of Parliament. It is fair to say, as many members



have said, that we all know someone who has been affected by hearing loss. We know how devastating it can be for those who lose their hearing, either through trauma or over a period of time, and the effect that it can have on their life, their family, their work and those around them.

Members will be aware of the national health service audiology modernisation project, which attracted £19 million of central funding, and that all NHS audiology services can now fit digital hearing aids as standard, which is a huge improvement on the previous situation. Following on from that, I was delighted recently to launch formally the national NHS adult audiology rehabilitation quality standards and the paediatric audiology quality standards. The approach taken to developing those standards was unique and has put Scotland at the forefront of quality improvement in audiology. There was a successful collaboration of several cross-border agencies, such as the RNID, the National Deaf Children's Society, the British Academy of Audiology and clinical experts from the NHS in England, Wales and Scotland.

A number of members asked about the newborn hearing screening programme, which is now well embedded in NHS boards. It is critical to a child's development that hearing loss is identified as early as possible and that appropriate steps are taken to ensure that early intervention has the maximum benefit for the child and their family. I welcome the interagency work that takes on board educational and social needs from an early age. NHS audiology departments are in a position to signal early the need for such interagency support.

As we gather evidence, we should keep an open mind about whether there is a requirement to rescreen. I do not think that we have that evidence yet, but of course we must be open-minded about that in future.

**Mary Scanlon:** I seek clarification on the pre-school check. I read so much about these things. I understood that it includes vision and hearing screening. Did I pick that up wrong?

**Shona Robison:** The newborn hearing screening programme was introduced because of the evidence on when it is best to screen. We should keep under review the issue of whether evidence comes out of the programme over a number of years that there is a requirement to rescreen later, in the light of things being missed during newborn screening. However, at the moment, we really do not have the evidence for that.

Both sets of standards and their associated quality rating tools have been well received by service providers and are seen as making a critical contribution to quality improvement. The on-going process of self-assessment and peer review of the

standards will enrich the sharing of best practice and highlight the need for improvement in areas that are found not to meet the standards. As a result, the process will improve the standards of care to patients and ensure the important principle of equity of service throughout Scotland.

Delia Henry, the director of RNID Scotland, also served on the standards group and attended the public meetings. I welcome her involvement and the co-operation with the voluntary sector in general. We are all working to the same end—to achieve the best outcome for patients. By working together, we are more likely to achieve that. Delia Henry also sits on the audiology services advisory group, which represents a variety of stakeholders and advises me directly on matters relating to the provision of NHS audiology services.

As Cathy Jamieson said, in 2006, RNID Scotland approached the Scottish Executive to assist with funding the hear to help project in Galashiels. That important project has provided a point of contact for people who are deaf or have hearing difficulties. It provides a place where people can receive at first hand information, guidance and support. Since 2007, the Scottish Government has funded that project, with £40,000 per annum until 2010. So far, we have had excellent feedback on the level of service and the information that is available.

Our commitment as a Government goes beyond the support that is required by those who are deaf or have a hearing problem. We are also committed to improving services for anyone who has a sensory impairment, be it hearing loss, vision loss or deafblindness. I will look into the issues that Nigel Don raised with respect to deafblindness in particular. With that in mind, the Government will look to support more innovative ways to ensure that appropriate services and information are provided and delivered. As I said earlier, we will do that by working in partnership with groups, such as RNID Scotland, that represent people with a sensory impairment.

The gradual loss of our hearing affects most of us at some stage in our lives—some of us earlier than others—and once we are being cared for by NHS audiology colleagues, the care continues for the remainder of our life. It is therefore important that we give everyone who comes to us the best quality service that we can, and that we support rehabilitation, where possible, to enable a better quality of life.

As Cathy Jamieson said, the First Minister announced in September 2007 that audiology services would, for the first time, be brought within the 18-week referral-to-treatment target. I am confident that all NHS boards will meet that target for adult services by 2011. Although the information and statistics division is still to confirm

this, we hope to have the figures that Cathy Jamieson asked for by August. I will keep Parliament updated on that.

I am of course aware of RNID's hearing matters campaign; indeed, I attended the parliamentary reception last week to launch deaf awareness week. I agree whole-heartedly that hearing does matter, and I assure members that I take a keen interest in issues affecting those with hearing loss.

As a Government, we need to ensure that all resources are used effectively and that any screening programme that we introduce is both clinically effective and cost effective. We receive advice on population-based screening programmes from the UK National Screening Committee. This Government and previous Administrations have followed that committee's advice. Its advice on screening for adult hearing loss is that, at present, it should not be offered. The NSC has assessed an adult screening programme against its criteria, to determine whether such a programme would be both clinically effective and cost effective. At the moment, there is not enough evidence to recommend it. That was also the finding of a report from the National Institute for Health Research in 2007.

The policy was reviewed as recently as March 2009, but no significant changes were made. It is due to be reviewed again in 2011-12, and that review will take into account findings from any new research. Our officials continue to monitor the findings of the National Screening Committee on my behalf. We will keep the situation under review.

**Mary Scanlon:** Are those research findings based on a pilot study for a screening programme for over-55s? Has such a programme been run in Scotland?

**Shona Robison:** No, not in Scotland. The research on which the National Screening Committee based its recommendations is broad and comes from a variety of sources. I can supply Mary Scanlon with more specific information on that.

It is encouraging to note from the RNID survey that there is so much support within Parliament to ensure that hearing loss is identified at an early stage. That underpins our commitment, and I believe that our actions will achieve the aim. We are working with audiology services and the primary care sector to ensure that GPs are advised on triage to identify potential hearing loss and to refer people to NHS audiology experts. I believe that it is better to work in that way, to ensure that people—no matter how old they are—can have their hearing loss identified. I believe that our plans will deliver that.

I commend the work that voluntary agencies do to raise awareness of issues affecting those with hearing loss, and I commend the commitment displayed by people in NHS audiology services who support patients from referral through to the fitting of hearing aids and their further rehabilitation. I am aware that there is still work to do to ensure equity of service across Scotland, but the standards that I have referred to will go a long way towards addressing that.

I am confident that the modernisation of NHS audiology services continues apace and that patients are benefiting from improved services. Scotland is leading the way in quality standards for all. The whole chamber will be proud of that.

*Meeting closed at 17:39.*

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